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Memorial Day focuses attention on sacrifices, despite war fatigue

By: BILL MYERS Examiner Staff Writer May 30, 2010

When the United States suffered its 1,000th fatality in the Iraq war, protesters took to the streets, editorialists raged and the nation's political leadership argued over the direction of the war.

On Friday, the Associated Press released an account of what is believed to be the U.S.'s 1,000th fatality in Afghanistan. The news passed largely without comment.

Memorial Day traditionally focuses Americans on the sacrifices of those who fought in the nation's wars. But as this Memorial Day approaches, some are wondering whether the nation's attention is wandering from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I think there's a little bit of war fatigue," Cato Institute analyst Malou Innocent told The Washington Examiner. "I think it is tragic that more Americans aren't focused on the war in Afghanistan."

Brookings Institution analyst Michael O'Hanlon said he sees Americans becoming more stoic after a decade of war -- "a gradual hardening in the national psyche," as he puts it. But he said he also thinks there's some political algebra involved.

"There's a form of strategic wait-and-see," O'Hanlon said. "That won't last because certainly there's a lot of people in Congress who are nervous about this war, who think it could be Obama's Vietnam."

Many of the ordinary people bearing the heaviest burdens of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan sense an ambivalence in their fellow Americans as Memorial Day approaches.



Vietnam War veteran Lance Evans plays bagpipes at Arlington National Cemetery near the grave of his father, Roy Evans, who served in World War II and the Korean War. (Andrew Harnik/Examiner)

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Paul Czaplicki had to bury his stepson, Army Sgt. John "Kyle" Daggett, in 2008.

He said he has gotten "overwhelming" support from family and friends, but concedes that he's troubled by people who "go through life like [Memorial Day] is a three-day holiday. That gets a little bit annoying," he said.

For Army Capt. Scott Smiley, though, Memorial Day was to be celebrated. Blinded in a suicide bomb attack in 2005, Smiley was on his way from West Point to D.C. to participate in a six-day bike ride to help raise money for other wounded veterans.

"I'm proud to have served and I'm glad to have given to my country," he said.

Stacey Pollack, a psychologist who treats traumatized vets at a Veterans Administration clinic in D.C., says many Americans have been directly touched by the war through a relative on active duty, or in National Guard or reserve units activated for Iraq or Afghanistan. That has created a national bond with today's veterans missing in some previous conflicts, she said.

"I was on an airplane recently, and someone gave his first-class seat to someone who was in uniform," she said. "By knowing so many people in the wars, you realize that anybody can be wounded in a conflict."

Still, families of some those killed in the ongoing wars said they recognized the growing war-weariness.

"We've been coming down to Washington regularly on Memorial Day for 15, 20 years," said Vietnam veteran Michael Romanczuk, whose son, Daniel, is currently in the Marine Corps. "And do the crowds get any smaller? It seems like they do."

He added: "We're still engaged. We're still involved."

Others sought a measure of empathy, and a recognition of sacrifice, from their fellow Americans on Memorial Day.

Sheryl McIlvaine, of Purcellville, Va., was planning to bring her two children, Michael and Alexa, to Arlington National Cemetery on Monday to visit the grave of her husband, Marine Sgt. James McIlvaine.

"The only thing I ask, if you go to the barbecues, just pause for a moment," McIlvaine said. "Try to remember what Memorial Day is for."

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