

Senator Lisa Baker
Memorial Day 2008

The solemn purpose of Memorial Day is far different in mood from the celebrations and traditions built around the holiday that signals the start of summer.

As we gather to honor our veterans, America's men and women in uniform are still protecting our Nation and advancing the cause of liberty.

Given our position of world leadership and our role as defender of freedom, there is never a time when we are spared the loss of men and women serving in our armed forces. Whether it is a time of war, or undeclared conflict, or relative peace, we are deployed in many places, and things can go tragically wrong very quickly.

This is so painfully acute for the family, friends and colleagues of Pennsylvania National Guard First Lt. Jeffrey DiPrimo of Pittston who lost his life last week serving our country in Afghanistan.

Times of war remind us – graphically, painfully – of the sacrifices made and the losses suffered.

More than ever, we mourn as a nation. Death on the battlefield is not a distant event – we see the faces, hear the stories, witness the grief of the families. We identify with those going overseas, and when deaths occur, it is intensely personal. We want to know what went wrong, and what can be done to prevent the same tragic circumstances.

We have great respect and deep gratitude for those who set aside everything they love and cherish – families, jobs, and dreams – to answer the call of our country.

Wars change in the ways and places they are fought, in the equipment and strategy employed, but the courage and conviction of those going to war is a constant.

Just as every community suffered losses in the Civil War, in the World Wars, in Korea and Vietnam, so has the War on Terror hit hard. Every community seems under the shadow of the sense of loss. It is a shock to us, with all our technology and hardware and training, that so many of our servicemen and women are killed or severely wounded.

We cannot replace those who are lost. We cannot assuage the pain felt by the families. But we can keep these individuals prominent in our hearts and our prayers.

Memorial Day began when a group of women placed flowers at the graves of Civil War soldiers in honor and remembrance. Years later, it is a disgrace that thieves are defacing the graves of our veterans by stealing the bronze markers.

This is a day to honor, to grieve, to remember. Through the memorials that have been established across our nation, we can each day keep the memories alive of those taken from us too early. We must remember the men and women from the Greatest Generation – our World War II veterans - who we are losing every day.

As a nation, and as a state, we must emphasize anew the critical importance of instruction in history and civics. Each generation needs to understand and appreciate why Americans fought, why they died in service, and what they accomplished. How they lived, why they served, what they left behind, these are lessons for a lifetime.

At a memorial service, a veteran summed up the warrior's creed: "You've got to believe in what you're doing." Those who fought and who died believed intensely in American principles and ideals.

We believe in those serving in our armed forces. We must support them, now in their time of duty and danger, and in the years to come. We must honor our obligations to them. And most importantly, we must remember those who lost their lives.

The word "hero" is used too casually these days, across sports and entertainment and media and celebrity. Today is a day to remind ourselves that those who serve, those who put everything at risk in defense of our nation, those who have paid the ultimate price, these are the true heroes. We salute them, and pay tribute to them, and memorialize them, today, tomorrow, and for as long as there is a free and great America.