

Welcome to COWS > About COWS > Newsroom > News

## ■ *Has U.S. Forgotten It's Ideals?*

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Today, amid family outings and barbecue, we honor those who have died in our nation's wars.

Whatever we may individually think of the morality of those wars - the ends sought by the politicians who authorized them, the means of their execution - on this day it is appropriate to ponder what those who died in them thought they were fighting for.

I believe almost all those men and women were fighting for something like "the American way of life," understood not as a distinctive pattern of consumption but as a set of principles generally shared in what the French observer Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at as "a society of equals." A nation whose citizens believed in their hearts that all humans are created equal, and who therefore took the removal of unnecessary burdens on any human's happiness as the natural first task of collective action, and the greatest shared happiness consistent with individual freedom as the essential end of government.

Doing those tasks was the patriotic duty of that nation. After abiding those, we were free to disagree among ourselves about lesser things, and otherwise enjoy or suffer the pleasures or irritations of each other's company.

This still strikes me as a very good "way of life" indeed. I only wish that we were leading it.

Today again this nation is at war, against the worldwide scourge of terrorism. Our leaders promise it will be an endless war - 40 years at least, and who can see beyond next week, much less 40 years. To wage this war on terror, our leaders have committed vast military resources and promise to commit many more.

After the "peace dividend" that never came at the end of the Cold War, our national military budget is fully back to Cold War levels. But thus far, on the acknowledgment of these same leaders, there has been no discernible diminution of the terror threat. They say we have endless enemies scattered around the globe. For whatever reason, probably envy, the poor and destitute of this Earth seem to like to bash the United States. Or at least enough of them do to provide aid and comfort to maniac terrorists who would attack us. More and more military and police presence is required.

But this Memorial Day, I really wonder what the ghosts of World War II - the war whose recent experience by my parents most shaped my childhood - would think of the wisdom of what we're doing.

Take the unnecessary suffering. There are about 1.5 billion people in the world living in conditions of poverty so extreme that they are literally life-threatening. There are about 15 million kids each year who die of that poverty, most simply from poor nourishment or bad water. There are another 3 million adults who die each year of diseases that are easily preventable through vaccination. There are about 1 billion adults who currently fail to satisfy even a minimal international definition of literacy - "able, in any language, to read a sentence" - and since only one child in four worldwide is now in school, that number should grow astronomically in the next decade or so. And as nearly everyone knows or ought to know, there are now 40 million people infected with AIDS, not one of which has yet been cured.

All bad. And all more or less unnecessary. It is no longer in dispute that for about \$150 billion annually - not thrown at corrupt governments, but spent carefully and with accountability - we could wipe out world poverty, make sure everyone was fed, vaccinate everyone, get everybody safe drinking water, and sharply contain the spread of AIDS.

By American standards, \$150 billion is chump change. Recall we had a \$1.6 trillion tax cut for the rich approved just last year. And other countries are prepared to pitch in. Indeed, they already do in existing world aid budgets, to a far greater extent than the United States. We now spend less on foreign aid than any other developed country, and even less than that on the poor. Our aid budget is only about 0.1 percent of our gross domestic product. We spend about 0.015 percent on "less developed countries."

After World War II, the United States launched its Marshall Plan for European reconstruction. The plan helped rebuild Europe, stabilized its then fledgling capitalist democracies, and rid it forever of the starving children a generation of postwar moms like mine would invoke to shame a generation of boomer children to clear their plates. It also generated incalculable amounts of good will toward the United States.

The Marshall Plan cost this country more than 2 percent of GDP for several years. We paid it willingly as a people. Two percent is more than 130 times the 0.015 percent we now spend on the world's poor.

This Memorial Day, as I pause to honor those lost in World War II and other wars, the comparison shames me. Are we really today 130 times less human, and more stupid, than the country they thought they were fighting for?

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. COWS is sponsoring "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. Go to [www.sustainingwisconsin.org](http://www.sustainingwisconsin.org) for more information.

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