

Memorial Day and Our Soldier-Heroes

by Lewis E. Lehrman

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Every day was Memorial Day for President Lincoln during the Civil War. “Men..., by fighting our battles, bear the chief burthen of saving our country” the President wrote in July 1863.¹ They would give the last full measure for their beloved country. The President was consistent in giving credit for victory to the soldiers who fought for the Union, and to the officers who led them. “With us every soldier is a man of character, and must be treated with more consideration than is customary in Europe,” Lincoln would write in a letter to a French statesman in August 1862.²

On the very evening Abraham Lincoln was murdered, the cast at Ford’s Theater planned to sing “Honor to Our Soldiers.” The assassin’s deed done, the song was never heard. Three days earlier, Lincoln uttered his last words to a crowd gathered at the White House -- “To Gen. Grant, his skillful officers, and brave men, all [credit] belongs.”

“Honor to the Soldier, and Sailor everywhere, who bravely bear his country's cause,” Lincoln wrote in December 1863 to New York politicians who invited him to speak at Cooper Union. “Honor also to the citizen who cares for his brother in the field, and serves, as he best can, the same cause -- honor to him, only less than to him, who braves, for the common good, the storms of heaven and the storms of battle.”

When he wrote this letter, the President was recovering from a mild form of smallpox -- a plague which killed Lincoln’s devoted black assistant. Lincoln, too, had fallen victim, after his speech at Gettysburg dedicating the new national cemetery, saying there that “in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.”³ For Lincoln, it would always be the brave soldiers first.

While in bed, Lincoln worked on his third Annual Message to Congress, which he closed with a persistent theme of the war: “Hence our chiefest care must still be directed to the army and navy, who have thus far borne their harder part so nobly and well. And it may be esteemed fortunate that in giving the greatest efficiency to these indispensable arms, we do also honorably recognize the gallant men, from commander to sentinel, who compose them, and to whom, more than to others, the world must stand indebted for the home of freedom disenthralled, regenerated, enlarged, and perpetuated.”

One day during the war, several soldiers encountered President Lincoln at Mathew Brady’s photography. Brady’s assistant asked that Lincoln’s photograph be taken first. “Lieutenant Riggs replied, rather dramatically: “Certainly, our Commander-in-Chief comes first everywhere.” Mr. Lincoln thanked us and said, in substance: “Soldiers come first everywhere, these days. Black-coats [of politicians] are at a discount in the presence of the blue and I recognize the merit of the discount.”⁴

¹ CWAL, Volume VI, p. 346 (Letter to Montgomery Blair, July 24, 1863).

² CWAL, Volume V, p. 355 (Letter to Count Gasparin, August 4, 1862).

³ CWAL, Volume VII, p. 23 (November 19, 1863).

⁴ John L. Cunningham, *Three Years with the Adirondack Regiment*, p. 50-54

Lincoln had an almost mystical devotion to everyday Americans -- but especially to the soldiers in Union military units. On September 24, 1862, after issuing the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, President Lincoln told a Washington serenade of his difficulties: "Yet they are scarcely so great as the difficulties of those who, upon the battle field, are endeavoring to purchase with their blood and their lives the future happiness and prosperity of this country."⁵

Lincoln visited Union troops outside Richmond in June 1864, noted Grant aide Horace Porter: "They cheered wildly, crowding around Lincoln, kissing his hand, brushing his coat or his horse so that they could tell others that they had touched the president. And Lincoln was touched. His eyes brimming with tears, his voice broke as he talked with the men; the encounter reminded everyone what was at stake."⁶

As victory in the Civil War approached in the early spring of 1865, Lincoln again visited the Virginia battle front. A volunteer working at a Sanitary Commission hospital near City Point recalled that on April 8, "President Lincoln came to our hospital to see the sick and wounded. All the soldiers who were able to be about were formed in a line of single rank, front face, and the President walked the full length of the long line and shook the hand of each man and said a word to him. Then he went through all the tents and shook hands with every man who occupied a cot."⁷

A few days later, the Commander-in-chief, a soldier of soldiers would himself die -- the victim of an assassin's bullet.

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⁵ CWAL, Volume V, p. 438 (Reply to Serenade, September 24, 1862).

⁶ Brooks D. Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865*, p. 342.

⁷ Homer Anderson, "When I saw Lincoln, Address at the Sixth Annual Lincoln Banquet, February 12, 1909.