

# Memorial Day Speech Resources: Fact Sheet

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## Introduction

Memorial Day is a day of reflection and remembrance, established to pay tribute to individuals who died in service to the United States.

Memorial Day also symbolically marks the beginning of summer because it coincides with the end of the school year in many states.

This guide is designed to assist congressional offices with work related to celebrating Memorial Day.

## History

Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day, began as a day for honoring troops who died during the Civil War. The date and location of the first local observance is disputed.<sup>1</sup> On May 30, 1868, the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of Union Civil War veterans, called for the first national observance by its members. In 1888, Congress passed an act making May 30 a holiday in the District of Columbia. Memorial Day is now officially observed on the last Monday in May, as prescribed in the Uniform Monday Holiday Act.

Many Americans observe Memorial Day by visiting cemeteries or memorials and placing American flags or wreaths in memory of those who have died in war. They may also participate in or attend a Memorial Day parade.

Part of the Memorial Day observance is the National Moment of Remembrance. This practice encourages all Americans to pause wherever they are at 3:00 p.m. local time for a moment of silence to remember and honor those who died in service to the nation.

In many communities, citizens assist veterans with the placement of flags on gravestones in cemeteries and distribute flags to people participating in parades. The American flag may also be flown or hung outdoors at an individual's home.

On Memorial Day, as on Veterans Day, artificial poppies are purchased and the donations are used to help veterans and their widows, widowers, and children.

## Legislation

36 U.S.C. §116

Uniform Monday Holiday Act (5 U.S.C. §6103)

National Moment of Remembrance Act (P.L. 106-579)

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<sup>1</sup> See for example National Park Service, "Memorial Day – Over 150 Years of Remembrance," <https://www.nps.gov/articles/memorial-day-history.htm>; Jessica Kratz, "The Nation's Sacrifice: The Origins and Evolution of Memorial Day," *Pieces of History*, National Archives and Records Administration, blog post, May 24, 2018, <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2018/05/24/the-nations-sacrifice-the-origins-and-evolution-of-memorial-day/>; and National Cemetery Administration, *Memorial Day History*, <https://www.cem.va.gov/history/Memorial-Day-History.asp>.

## Related CRS Products

The Congressional Research Service has several reports detailing the history of federal holidays and addressing military casualties, including the following:

CRS Report R43539, *Commemorations in Congress: Options for Honoring Individuals, Groups, and Events*, coordinated by Jacob R. Straus.

CRS Report R41990, *Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices*, by Jacob R. Straus.

CRS Report RL32492, *American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics*, by David A. Blum.

CRS In Focus IF10899, *Trends in Active-Duty Military Deaths From 2006 Through 2021*, by Hannah Fischer.

CRS Report RS22452, *A Guide to U.S. Military Casualty Statistics: Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation New Dawn, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom*, by Hannah Fischer.

## Selected Congressional Statements and Remarks

Members of Congress often make floor statements, issue press releases, or enter Extensions of Remarks into the *Congressional Record* to recognize federal holidays and observances. The following are some recent examples from the *Congressional Record*:

Representative Daniel Meuser, “Ultimate Sacrifice,” remarks in the House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 170 (May 23, 2024), p. H3513.

Representative Abigail Davis Spanberger, “Stories of Service,” remarks in the House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 170 (May 22, 2024), p. H3407.

Senator Todd Young, “Memorial Day,” remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 169 (May 18, 2023), pp. S1717-S1718.

Senator Richard J. Durbin, “Memorial Day,” remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 168 (May 26, 2022), pp. S2740-S2741.

## Selected Presidential Proclamations and Remarks

One of the many uses of a presidential proclamation is to ceremoniously honor a group or call attention to certain issues or events. Some recent Memorial Day proclamations, from the *Compilation of Presidential Documents*, include the following:

Presidential Proclamations and Remarks—Donald J. Trump (2025-).<sup>2</sup>

Presidential Proclamations and Remarks—Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (2021-2025).

Presidential Proclamations and Remarks—Donald J. Trump (2017-2020).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Link provides access to proclamations and remarks made by President Trump during both of his nonconsecutive terms, where available.

<sup>3</sup> Link provides access to proclamations and remarks made by President Trump during both of his nonconsecutive terms, where available.

Presidential Proclamations and Remarks—Barack H. Obama (2009-2016).

Presidential Proclamations and Remarks—George W. Bush (2001-2008).

Presidential proclamations and remarks from 1993 to the present are available through the govinfo service on the Government Publishing Office website. Earlier remarks are available through The American Presidency Project, established by the University of California, Santa Barbara.

## **Government Resources**

### **Library of Congress**

Library of Congress, “Today in History – May 30.” Find more historical resources on the Library of Congress website.

Library of Congress American Folklife Center, “Veterans History Project.” In 2016, the Gold Star Families Voice Act (P.L. 114-246) expanded the original scope of the Veterans History Project to include oral histories by immediate family members (parent, spouse, sibling, or child) of “members of the Armed Forces who died as a result of their service during a period of war.”

### **Other Resources**

Many other federal agencies provide resources on the history and observation of Memorial Day:

Arlington National Cemetery, “Wreath Layings.”

Arlington National Cemetery, “Request a Public Wreath Ceremony.”

Defense Manpower Data Center. Provides statistics on active duty military deaths as well as detailed historical tables through the Defense Casualty Analysis System.

National Archives and Records Administration, “Memorial Day: A Commemoration.”

National Park Service, “NPS Commemorations and Celebrations: Memorial Day.”

U.S. Army Center of Military History, “Memorial Day.”

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ Memorial Day. Information on veterans’ cemeteries and flag protocol.

U.S. Census Bureau. Tracks statistics about veterans and provides information and visualizations that may be useful to include in speeches.

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