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5-27-2012

May 27, 2012: Happy Memorial Day

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2012). May 27, 2012: Happy Memorial Day. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/646>

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Title: Happy Memorial Day

Date: 2012-05-27T06:29:00.002-04:00

5/27/2012—Tomorrow is Memorial Day, the day on which we honor those who have died fighting in our nation's wars. It is in contrast to Veterans Day, in the fall, when we honor those who lived and all those who served in our armed forces. But there is a more subtle difference between the two days than that. Memorial Day originated to honor the fallen of the Civil War, more or less on both sides. Veterans Day was formerly known as Armistice Day, which celebrated the signing of the Armistice that ended WWI—11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918. The two wars, the Civil War and WWI illustrate the ambiguity of war—the sense we retain of good wars and the wars of power. The Civil War and WWII are the quintessential good wars—wars to end slavery and fight aggressive fascism. In contrast, WWI began and ended without obvious accomplishment or necessity. It has never been clear why Europe had to go to war at all in 1914 and the 1919 Treaty of Versailles that ended WWI was unwise in many ways and certainly contributed to the rise of Nazism in Germany. Today, of course, we can contrast the war in Afghanistan after 9/11 with the war in Iraq, still an unclear outcome. But I don't mean to be simplistic about this. All wars have consequences, even if unforeseen. President Bush went to war in Iraq to bring democracy to the Middle East. Today, Egyptians are in the midst of a real election for President. I don't know if the Arab spring had anything to do with the war in Iraq or not.