



## THE LAWRENCEVILLE SCHOOL

### **Memorial Day – Solemn Remembrance 3:30 at the Flagpole - May 27, 2019**

We gather to remember and honor, not simply those who served, but the fallen, those who paid the highest price and died in the service of their country.

Historian David Blight, who gave the Weeden Lecture last year, reminds us that although certain communities have revised or forgotten the real origins of Memorial Day, the very first observance was a rather spontaneous tribute by a large contingent of recently freed slaves in Charleston, South Carolina on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1865, just weeks after the end of the Civil War.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Colored Infantry had accepted the city's surrender earlier that spring, and so the occupying army was in large part made up of former enslaved peoples who had volunteered for military service. Charleston had also been the site of an outdoor prison for captured Union prisoners, kept in horrible conditions. Many died from disease and exposure.

The freedmen from the city came together to pay tribute to the soldiers who had been part of the war to end slavery, and who had died in such particularly sad, squalid circumstances. There was nothing noble about it – they died tragically and unnecessarily. The former slaves gave a proper burial to the soldiers, and they built them a more dignified cemetery with a whitewashed fence around it.

So, Memorial Day from its origin has never been about glorifying war. We are not here to conjure up a noble clash of powers. We are acknowledging our human imperfections. If we finally go to war, it is because diplomacy has failed, because negotiation failed, because we could not find a peaceful path.

In my view, we are also here, in part, to remember that this country was founded on noble aspirations, not as a finished set of perfect institutions, but a work in progress tending toward those noble aspirations. And our charge as citizens is to strive to get ever closer to those aspirations, to get better over time – to be a more just, equitable, fair, and inclusive society. We are better today than we were in 1789, and we will be better tomorrow than we are today when your generation has a chance to have a go at it.

And sometimes, the ideals of this fragile experiment in democracy need defending. We must elect wise leaders who will make the decision of when to choose diplomacy and when to choose to fight. And when we do go to war, we need citizens willing to serve, willing to do what it takes so that there is a place in the world where these freedoms can exist, to show the world that they

can exist. We owe it to every member of the armed forces to make careful, thoughtful decisions, to seek to avoid war whenever possible, and to never expend a single life unnecessarily.

In his book, "The Things They Carried," Tim O'Brien, who served in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division in Vietnam, writes:

*"A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie."*

He says this not out of disrespect, but having been there, he urges us, with some desperation, to never glorify or misunderstand the reality of war, and the cost of war.

Because he also says,

*"It was my view then, and still is, that you don't make war without knowing why. Knowledge, of course, is always imperfect, but it seemed to me that when a nation goes to war it must have reasonable confidence in the justice and imperative of its cause. You can't fix your mistakes. Once people are dead, you can't make them undead."*

This is his warning, his strident admonition, out of respect for those who have given their lives to defend our country, to never take lightly the price that they have paid, to treat with careful reverence their sacrifice. We owe them a debt of gratitude, and a commitment to understanding the cost of war, so that we never underestimate the toll it takes on those who serve and on their loved ones who depend upon them.

Thank you very much.

*Stephen S. Murray H'54 '55 '65 '16 P'16 '21  
The Shelby Cullom Davis '26 Head Master*