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Commemoration and Remembrance (USA)

By [Steven Trout](#)

From 1919 through the early 1920s, Americans energetically memorialized their role in the First World War. They built literally thousands of community monuments and functional memorials (such as buildings and parks), implemented an elegant scheme for battlefield commemoration in Europe, established Armistice Day as a national holiday, and emulated France and Great Britain by honoring an unknown soldier. There was no consensus, however, about the meaning of the war or the way in which it should be commemorated and remembered. As a result, collective memory of the conflict splintered into competing versions of the past and faded quickly.

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Introduction

In the [United States](#), two major controversies reflected widespread uncertainty over the meaning of the nation's participation in the First World War (WWI). First, Americans disagreed whether to leave their [war dead](#) in military cemeteries located in Europe or bring them home to the USA. Military leaders, along with highly placed civilian allies, advocated the former; a determined grass roots

movement, allegedly in league with the funeral industry, pushed for the latter. Second, Americans disagreed on the form that domestic war memorials should take. Some citizens sought to perpetuate commemorative traditions inherited from the late 19th century, when statues of Civil War soldiers became familiar icons in both northern and southern states. Others argued for a more functional approach to remembrance. These Americans preferred that war memorials take the shape of structures and spaces that citizens could actually *use*.

Ironically, the outcomes of these two controversies, combined with problematic policies implemented by the American Battlefield Monuments Commission (ABMC) (the organization charged with the design and construction of American war memorials and permanent cemeteries located overseas), all but guaranteed that collective memory of WWI would remain divided and unresolved from the early 1920s onward. Just one public war memorial, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery, remained meaningful on a national level, primarily because it unintentionally highlighted the sense of ambiguity that surrounded the American experience of the war in general.

As a subject for academic study, American WWI remembrance received little attention until the early 21st century, when scholarship in this previously neglected area suddenly increased. Three books, all published around the same time, explored the topic in depth: Lisa M. Budreau's *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919-1933* (2010), Mark A. Snell's *Unknown Soldiers: The American Expeditionary Forces in Memory and Remembrance* (2008), and [Steven Trout's](#) *On the Battlefield of Memory: The First World War and American Remembrance, 1919-1941* (2010). This article will draw upon the findings contained in these three studies, as well as other relevant sources, to provide an overview of American WWI commemoration and the reasons why that commemoration ultimately failed, for the most part, to keep the conflict alive in national memory.

The Debate over Repatriating the War Dead

Approximately 116,000 American soldiers died in WWI; another 204,002 were wounded.^[1] The debate over what to do with America's fallen soldiers began during the war itself, as grief-stricken parents and [widows](#) presented conflicting demands to the War Department. Many of these mourners insisted that the federal government repatriate the dead. Others regarded the removal of an American soldier from the supposedly sacred ground where he fell as unthinkable. Former President [Theodore Roosevelt \(1858-1919\)](#) publically lent his support to the latter view after his son [Quentin Roosevelt \(1897-1918\)](#), a U.S. Army aviator, was killed in a dogfight on 14 July 1918. In an appeal to the War Department, subsequently published in *The New York Times*, Roosevelt expressed his family's attitude through an instantly famous metaphor: "We feel that where the tree falls there let it lie."^[2] Roosevelt's endorsement gave a powerful boost to the non-repatriation effort. Nevertheless, pressure from the opposite camp, which held a numerical advantage, led Secretary of War [Newton D. Baker \(1871-1937\)](#) to make a fateful promise in September 1918. With little thought given to the enormous logistical and diplomatic difficulties that repatriation would entail, Baker publically assured

American families that their dead would be returned to them.

From Armistice Day 1918 through April 1919, the US Congress and the War Department struggled with the daunting implications of this pledge, and many civilian and military leaders looked for a way out. A powerful anti-repatriation organization emerged, known as the American Field of Honor Association, with none other than [John J. Pershing \(1860-1948\)](#), [William Howard Taft \(1857-1930\)](#), and [Samuel Gompers \(1850-1924\)](#) topping its roster of members.^[3] The Association argued against repatriation in principle, but also pointed out practical difficulties, such as the high cost involved and the health hazards posed by the transportation of so many cadavers. The organization also alleged that American morticians had unwritten the entire repatriation scheme. An equally formidable lobbying group, the Bring Home the Soldier Dead League, squared off against the Association and continually reminded the federal government of Baker's promise.

These organizations waged a sometimes vicious war of words against one another in the [American press](#) until the spring of 1919, when President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) signed into law legislation predictably designed to please both sides. Parents could choose between having their dead permanently memorialized at an American military cemetery overseas or returned stateside at governmental expense, and they had until 1923 to make their decision.

In the end, more than 45,000 American families opted for repatriation, and throughout the early 1920s ships bearing flag-draped caskets, sometimes thousands at a time, landed in Hoboken, New Jersey, where military and civilian dignitaries, including President [Warren G. Harding \(1865-1923\)](#), were on hand to receive them.^[4] From there, the caskets went by rail to cities and towns across the nation, where a posthumous hero's welcome awaited each one. Behind the patriotic hoopla, however, were gruesome realities. For understandable reasons, some of the caskets contained the wrong bodies, others no bodies at all – just body parts thought to belong to the same individual.

However, the decision to leave a soldier's remains in Europe offered no antidote to such indignities. [Great Britain](#) decided to leave its war dead in literally thousands of battlefield cemeteries – some with fewer than fifty individual graves – that generally corresponded with the actual locations where the inhabitants of these cemeteries died. In contrast, the American Battle Monuments Commission, founded in 1923 and chaired by John J. Pershing, created seven centralized cemeteries in [France](#) and [Belgium](#), one for each area where major American military operations had occurred, plus an additional cemetery in England. This approach saved money (the upkeep of Great Britain's thousands of cemeteries necessitated a small army of gardeners), and by concentrating so many grave markers together served to amplify the scale of American sacrifice, which had, in fact, been modest in comparison with the millions of fatalities suffered by Great Britain, France and [Germany](#). However, the decision to centralize commemoration in this fashion also meant that the bodies that wound up in ABMC cemeteries had, in many cases, been unearthed and reburied multiple times by the Graves Registration Service before reaching their permanent resting place.

The repatriation debate revealed a deep fissure in national memory. To proponents of overseas

commemoration, the rows upon rows of white crosses (interrupted here and there by a Star of David) at the massive ABMC cemeteries on the former [Western Front](#) represented America's noble sacrifices in the defense of civilization. Keeping America's war dead permanently *over there* not only sent a strong message about Anglo- and Franco-American ties, but also symbolized America's new leadership role on the global stage. In contrast, repatriation symbolized a rejection of this internationalist agenda. Once buried in local cemeteries, the dead took their place in a trans-historical narrative of American service and sacrifice that ignored the specific causes and results of the nation's intervention in the Great War.

Dividing commemoration between the foreign and the domestic failed, by and large, to produce culturally resonant sites of memory. Policies implemented by the ABMC did not help matters. For example, fearing that battlefields like the Meuse-Argonne and St. Mihiel would become as cluttered with monuments as Gettysburg or Shiloh, the ABMC tried to block the erection of unit- or state-specific memorials and even dismantled many of the dozens of homemade monuments left behind by members of the [American Expeditionary Forces](#). The Commission's head board also vetoed the idea of personalized inscriptions on grave markers. Thus, commemorative objects that might have carried special meaning for returning veterans were ruled out.

In place of these personal touches, the ABMC applied a rigid formula unlike anything in the history of American war remembrance up to that point. The Commission treated every area of major American operations – the Meuse Argonne, St. Mihiel, Chateau Thierry, etc. – in a consistent manner. Each became the site of an imposing central monument (a 200-foot-tall Doric column in the case of the Meuse-Argonne battlefield), a nondenominational chapel outfitted with tablets that listed the names of the missing, and a single cemetery designed to look as gigantic as possible. Nothing else was allowed. French-born architect Paul Cret (1876-1945), whose work blended the Beaux-Arts style with modernist elements, served as the head designer for the eight central memorials. The Commission's scheme was elegant, and Cret oversaw the creation of some of the most spectacular pieces of battlefield architecture in all of Europe. However, because they valued grandiosity and consistency over intimate and specific meaning, the ABMC's memorials never lived in the public imagination as those erected by other nations did.

The European half of American WWI commemoration achieved its greatest visibility in the early 1930s, after outgoing President [Calvin Coolidge \(1872-1933\)](#) approved a federal program to send Gold Star mothers (so-named because of the wartime symbol of the gold star, which signified an American fatality) to visit their sons' graves overseas. Widows of fallen soldiers, added to the legislation as an afterthought, were eligible as well, though not those who had remarried. Between 1930 and 1933, 6,685 American women (a little more than half of those invited) participated in the Gold Star Pilgrimages, as these expense-paid trips to the cemeteries came to be known, and the solemn nature of their journey captured the nation's attention.^[5]

However, even as the pilgrimages brought Americans together in unified awe of Republican motherhood, they underscored longstanding divisions and injustices. No one was particularly

surprised to learn that participants in the program were racially segregated (even while the overseas cemeteries themselves were not); what galled [African Americans](#) were the familiar conditions of separate and *unequal*. In New York, prior to boarding, white mothers and widows stayed free-of-charge in a comfortable hotel; blacks roomed at the [YMCA](#). And while Caucasian participants travelled to Europe first-class aboard luxury liners, African American mothers and widows found themselves consigned to inferior vessels. After learning of these disparities, poet and folklorist [James Weldon Johnson \(1871-1938\)](#), a leading figure in the flowering of urban black art and culture known as the Harlem Renaissance, penned one of the most scathing works of literature ever focused on the subject of American war remembrance. In his poem, “Saint Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day” (1930), he poured his resentment over the mistreatment of African American Gold Star Mothers into a deeply sardonic vision of how white America would react to the discovery that the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier contained a black man.

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and Armistice Day

The memorial that served as the specific target of Johnson’s attack was the one public site related to America and the Great War that captivated Americans throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Inspired by the unknown soldier memorials created in Great Britain and France in 1920, New York representative and American Legion cofounder [Hamilton Fish Jr. \(1888-1991\)](#) led a congressional effort in 1921 to establish an American version. Some of Fish’s original vision fell by the wayside. For example, he argued unsuccessfully that the tomb be placed inside the rotunda of the nation’s capitol building and dedicated on Memorial Day, a national holiday devoted to Civil War remembrance, as a symbol of unity between North and South. Ultimately, the Harding administration chose the Memorial Amphitheater of Arlington National Cemetery as the location for the tomb and settled on the new Armistice Day holiday for the formal interment, one of most grandiose spectacles in the history of American war remembrance.

The American Legion, the largest and most powerful veterans’ organization in American history, had spearheaded the creation of Armistice Day as a national day of remembrance. Containing, at its height of popularity, one out of every four American WWI veterans, the Legion preferred to remember the war effort not as a crusade to spread democracy – for abundant evidence existed in the interwar period that the world was not safe for democracy – but as a time of elevated experience, heightened masculinity, and beneficial Americanism. The latter, a key term in the organization’s lexicon of remembrance, referred to the shedding of ethnic differences during a time of national emergency. When it came to American war commemoration in the 1920s and 1930s, the Legion was ubiquitous. Foremost among its various commemoration causes was the establishment of 11 November, the date of the Armistice on the Western Front, as a day dedicated to the hopeful celebration of peace among nations, together with reflections on American sacrifices. Thanks to Legion lobbying, formal governmental observance of Armistice Day (today known as Veterans’ Day) began in 1921, and became a legal holiday for federal employees in 1938. As historian G. Kurt Piehler notes, Armistice Day was a solemn occasion for veterans and their families with ceremonies that “usually included

hymns and prayers in memory of those who had not come home, and occasionally the names of the community's war dead were read aloud."^[6]

Elaborate ritual surrounded the Unknown Soldier even before his arrival in the United States. His quasi-spiritualistic selection ceremony set the tone. At Châlons-sur-Marne, military dignitaries presented a blindfolded American enlisted man, Sergeant [Edward Younger \(1898-1942\)](#), with four different caskets, each containing the remains of an unidentified American fatality. Younger circled the coffins three times and then made his selection by placing a bouquet of roses atop "the second coffin from the right."^[7] From the former Western Front, America's Unknown Soldier made his way to the Le Havre, via Paris, aboard a special funeral train. A flotilla of American war ships then escorted the *U.S.S. Olympia*, the vessel chosen to transport the flag-draped casket, as it crossed the Atlantic. And for a full twenty-four hours prior to reburial, the Soldier rested in state beneath the dome of the Capital Building, as an estimated 90,000 visitors filed past.^[8]

On 11 November 1921, the interment ceremony opened with a formal procession that stretched all the way from the center of Washington, D.C. to Arlington National Cemetery on the opposite bank of the Potomac. Together with military leaders, the president and his cabinet, governors of all forty-eight states, and representatives of every imaginable patriotic and religious organization, the entire American Congress walked behind the horse-drawn wagon that carried the Unknown Soldier through the crowd-lined streets of the capitol. Congressional Medal of Honor recipients, including Lost Battalion Commander [Charles Whittlesey \(1884-1921\)](#), served as pall bearers.

President Harding's funeral oration, which stressed a desire for peace and referred hopefully to a naval disarmament conference that coincided with the ceremony, dominated the proceedings at the Memorial Amphitheater, along with the conferral of military decorations upon the Unknown Soldier by representatives of all the Allied nations. However, to reinforce the impression of national unity – after all, the Unknown Soldier could be *anyone* – the organizers of the funeral also allowed various religious and [ethnic minorities](#) to make contributions. A rabbi, for example, spoke during the service, and Chief [Plenty Coups \(1848-1932\)](#) of the Crow nation presented the Unknown Soldier with a war bonnet and coup stick. Though silent during the Amphitheater ceremony, members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) marched in the procession, and they left a wreath with the Unknown Soldier as he lay in state on 10 November 1921.

Ironically, given the pomp and circumstance lavished on the interment proceedings, a modest, largely unadorned slab marked the location of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier until 1932, when a sarcophagus designed by sculptor [Thomas Hudson Jones \(1892-1969\)](#) and architect [Lorimer Rich \(1891-1978\)](#) was finally erected. This eleven-year delay arguably reflected the monument's instability as a national symbol. So too did the absence of formal tomb guards, the feature of the monument that visitors today find most fascinating. Uniformed sentinels did not appear at the Tomb until 1926, and they did not begin guarding the site twenty-four hours a day until 1937.^[9]

Throughout the interwar period, Americans argued over the meaning of this prominent but ultimately

ambiguous memorial. To military officials and members of the American Legion, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier stood for patriotic service and sacrifice. (Not surprisingly, it was the Legion that pushed for military sentries at the memorial as a way to reinforce its supposed message of military pride and honorable sacrifice.) For many other Americans, however, the Tomb served as a subversive icon. For example, American writers, ranging from [Laurence Stallings \(1894-1968\)](#) to [John Dos Passos \(1896-1970\)](#), emphasized the grotesque horrors that the Tomb masked through patriotic ritual.^[10] And clergymen such as [Harry Emerson Fosdick \(1878-1969\)](#) and [John Haynes Holmes \(1879-1964\)](#), eloquent spokesmen for the American pacifist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, presented the Unknown Soldier as a prisoner of his nationalistic commemoration.^[11]

Though subject to sharply divided interpretations, the Tomb nevertheless served as a de facto national memorial to the Great War, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors between 1921 and 1941. Thus, it marked the most successful of the federal government's remembrance projects. Yet for most Americans, war commemoration remained a local matter as communities from coast to coast sought to celebrate and to memorialize their part in the War to End All Wars.

Community Commemoration

Here again debate and division quickly surfaced. Many Americans insisted that the war dead would best be honored through useful spaces that would benefit the living. Others pushed for more traditional, non-functional memorials, which typically took the form of soldier statues, steles, victory arches, or captured pieces of enemy [artillery](#) – objects that harkened back to familiar forms of Civil War commemoration. Perhaps the most familiar memorial in this category came from the aggressively entrepreneurial sculptor [E. M. Viquesney \(1876-1946\)](#), who in 1920 founded the American Doughboy Studios in Americus, Georgia. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and despite a forced copyright settlement and other economic vicissitudes, Viquesney's company mass-produced an eight-foot-tall statue known as *Spirit of the American Doughboy*, which depicted a helmeted soldier advancing confidently across [no-man's land](#), his right hand raised in the act of throwing a [grenade](#). Hundreds of communities purchased copies of Viquesney's best-known creation, and nearly 140 of these statues remain on public display today in communities spread across thirty-five different states.^[12] At the same time, Viquesney's American Doughboy Studios produced miniature versions of *Spirit*, some configured as art lamps, which an estimated 25,000 veterans purchased for their homes.^[13]

Inventories of domestic WWI memorials confirm that support for nonfunctional forms of public remembrance remained robust during the immediate post-war period. The state of Kansas, for example, is home to no fewer than fifty-four nonfunctional memorials, which include copies of *Spirit of the American Doughboy*, as well as soldier statues by Viquesney's chief competitor, [John Paulding \(1883-1935\)](#) of the American Art Bronze Foundry in Chicago.^[14] However, proponents of so-called living memorials enjoyed even greater success, as memorial halls, athletic stadiums, high

schools, student unions, parks, and gardens came to dominate the American commemorative landscape. Thousands of these functional sites of memory still exist today.

Such memorials erased the boundary between commemorative space, usually reserved for shrine-like monuments, and the ordinary spaces where Americans worked, held meetings, or enjoyed recreation. The idea was to make war remembrance a part of everyday life. Over time, however, the utilitarian nature of living memorials caused their commemorative associations to fade. Indeed, by the 1970s, with the Second World War understandably dominant in national memory, most Americans who frequented memorial buildings or parks designed to honor the doughboys of 1917-18 no longer realized their connection to the war.

Conclusion

Different memorials – and different commemorative policies and practices, both at home and abroad – might have given the First World War a more secure position in American memory. Or perhaps not. Too much ambiguity surrounded the events of 1917-18, thus thwarting the emergence of a satisfying master narrative or central myth. America entered WWI late, made a limited military contribution, and emerged ambivalent about its new role as a global leader. As a result, various competing versions of the past remained locked in battle until World War II, which *did* offer Americans a coherent narrative, all but blotted out the memory of World War I.

Ironically, however, public interest in what was once known as the Great Adventure has begun to show signs of life in the twenty-first century. In particular, the National World War I Museum located at Liberty Memorial (a huge remembrance complex that honors the more than 400 individuals from Kansas City, Missouri, who died in the war) draws visitors from coast to coast and is typically packed on weekends. Though the events of 1917-18 will likely remain overshadowed by the Civil War, World War II, and Vietnam, some Americans do remember what scholars have long dubbed America's "forgotten war."

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Notes

1. ↑ Keene, Jennifer: *World War I. The American Soldier Experience*, Lincoln 2011, p. 163.
2. ↑ Quoted in: Budreau, Lisa M.: *Bodies of War. World War I and the Politics of Commemoration, 1919-1933*, New York 2010, p. 70.
3. ↑ Budreau, *Bodies of War* 2010, p. 69
4. ↑ Budreau, *Bodies of War* 2010, p. 80.

5. ↑ Budreau, *Bodies of War* 2010, p. 239.
6. ↑ Piehler, G. Kurt: *Remembering the War to End All Wars*, in: Snell, Mark A. (ed.): *Unknown Soldiers. The American Expeditionary Forces in Memory & Remembrance*, Kent 2008, p. 46.
7. ↑ Hanson, Neil: *Unknown Soldiers. The Story of the Missing of the First World War*, New York 2006, p. 338.
8. ↑ Hanson, *Unknown Soldiers* 2006, p. 345.
9. ↑ Trout, Steven: *On the Battlefield of Memory. The First World War and American Remembrance, 1919-1941*, Tuscaloosa 2010, p. 153.
10. ↑ See: Stallings, Laurence: *Plumes*, New York 1924; Dos Passos, John: 1919, New York 1932.
11. ↑ See: Fosdick, Harry Emerson: *The Unknown Soldier. Armistice Day Sermon, 1933*, in: Fosdick, Harry Emerson: *Riverside Sermons*, New York 1958, pp. 343-52; Holmes, John Haynes: *The Unknown Soldier Speaks. 1928*, in: Voss, Carl Hermann (ed.): *A Summons Unto Men. An Anthology of the Writings of John Haynes Holmes*, New York 1971, pp. 126-42.
12. ↑ Holmes, *Unknown Soldier* 1971, p. 110.
13. ↑ Holmes, *Unknown Soldier* 1971, p. 110.
14. ↑ Thies, Randall M.: *Kansas WWI Monuments. A List*, Library Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, 15 March 2004.

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