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What does Memorial Day mean?

Image from website of the White House Commission on the National Moment of Remembrance. Today is Memorial Day, which is a holiday for memorializing America's soldiers who died in wars. However, the bigger focus of the holiday seems to be long weekend vacations, parades, and retail sales. I have said plenty about the military. Mainly, I believe the United States needs an effective military. However, I also believe that the military-industrial-government complex is dangerously overgrown; that the United States has been too trigger-happy with the military and that effective diplomacy needs to be given more opportunity; and that violence begets violence, and, even though I am not a full pacifist, that Gandhi and many other pacifists' messages are important to take to heart and are often very powerful and effective. I also believe that the United States military has been the source of too many severe abuses, atrocities, and imperialist expansion whether originating from the lower ranks, the highest echelons, or somewhere in between; and that the United States government repeatedly has used war -- and by now terrorism, as well -- as an excuse to stymie civil liberties. Using effective diplomacy and hemming in military excess is not impossible. Although I take it that America's military, military budget, and nuclear arsenal continued growing under his watch, Jimmy Carter "was thankful that although my profession was that of a military man - commander in chief of the armed forces, prepared to defend my nation with maximum force if I had to - I was able to go through my entire term in office without firing a bullet, dropping a bomb or launching a missile." (Esquire, January 2005). (Many Americans at the time preferred the cowboy mentality of Ronald Reagan, who defeated Carter in an Electoral College landslide. Carter's full quote is: "The hostage crisis lasted almost a year. Most of my political advisers were urging me to launch an attack against Iran. I could have, in effect, destroyed Iran with one strike. And it would have been politically popular to do so. But in the process, I would have also killed thousands of innocent Iranians. And it would have undoubtedly resulted in the execution of our hostages... My family tied me back to the human element in the most important international, diplomatic and military decisions I had to make. And in the end, I was thankful that although my profession was that of a military man - commander in chief of the armed forces, prepared to defend my nation with maximum force if I had to - I was able to go through my entire term in office without firing a bullet, dropping a bomb or launching a missile."). In short, Memorial Day should not be a day blindly to glorify the military, military service, or soldiers. Instead, it should be a time to humanize soldiers and to recognize the sacrifices they have made while maintaining a realistic and critical assessment of American militarism; recognizing the serious tradeoffs involved in using and threatening military force; and recognizing that soldiers are humans including those who will commit horrid atrocities and others who will try to stop the atrocities. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 18:15