Memorial Day Speech Resources: Fact Sheet

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Introduction

Memorial Day is a day of reflection and remembrance of those who died while serving in the U.S. military. Many Americans observe Memorial Day by visiting cemeteries or memorials and placing wreaths. They may also participate in a Memorial Day parade or hold a family gathering, such as a barbeque. Memorial Day also unofficially marks the beginning of summer.

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. 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 proscribed in the Uniform Monday Holiday Act.

Legislation

36 U.S.C. §116
Uniform Monday Holiday Act (5 U.S.C. §6103)
National Moment of Remembrance Act (P.L. 106-579)

CRS Reports

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


Sample Congressional Speeches and Recognitions

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*:


**Presidential Proclamations**

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

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

Presidential Proclamations—Donald J. Trump (2017-2020)

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


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.

**Statistics**

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

Memorial Day is a time to reflect on what veterans have done for the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau tracks statistics about veterans and provides information and visualizations that may be useful to include in speeches.
What Can Americans Do to Participate in Memorial Day?

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.

For additional information on Memorial Day, flag protocol, and veterans cemeteries, see the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ Memorial Day webpage.

Arlington National Cemetery, “Wreath Layings.”

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


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.”

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.”

YouTube videos of wreath-laying ceremonies.
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