

# How to Honor Memorial Day

**Exclusive:** Of all the world's holidays commemorating wars, Memorial Day should be one of sober reflection on war's horrible costs, surely not a moment to glorify warfare or lust for more wars. But many pols and pundits can't resist the opportunity, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern describes.

By Ray McGovern

How best to show respect for the U.S. troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan and for their families on Memorial Day? Simple: Avoid euphemisms like "the fallen" and expose the lies about what a great idea it was to start those wars and then to "surge" tens of thousands of more troops into those fools' errands.

First, let's be clear on at least this much: the 4,500 U.S. troops killed in Iraq so far and the 2,350 killed in Afghanistan so far did not "fall." They were wasted on no-win battlefields by politicians and generals cheered on by neocon pundits and mainstream "journalists" almost none of whom gave a rat's patootie about the real-life-and-death troops. They were throwaway soldiers.

And, as for the "successful surges," they were just P.R. devices to buy some "decent intervals" for the architects of these wars and their boosters to get space between themselves and the disastrous endings while pretending that those defeats were really "victories squandered" all at the "acceptable" price of about 1,000 dead U.S. soldiers each and many times that in dead Iraqis and Afghans.

Memorial Day should be a time for honesty about what enabled the killing and maiming of so many U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama and the senior military brass simply took full advantage of a poverty draft that gives upper-class sons and daughters the equivalent of exemptions, vaccinating them against the disease of war.

What drives me up the wall is the oft-heard, dismissive comment about troop casualties from well-heeled Americans: "Well, they volunteered, didn't they?" Under the universal draft in effect during Vietnam, far fewer were immune from service, even though the well-connected could still game the system to avoid serving. Vice Presidents Dick Cheney and Joe Biden, for example, each managed to pile up five exemptions. This means, of course, that they brought zero military experience to the job; and this, in turn, may explain a whole lot – particularly given their bosses' own lack of military experience.

The grim truth is that many of the crÃ"me de la crÃ"me of today's Official Washington don't know many military grunts, at least not intimately as close

family or friends. They may bump into some on the campaign trail or in an airport and mumble something like, "thank you for your service." But these sons and daughters of working-class communities from America's cities and heartland are mostly abstractions to the powerful, exclamation points at the end of some ideological debate demonstrating which speaker is "tougher," who's more ready to use military force, who will come out on top during a talk show appearance or at a think-tank conference or on the floor of Congress.

### **Sharing the Burden?**

We should be honest about this reality, especially on Memorial Day. Pretending that the burden of war has been equitably shared, and worse still that those killed died for a "noble cause," as President George W. Bush likes to claim, does no honor to the thousands of U.S. troops killed and the tens of thousands maimed. It dishonors them. Worse, it all too often succeeds in infantilizing bereaved family members who cannot bring themselves to believe their government lied.

Who can blame parents for preferring to live the fiction that their sons and daughters were heroes who wittingly and willingly made the "ultimate sacrifice," dying for a "noble cause," especially when this fiction is frequently foisted on them by well-meaning but naive clergy at funerals. For many it is impossible to live with the reality that a son or daughter died in vain. Far easier to buy into the official story and to leave clergy unchallenged as they gild the lilies around coffins and gravesites.

Not so for some courageous parents Cindy Sheehan, for example, whose son Casey Sheehan was killed on April 4, 2004, in the Baghdad suburb of Sadr City. Cindy demonstrated uncommon grit when she led hundreds of friends to Crawford to lay siege to the Texas White House during the summer of 2005 trying to get President Bush to explain what "noble cause" Casey died for. She never got an answer. There is none.

But there are very few, like Cindy Sheehan, able to overcome a natural human resistance to the thought that their sons and daughters died for a lie and then to challenge that lie. These few stalwarts make themselves face this harsh reality, the knowledge that the children whom they raised and sacrificed so much for were, in turn, sacrificed on the altar of political expediency, that their precious children were bit players in some ideological fantasy or pawns in a game of career maneuvering.

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is said to have described the military disdainfully as "just dumb stupid animals to be used as pawns in foreign policy." Whether or not those were his exact words, his policies and behavior

certainly betrayed that attitude. It certainly seems to have prevailed among top American-flag-on-lapel-wearing officials of the Bush and Obama administrations, including armchair and field-chair generals whose sense of decency is blinded by the prospect of a shiny new star on their shoulders, if they just follow orders and send young soldiers into battle.

This bitter truth should raise its ugly head on Memorial Day but rarely does. It can be gleaned only with great difficulty from the mainstream media, since the media honchos continue to play an indispensable role in the smoke-and-mirrors dishonesty that hides their own guilt in helping Establishment Washington push "the fallen" from life to death.

We must judge the actions of our political and military leaders not by the pious words they will utter Monday in mourning those who "fell" far from the generals' cushy safe seats in the Pentagon or somewhat closer to the comfy beds in air-conditioned field headquarters where a lucky general might be comforted in the arms of an admiring and enterprising biographer.

Many of the high-and-mighty delivering the approved speeches on Monday will glibly refer to and mourn "the fallen." None are likely to mention the culpable policymakers and complicit generals who added to the fresh graves at Arlington National Cemetery and around the country.

Words, after all, are cheap; words about "the fallen" are dirt cheap especially from the lips of politicians and pundits with no personal experience of war. The families of those sacrificed in Iraq and Afghanistan should not have to bear that indignity.

### **'Successful Surges'**

The so-called "surges" of troops into Iraq and Afghanistan were particularly gross examples of the way our soldiers have been played as pawns. Since the usual suspects are again coming out the woodwork of neocon think tanks to press for yet another "surge" in Iraq, some historical perspective should help.

Take, for example, the well-known and speciously glorified first "surge;" the one Bush resorted to in sending over 30,000 additional troops into Iraq in early 2007; and the not-to-be-outdone Obama "surge" of 30,000 into Afghanistan in early 2010. These marches of folly were the direct result of decisions by George W. Bush and Barack Obama to prioritize political expediency over the lives of U.S. troops.

Taking cynical advantage of the poverty draft, they let foot soldiers pay the "ultimate" price. That price was 1,000 U.S. troops killed in each of the two "surges."

And the results? The returns are in. The bloody chaos these days in Iraq and the faltering war in Afghanistan were entirely predictable. They were indeed predicted by those of us able to spread some truth around via the Internet, while being mostly blacklisted by the fawning corporate media.

Yet, because the “successful surge” myth was so beloved in Official Washington, saving some face for the politicians and pundits who embraced and spread the lies that justified and sustained especially the Iraq War, the myth has become something of a touchstone for everyone aspiring to higher office or seeking a higher-paying gig in the mainstream media.

Campaigning Wednesday in New Hampshire, presidential aspirant Jeb Bush gave a short history lesson about his big brother’s attack on Iraq. Referring to the so-called Islamic State, Bush said, “ISIS didn’t exist when my brother was president. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was wiped out ... the surge created a fragile but stable Iraq. ...”

We’ve dealt with the details of the Iraq “surge” myth before both before and after it was carried out. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com’s [“Reviving the Successful Surge Myth”](#); [“Gen. Keane on Iran Attack”](#); [“Robert Gates: As Bad as Rumsfeld?”](#); and [“Troop Surge Seen as Another Mistake.”](#)]

But suffice it to say that Jeb Bush is distorting the history and should be ashamed. The truth is that al-Qaeda did not exist in Iraq before his brother launched an unprovoked invasion in 2003. “Al-Qaeda in Iraq” arose as a direct result of Bush’s war and occupation. Amid the bloody chaos, AQI’s leader, a Jordanian named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, pioneered a particularly brutal form of terrorism, relishing videotaped decapitation of prisoners.

Zarqawi was eventually hunted down and killed not during the celebrated “surge” but in June 2006, months before Bush’s “surge” began. The so-called Sunni Awakening, essentially the buying off of many Sunni tribal leaders, also predated the “surge.” And the relative reduction in the Iraq War’s slaughter after the 2007 “surge” was mostly the result of the ethnic cleansing of Baghdad from a predominantly Sunni to a Shia city, tearing the fabric of Baghdad in two, and creating physical space that made it more difficult for the two bitter enemies to attack each other. In addition, Iran used its influence with the Shia to rein in their extremely violent militias.

Though weakened by Zarqawi’s death and the Sunni Awakening, AQI did not disappear, as Jeb Bush would like you to believe. It remained active and when Saudi Arabia and the Sunni gulf states took aim at the secular regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria AQI joined with other al-Qaeda affiliates, such as the Nusra Front, to spread their horrors across Syria. AQI rebranded itself “the Islamic

State of Iraq and Syria” or simply “the Islamic State.”

The Islamic State split off from al-Qaeda over strategy but the various jihadist armies, including al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front, have now seized wide swaths of territory in Syria – and the Islamic State has returned with a vengeance to Iraq, grabbing major cities such as Mosul and Ramadi.

Jeb Bush doesn’t like to unspool all this history. He and other Iraq War backers prefer to pretend that the “surge” in Iraq had won the war and Obama threw the “victory” away by following through on George W. Bush’s withdrawal agreement with Maliki.

But the current crisis in Syria and Iraq is among the fateful consequences of the U.S./UK attack 12 years ago and particularly of the “surge” of 2007, which contributed greatly to Sunni-Shia violence, the opposite of what George W. Bush professed was the objective of the “surge,” to enable Iraq’s religious sects to reconcile.

Reconciliation, however, always took a back seat to the real purpose of the “surge” buying time so Bush and Cheney could slip out of Washington in 2009 without having an obvious military defeat hanging around their necks and putting a huge stain on their legacies.

The political manipulation of the Iraq “surge” allowed Bush, Cheney and their allies to reframe the historical debate and shift the blame for the defeat onto Obama, recognizing that 1,000 more dead U.S. soldiers was a small price to pay for protecting the “Bush brand.” Now, Bush’s younger brother can cheerily march off to the campaign trail for 2016 pointing to the carcass of the Iraqi albatross hung around Obama’s shoulders.

### **Rout at Ramadi**

Last weekend, less than a year after U.S.-trained and -equipped Iraqi forces ran away from the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, leaving the area and lots of U.S. arms and equipment to ISIS, something similar happened at Ramadi, the capital of the western province of Anbar. Despite heavy U.S. air strikes on ISIS, American-backed Iraqi security forces fled Ramadi, which is only 70 miles west of Baghdad, after a lightning assault by ISIS forces.

The ability of ISIS to strike just about everywhere in the area is reminiscent of the Tet offensive of January-February 1968 in Vietnam, which persuaded President Lyndon Johnson that that particular war was unwinnable. If there are materials left over in Saigon for reinforcing helicopter landing pads on the tops of buildings, it is not too early to bring them to Baghdad’s Green Zone, on the chance that U.S. embassy buildings may have a call for such materials in the

not-too-distant future.

The headlong Iraqi government retreat from Ramadi had scarcely ended on Sunday when Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, described the fall of the city as “terribly significant” which is correct adding that more U.S. troops may be needed which is insane. His appeal for more troops neatly fits one proverbial definition of insanity (attributed or misattributed to Albert Einstein): “doing the same thing over and over again [like every eight years?] but expecting different results.”

By Wednesday, as Jeb Bush was singing the praises of his brother’s “surge” in Iraq, McCain and his Senate colleague Lindsey Graham were publicly calling for a new “surge” of U.S. troops into Iraq. The senators urged President Obama to do what George W. Bush did in 2007 replace the U.S. military leadership and dispatch additional troops to Iraq.

But Washington Post pundit David Ignatius, even though a fan of the earlier two surges, is not yet on board for this one. In a column published also on Wednesday, Ignatius warned that Washington should not abandon its current strategy:

“This is still Iraq’s war, not America’s. But President Barack Obama must reassure Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi that the U.S. has his back, and at the same time give him a reality check: If al-Abadi and his Shiite allies don’t do more to empower Sunnis, his country will splinter. Ramadi is a precursor, of either a turnaround by al-Abadi’s forces, or an Iraqi defeat.”

Ignatius’s urgent tone is warranted. But what he suggests is precisely what the U.S. made a lame attempt to do with then-Prime Minister Maliki in early 2007. Yet, President Bush squandered U.S. leverage by sending 30,000 troops to show he “had Maliki’s back,” freeing Maliki to accelerate his attempts to marginalize, rather than accommodate, Sunni interests.

Perhaps Ignatius now remembers how the “surge” he championed in 2007 greatly exacerbated tensions between Shia and Sunni contributing to the chaos now prevailing in Iraq and spreading across Syria and elsewhere. But Ignatius is well connected and a bellwether; if he ends up advocating another “surge,” take shelter.

### **Keane and Kagan Ask For a Mulligan**

The architects of Bush’s 2007 “surge” of 30,000 troops into Iraq, former Army General Jack Keane and American Enterprise Institute neocon strategist Frederick Kagan, in testimony Thursday to the Senate Armed Services Committee, warned strongly that, without a “surge” of some 15,000 to 20,000 U.S. troops, ISIS will win in Iraq.

"We are losing this war," warned Keane, who previously served as Vice Chief of Staff of the Army. "ISIS is on the offense, with the ability to attack at will, anyplace, anytime. ... Air power will not defeat ISIS." Keane stressed that the U.S. and its allies have "no ground force, which is the defeat mechanism."

Not given to understatement, Kagan called ISIS "one of the most evil organizations that has ever existed. ... This is not a group that maybe we can negotiate with down the road someday. This is a group that is committed to the destruction of everything decent in the world." He called for "15-20,000 U.S. troops on the ground to provide the necessary enablers, advisers and so forth," and added: "Anything less than that is simply unserious."

(By the way, Frederick Kagan is the brother of neocon-star Robert Kagan, whose Project for the New American Century began pushing for the invasion of Iraq in 1998 and finally got its way in 2003. Robert Kagan is the husband of Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who oversaw the 2014 coup that brought "regime change" and bloody chaos to Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis also prompted Robert Kagan to urge a major increase in U.S. military spending. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[A Family Business of Perpetual War.](#)"] )

What is perhaps most striking, however, is the casualness with which the likes of Frederick Kagan, Jack Keane, and other Iraq War enthusiasts advocate dispatching tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers to fight and die in what would almost certainly be another futile undertaking. You might even wonder why people like Kagan are invited to testify before Congress given their abysmal records.

But that would miss the true charm of the Iraq "surge" in 2007 and its significance in salvaging the reputations of folks like Kagan, not to mention George W. Bush and Dick Cheney. From their perspective, the "surge" was a great success. Bush and Cheney could swagger from the West Wing into the western sunset on Jan. 20, 2009.

As author Steve Coll has put it, "The decision [to surge] at a minimum guaranteed that his [Bush's] presidency would not end with a defeat in history's eyes. By committing to the surge [the President] was certain to at least achieve a stalemate."

According to Bob Woodward, Bush told key Republicans in late 2005 that he would not withdraw from Iraq, "even if Laura and [first-dog] Barney are the only ones supporting me." Woodward made it clear that Bush was well aware in fall 2006 that the U.S. was losing. Suddenly, with some fancy footwork, it became Laura, Barney and new Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Gen. David Petraeus along with 30,000 more U.S. soldiers making sure that the short-term fix was in.

The fact that about 1,000 U.S. soldiers returned in caskets was the principal price paid for that short-term “surge” fix. Their “ultimate sacrifice” will be mourned by their friends, families and countrymen on Memorial Day even as many of the same politicians and pundits will be casually pontificating about dispatching more young men and women as cannon fodder into the same misguided war.

It has been difficult drafting this downer, this historical counter-narrative, on the eve of Memorial Day. It seems to me necessary, though, to expose the *dramatis personae* who played such key roles in getting more and more people killed. Sad to say, none of the high officials mentioned here, as well as those on the relevant Congressional committees, are affected in any immediate way by the carnage in Ramadi, Tikrit or outside the gate to the Green Zone in Baghdad.

And perhaps that’s one of the key points here. It is not most of us, but rather our soldiers and the soldiers and civilians of Iraq, Afghanistan and God knows where else who are Lazarus at the gate. And, as Benjamin Franklin once said, “Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are.”

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## One More Casualty of US Wars

**From the Archive:** For many politicians, Memorial Day is just another chance to glorify war with little real remembrance of war’s horrors and waste, like the death of one young veteran a year ago, as recalled by Richard L. Fricker in one of his last articles before his own death from heart failure last Sept. 12.

By Richard L. Fricker (Originally published May 27, 2014)

I knew Cody Young only in a peripheral way. He and my son were classmates and skateboard buds. My wife remembers he would come over for a homemade Orange Julius on hot summer days. Thus with great sadness, we learned of his death on May 21, 2014, in what Tulsa police are calling a standoff.

How did a young man, 22 years old, who once entertained dreams of being the next Tony Hawk become the target of a police kill shot? My son and many of Cody’s

other friends recall him as a non-violent kid with a big kind heart. What happened? War happened! At least that's part of the story.

The Tulsa Police Department says it responded to reports of someone shooting at parked cars from a second-floor apartment near 11<sup>th</sup> and Rockford Ave. at about 1 a.m. Nothing in the releases indicates that Young fired specifically at officers or anyone else, only that he had a long gun at the window. Reports vary as to whether the weapon was a rifle or shotgun.

But Cody's life began to unravel in 2009, just before graduation from Thomas A. Edison High School when he joined the Oklahoma National Guard. Thomas Edison was known as a preparatory school but there was no way it could have prepared Cody for his future.

Cody was nine when Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda attacked New York City's Trade Center and the Pentagon. A decade later, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars were still going strong and it would be naive to think that he didn't know there was a good chance he would wind up in Iraq or Afghanistan.

But young men are prone to see themselves as immortal, impervious to injury and death. This sense of immortality is joined at the hip by a desire for adventure, or just doing something different to get out of town. So, Cody traded in his skate board for weapons of war. He became a soldier in the Oklahoma National Guard, the Thunderbirds, whose motto is "Always Ready, Always There." The "there" in this case was Afghanistan.

The Oklahoma Thunderbirds have a proud combat tradition, fighting in many engagements in many wars. During World War Two, they were said to be the first guard unit into Europe and last unit out. Afghanistan would have its own deadly consequences.

As chronicled in Phillip O'Connor piece, "[The Deadliest Day](#)" about a patrol on Sept. 9, 2011, "The firefight lasts maybe 15 seconds. When it is over, Oklahoma and its 7,500-member Army National Guard are left to face the state's bloodiest day in combat since Korea. Three soldiers are dead and two seriously wounded."

Before Cody and the Thunderbirds returned home 14 men had died and scores were injured. One soldier cited by O'Connor affirmed what anyone who has been to war knows, "Everybody wants to see combat, until they see it."

Cody, like many others in his deployment, saw a lot. According to family and friends, Cody returned changed, he was distant. He told his mother "something was wrong." That something was Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), a war disease whose symptoms vary: flashbacks, disassociation, depression often self-medicated with drugs or alcohol, and, worst of all, nightmares and flashbacks.

During a flashback, you are in the present and the past simultaneously, unsure which is real. You don't know how you got to this moment; a song, an aroma, a sound, a conversation, a movie? Anything can trigger it and you're left with very little control. In your mind, you're in combat. Someone must guide you out or it continues until you wear out or pass out.

The nightmares arrive unannounced, until someone wakes you because they hear you screaming, or they run their course and you wake up shaken and confused. Then the long night begins, fighting sleep fearing the nightmare will return.

According to Cody's mother, he had all the classic PTSD symptoms. He had sought help, but almost nothing was working. Cody, according to reports, spent his last night watching a war movie with a friend. Then something happened.

Only Cody knew what triggered his taking up a weapon and firing at parked cars out the window. Did Cody try to tell the assembled police responders what it was? The police say he was "mumbling" something but they couldn't understand what he was saying. In a sense, Cody had been trying to say something since he returned from Afghanistan.

At some point, according to Tulsa police accounts, Cody raised his weapon. Only Cody knew where he thought he was or what he was seeing. We do know there were a lot of police around. We do know they brought in one of their armored vehicles. The police simply followed protocol, but did being surrounded and confronted by an armored vehicle have any meaning to Cody or was he in another reality?

Cody can't tell us now. Seventeen-year veteran officer Gene Hogan ended Cody's life with a single rifle shot. Nine days earlier, Hogan had led the fifth annual Jared Shoemaker Memorial Walk, named for a U.S. Marine and Tulsa police officer killed during a deployment to Iraq in 2006. It was not immediately known if Hogan was given a specific kill order or if the Tulsa Police Department leaves that decision up to individual officers.

According to Stacy Bannerman, author of "When the War Came Home: The Inside Story of Reservists and the Families They Leave Behind," writing for [Truthout.Org](http://Truthout.Org) on May 26, 2014, "National Guardsmen have been found to have rates of PTSD as much as three times higher than active duty troops after combat."

She continued, "The vast differentials in mental health outcomes between reserve and active duty are primarily due to: the lack of post-deployment unit support; markedly poorer post-deployment mental health services and follow-up; and the rapidity with which citizen soldiers return to civilian life after combat." Remarking on Cody's death, she said it was "not isolated."

Locally, H. Caldwell "Callie" O'Keefe, VFW Post 577 chaplain and U.S. Marine veteran of Vietnam, said, "The needs of these veterans are not being addressed by the VA [Veterans Administration]; there needs to be a lot more therapy."

Caldwell's remarks echo concerns that Defense Department and VA doctors have been encouraged to downgrade PTSD findings to lower levels, such as "personality disorder." Caldwell said, "If they call it personality disorder they (DoD and VA) don't have to pay as much."

In 2013, the Army completed a study of PTSD diagnoses at Madigan Army Medical Center which was prompted by the discovery of a memo released by the Seattle Times quoting a Center psychiatrist telling colleagues, a soldier who retires with a post-traumatic-stress-disorder diagnosis could eventually receive \$1.5 million in government payments.

The memo claims, "He (the psychiatrist) stated that we have to be good stewards of the tax payers dollars, and we have to ensure that we are just not 'rubber stamping' a soldier with the diagnoses of PTSD." Such findings, it was claimed, could cause the Army and VA to go broke. The Army has resisted media efforts to release the complete study.

"People," Caldwell said, "who have seen combat are getting fucked-up. The public has no idea how prevalent PTSD is and if they did it would scare them to death, as if they'd had to go there themselves."

The VA has been under fire recently because of long delays in veterans getting treatment. There have been calls for Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki's resignation. Sen. Richard Burr, R-North Carolina, ranking Republican on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, publicly chided veterans groups for not joining in calling for Shinseki to go. The groups responded to the senator, calling his attack a "cheap shot," among other things. [Update: Shinseki resigned on May 30, 2014.]

In the end, Cody Young was a young man who served his country with honor and in the process came home a walking casualty. To those who knew him, it doesn't really matter if he was killed by the Taliban or the Tulsa police; he will be missed by his family and friends no matter who ended his life.

We must ask what Cody has taught us about sending our young men and women into the meat grinder of war as well as understanding their needs when they return. The sad fates of Cody and the thousands of other veterans who have returned home to die of gun violence are not the stories that parades celebrate; they don't make society feel good.

Looking back, it never occurred to me that the skateboard kid with the Orange

Julius would, in a few short years, become, like me, a veteran who served at about the same age, me in the Vietnam theater and him in Afghanistan. If I realized what he was going through, I would have tried to know him better. In war, we all become casualties.

Cody's name will not be on a marble wall, but he should be remembered by the people and the country that he served. I like to think that somewhere in the dimensions of the cosmos, Cody is skating half-pipes with no memory of what brought him to that place.

**Richard L. Fricker lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma. His last book, *The Last Day of the War*, is available at <https://www.createspace.com/3804081> .**

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