

# Memorial Day Invokes Memory of War Dead, And Debate

A civil war prompted a civic holiday, which evolved into both the unofficial kickoff of summer and the deadliest weekend of the year on America's highways. Its observance sparks debate even today.

Originally named Decoration Day, Memorial Day dawned just after the Civil War. Gen. John A. Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic, a veteran's group for Union soldiers, first proclaimed May 30, 1868, a day for honoring the Civil War dead. A grave-decoration ceremony took place at Arlington National Cemetery, where both Union and Confederate soldiers were buried.

Several towns claim to have instigated such commemorations earlier than Logan, however. Communities competing as the birthplace of Memorial Day include Columbus, Miss.; Columbus, Ga.; Macon, Ga.; Richmond, Va.; Boalsburg, Pa.; Carbondale, Ill.; and Waterloo, N.Y.

[The Department of Veterans Affairs](#) says 25 towns claim some role in Memorial Day's beginning. However, in 1966, President Johnson signed a presidential proclamation naming [Waterloo, N.Y.](#), the "official" birthplace of Memorial Day.

Memorial Day's Civil War-era roots help account for its various incarnations today. Some Southern states alternately recognize a Confederate Memorial Day, which honors the Confederate dead specifically.

For example, Mississippi observed [Confederate Memorial Day](#) April 28. The state will observe [National Memorial Day](#) May 26—in conjunction with Jefferson Davis' birthday.

As Memorial Day continued to be celebrated into the 20th century, its significance expanded to include the memory of those killed in any war. A 1971

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federal law—the National Holiday Act—changed the date of observance from May 30 to the last Monday in May. That law also formally made the day in recognition of those who died in any war.

The date change remains controversial. Veterans and others given to more solemn reflection on the day charge that the “last Monday” approach has turned Memorial Day into a long weekend that no longer promotes remembrance of those who sacrificed their lives in war.

In 1999, Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, introduced a bill to restore the Memorial Day observance to May 30. The bill was referred to the Committee on the Judiciary, where it remains.

In 2000, Congress passed [Public Law 106-579](#), a National Moment of Remembrance Act, which designates 3 p.m. local time as the National Moment of Remembrance. Congress found that “a National Moment of Remembrance and other commemorative events are needed to reclaim Memorial Day as the sacred and noble event that that day is intended to be.”

As a three-day weekend, Memorial Day now is widely viewed as a summer kick-off—a time for movie blockbusters, short vacations and picnics. Some families use it as an occasion to remember their own departed loved ones in a sort of “homecoming” ritual.

Popular-culture scholar [Jack Santino](#) points out in his book *All Around the Year* that “there is no obvious connection between the backyard barbecue or trip to the beach and the deaths of our ancestors.”

“However,” he wrote, “it is ironic that more deaths occur due to automobile crashes during Memorial Day weekend than at any other comparable period of the year.”

In fact, the Indianapolis 500 is run each year on Memorial Day weekend, and it has been since 1911—except during the war years 1917-1918 and 1942-1945.

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