

**M**emorial Day. For most, it's the celebrated kickoff to summer. Time for camping, cookouts, festivals, parades or gardening. But let's not forget that this day is set aside to honor all American soldiers killed in combat throughout our history. First celebrated nationwide in May 1868, after America's bloody Civil War, Memorial Day attained official national holiday status by a congressional declaration in 1971. In a moment of reflection, we should all pause to consider the Americans whose lives were snuffed out in military combat. Grateful for their sacrifices, we also should consider our collective duty to ensure that future lives are not expended in vain.

Of all the bad things that happen in life, war may be the most difficult to truly understand. Ordinary people all across the world share much more in common than the ideological differences that divide them. They raise families they love, they strive for some kind of happy existence and they all want to feel respected. Warriors have looked repeatedly across the battlefield to see individuals much like themselves — scared human beings who would rather be home and who don't fully understand, agree with or care about the political ideals driving the aggression. Too often, that *enemy* is just following orders in a desperate kill-or-be-killed scenario.

Wars originate in the aspirations of leaders. Sometimes they are deranged psychopaths, like Adolf Hitler. Sometimes they are delusional imperialists, like Napoleon Bonaparte. But many times they are simply zealots of a specific political or religious ideology who believe the rest of the world should convert to their viewpoint.

But waging war all by oneself is a difficult proposition. What dynamics convince a population of ordinary people to participate in mass slaughter? The leader's ability to perpetuate hate, instill a sense of righteousness or demonize the other side is essential. But our own willingness to be caught up in these emotions provides the political, financial and human support necessary to wage war.

Short of defending one's homeland, is there really any justification for conventional war? When an overzealous ruler attacks another country, or murderously oppresses his own people, is war the best response? Good intelligence and careful planning allowed Osama

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Commentary



bin Laden to be removed by a small, select strike force. A strong intelligence community might have allowed for similar removal of Saddam Hussein without a military invasion. Some key German officers would have supported a viable plan to remove Hitler during World War II.

Some argue that such targeted assassinations are not moral, or are beneath American standards of decency. So instead, we sacrifice thousands of military personnel in *proper* combat.

During the American Revolution, British regulars were abhorred by the ruthless tactics of colonial militia shooting from concealed positions in the woods, or snipers targeting British officers. The more *honorable* traditions of battle-line formations cost the British thousands of casualties. Conflict is not subject to social etiquette.

Wars are initiated by leaders with an agenda. Yet, followers are the enablers. Civilians must resist strongly, and highly scrutinize, recommendations by their leaders for military involvement that clearly is not defensive. If history has taught us anything, we should recognize that interventions escalate over time. Maintaining a formidable military might is our best assurance of long-term peace. But it also creates a powerful temptation to use that might to advance our own ideologies through interventionist policies. The inevitable outcome of those policies is dead American soldiers.

How many of the American soldiers lost in combat in the past 235 years were casualties of bad policy decisions? Probably more than we'd care to admit. But we can make sure we improve our record in the years ahead. To those who have the courage and stamina to enlist and serve, we have a responsibility to ensure that their lives will not be squandered on capricious ideological agendas, but only employed in defense of America's right to exist as a free and democratic nation.

Dan Linssen of Green Bay advocates for personal responsibility and thinking outside the box. His book "Who's to Blame?" is available at [www.whostoblame.net](http://www.whostoblame.net) and other online sources.