

Civil War: Behind the Scenes

Day 4: A New Way to Remember

Remembering War the American Way

Republican leaders also played a decisive role in the creation of the largest and most successful organization of Union veterans, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). Ostensibly founded as a nonpartisan society in 1866, the GAR rendered invaluable service to the Republican cause. Under the leadership of John A. Logan, a U.S. senator from Ohio and a former Union general, the GAR solidified support among Union veterans for the party and kept the memory of war before the public's eye. Over the course of its existence, a majority of Union veterans never joined this society, even when its membership peaked in 1890 at slightly over four hundred thousand members. Moreover, membership in the GAR fluctuated greatly, particularly in the late 1860s and 1870s, with the membership in 1876 standing at only 26,899. Furthermore, the GAR was by no means the only organization to attract the allegiance of Union army veterans. Former officers created a number of exclusive societies, most notably the Loyal Legion, that excluded enlisted men.²²

The importance and effectiveness of the GAR stemmed from its ability to play a decisive role in shaping the commemoration of the Civil War

in the larger society. Soon after the war ended, the GAR began to encourage the commemoration of Memorial Day, a day dedicated to remembering the war dead. To a certain extent the GAR had merely standardized and formalized an increasingly common observance. In the South, as early as 1865, groups of women decorated the graves of Confederate soldiers and held memorial services in the spring. This custom spread north in 1866 and 1867 and was celebrated on a wide variety of spring days. The GAR played a crucial role in turning Memorial Day into a widely observed holiday in the North and in eventually making it into an official federal holiday. In 1868 Logan directed GAR posts to decorate the graves of Union soldiers and to hold memorial ceremonies on 30 May in honor of the fallen. The "heroic dead," Logan declared, had made themselves into a "barricade between our country and its foes." They had served as the "reveille of freedom to a race in chains," and their deaths were "the tattoo of rebellious tyranny in arms." Logan charged GAR posts to guard their "graves with sacred vigilance," so that coming generations would know the "cost of a free and undivided Republic."²³

In response to Logan's call, GAR posts throughout the nation held ceremonies featuring prayers, hymns, patriot anthems, and dirges. Although most ceremonies had a decidedly Protestant cast, in some cities Catholic priests presided or participated. Orators, usually former generals or members of the clergy, described how the sacrifice of the dead had paved the way for a united nation and brought the blessings of liberty. Many saw the results of the war as a fulfillment of the promise of the Revolution and the Declaration of Independence. Frequently, the names of the community's war dead were read aloud. At the end of a ceremony, participants generally placed flowers, wreaths, and, in some cases, small American flags on the graves. At the conclusion of the program at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, children orphaned by the conflict scattered flowers over the twelve thousand graves as two future presidents, Ulysses S. Grant and James Garfield, together with other invited dignitaries, watched. As Logan had hoped, Memorial Day became an annual and widely observed holiday in much of the North, and even in parts of the South.²⁴