

# The Grand Army of the Republic, the Indianapolis 500, and the Struggle for Memorial Day in Indiana, 1868-1923

NICHOLAS W. SACCO

The American Civil War was the deadliest conflict in United States history, with upwards of 750,000 soldiers dead from 1861 to 1865.<sup>1</sup> The bloody consequences of this sectional strife shocked Americans, leaving survivors—veterans and those on the home front—with the challenge of remembering, interpreting, and grappling with what, exactly, the fighting had been all about.<sup>2</sup> In 1866, a group of Illinois Union veterans founded the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), which eventually became the nation's largest Union Civil War veterans' fraternal organization, number-

---

Nicholas W. Sacco is a park guide with the National Park Service at the Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site in St. Louis, Missouri. He holds a master's degree in History with a concentration in Public History from Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis. This article originally appeared as a chapter of his master's thesis, "Kindling the Fires of Patriotism: The Grand Army of the Republic, Department of Indiana, 1866-1949" (2014). The author would like to thank Dr. Anita Morgan, Dr. Modupe Labode, Dr. Rebecca Shrum, Mr. Stephen E. Towne, and the Indiana State Library for their assistance in helping this article come to fruition.

<sup>1</sup>The most recent estimate of the Civil War death toll (750,000) is taken from J. David Hacker, "A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead," *Civil War History* 57 (December 2011), 307-348.

<sup>2</sup>David Blight, "Decoration Days: The Origins of Memorial Day in North and South," in Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh, eds., *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 2004), 94.



GAR postcard for Decoration Day, 1915. Beginning in 1868, members of the Grand Army of the Republic declared May 30—known as Decoration Day or Memorial Day—a day of solemn remembrance of the soldiers who died in the Civil War.

Courtesy, Derry Public Library, New Hampshire

ing more than 400,000 members nationwide by 1890.<sup>3</sup> As self-professed saviors of the Union, these GAR members took it upon themselves to act as gatekeepers of Civil War memory in the war's aftermath.

In 1868, as part of their strategy to preserve their memories of the war, the GAR declared May 30 as a day of solemn, public commemoration for the Union military's war dead. Challenges quickly arose, however, as to what the GAR deemed to be appropriate activities for Memorial Day.<sup>4</sup> By the turn of the twentieth century, GAR leaders across the country were taking issue with those who used Memorial Day to gamble on sports, consume copious amounts of alcohol, or run a business that stayed open during the holiday. In Indiana, the struggle centered around the running of the Indianapolis 500.

Beginning in 1911, the founders of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway held their annual five-hundred-mile automobile race on May 30, the same day as the GAR's Memorial Day holiday. This scheduling conflict motivated the GAR to lead a statewide movement against the Indianapolis 500, and in 1923, State Senator Robert Moorhead introduced a bill before the Indiana General Assembly that called for banning the race on Memorial Day. GAR veterans throughout the state wrote letters to the editor and made speeches in their local communities advocating for the passage of the Moorhead Memorial Day Bill while criticizing the race as an insult to the memory of United States soldiers who died during the Civil War. The legislation, however, attracted both vehement support and opposition—the latter from many younger veterans of World War I and members of the newly formed American Legion. The Indiana GAR ultimately lost this battle when Governor Warren McCray vetoed the Moorhead Memorial Day Bill on March 5, 1923. The story of Indiana war veterans, Memorial Day, and the Indianapolis 500 raises questions about the nature of patriotism and the process of commemoration, and about who defines and regulates these practices.

---

<sup>3</sup>For firsthand accounts of the GAR's origins, see Robert B. Beath, *History of the Grand Army of the Republic* (New York, 1888), 33-67; Oliver Morris Wilson, *The Grand Army of the Republic Under its First Constitution and Ritual: Its Birth and Organization* (Kansas City, Mo., 1905), 27-30. See also Mary R. Dearing, *Veterans in Politics: The Story of the G.A.R.* (Baton Rouge, La., 1952); Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1992). GAR membership statistics throughout the organization's existence are in Dennis Northcott, *Indiana Civil War Veterans: Transcription of the Death Rolls of the Department of Indiana, Grand Army of the Republic, 1882-1948* (St. Louis, Mo., 2005), 379-80.

<sup>4</sup>Readers should note that the holiday was often referred to as "Decoration Day" in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In this study I will use the term "Memorial Day," which is the common term for the holiday in the United States today. Memorial Day was switched to the last Monday in May through a 1968 federal law. See United States Congress, "Public Law 90-363" (PL, 28 June 1968).

Historian Jay Winter outlines a three-phase process by which public commemorative practices evolve as new generations replace old ones: the “creative” phase, the “institutional” phase, and the “transformational” phase.<sup>5</sup> This typology helps to explain the Indiana GAR’s attempt to control Memorial Day and the historical memories of the Union dead. During the initial postwar period, memories of the dead triggered a creative phase, in which the GAR’s collective desire for public commemoration led to the establishment of Memorial Day and the unveiling of its inaugural rituals in 1868. By 1900, repeated rituals institutionalized Memorial Day practices and solidified the holiday’s place in America’s commemorative landscape. The establishment of the Indianapolis 500 in 1911 finally ushered in the transformational phase, in which later generations inherited Memorial Day and used the holiday to convey their own interpretations, memories, and rituals onto society’s collective past.<sup>6</sup>

#### THE GAR AND THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF MEMORIAL DAY

The Grand Army of the Republic observed Memorial Day as a time reserved to reflect on the past and meet the new demands of memory brought on by the war. The scope of death, destruction, and change to American society wrought by four years of bloodshed challenged Americans to contemplate the meaning of this massive loss of life and ensure, through commemoration and remembrance, that such suffering would never occur again. As one GAR handbook explained in 1884, Memorial Day was “the day of all days in the G.A.R. Calendar.” “Comrades,” according to the author, “should exercise great care” in ensuring that civilians understood that “the old soldier is capable of sober thoughts and earnest acts.”<sup>7</sup> Union veterans believed that making the GAR “calendar” a part of every American citizen’s calendar would perpetuate a proper remembrance of the Union dead and a stronger love of country.

The GAR officially acknowledged Memorial Day after National Commander John A. Logan issued General Orders Number 11 on May

---

<sup>5</sup>Jay Winter, “Remembrance and Redemption: A Social Interpretation of War Memorials,” *Harvard Design Magazine* (Fall 1999), 76-77; Karen E. Till, “Memory Studies,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 62 (Autumn 2006), 327.

<sup>6</sup>For extended discussions on history and memory, see Till, “Memory Studies,” 325-41; Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).

<sup>7</sup>A. C. Leonard, *Grand Army of the Republic Hand Book* (Lancaster, Pa., 1884), 16.

5, 1868.<sup>8</sup> Logan defined the purpose behind the order as “preserving and strengthening those kind and fraternal feelings which have bound together the soldiers, sailors and marines who united to suppress the late rebellion.” To enhance those feelings among veterans and the rest of society, Logan encouraged GAR members to use Memorial Day as a way to cherish “the memory of our heroic dead” by “guard[ing] their graves with sacred vigilance.” By taking the time to observe Memorial Day and to remember those who died to save the Union, Americans would maintain the “solemn trust” between living veterans and the dead and perpetuate the memories of the fallen.<sup>9</sup> As sociologist Robert Bellah explains, the Civil War infused America’s civil religion (the blending of religious themes with nationalist sentiments) with “a new theme of death, sacrifice, and rebirth.”<sup>10</sup> Memorial Day ritualized these themes in an effort to foster an imagined community of citizens whose shared sufferings during the Civil War brought local communities across the nation together.<sup>11</sup> Through the commemoration of the Union dead, according to the GAR, Americans would forge a national identity as a reborn nation strengthened by the defeat of secession.

Thanks to Commander Logan’s instructions to GAR posts to observe the day “in their own way,” Memorial Day services at first took on a wide variety of incarnations. A one-thousand-page compilation of Memorial Day activities across the nation in 1869 (composed by Union veteran Ernest F. M. Faetz to promote the day’s observance) shows that while the general message of remembrance was almost universally embraced, different types of ritual services emerged. Indiana was no exception. That year, the Indiana GAR in South Bend enlisted the help of Republican vice president and Mishawaka, Indiana, resident Schuyler Colfax to boost awareness of Memorial Day in the area. After a large procession strewed flowers over all soldiers’ graves in the area, Colfax argued in an impassioned speech that by honoring the dead, Memorial Day would “teach us to love our country

---

<sup>8</sup>For more information about commemorative practices on May 30 from 1865 through 1867, see Blight, “Decoration Days,” 94-129; Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991), 102-110; Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 2013), 98-99; John R. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* (Lawrence, Kan., 2005), 153-54.

<sup>9</sup>The full text of General Logan’s General Orders No. 11 are printed in Beath, *History of the Grand Army of the Republic*, 90-91.

<sup>10</sup>Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (Winter 1967), 1-21.

<sup>11</sup>Benedict Anderson defines “imagined community” as a socially constructed community that perceives itself as a cohesive group or nationality. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 1983), 1-7.

more, to value its dearly-purchased institutions more, to prize its manifold blessings more, and to advance its greatness and true glory more.” Colfax’s comments held significance: prior to the Civil War, many Americans had viewed themselves as “present-minded people” who rejected “Old World” European notions of tradition and remembrance in favor of focusing on America’s future. Now, through speeches and ritual, the Indiana GAR attempted to instill the importance of making Memorial Day a “tradition” in American society, one that emphasized the importance of looking back to the past for inspiration and examples of true patriotism.<sup>12</sup>

While Colfax’s South Bend speech offered a somber reflection of the Union dead and their patriotic influence, the Memorial Day service in Indianapolis involved a lavish parade that included Republican governor Conrad Baker, officers of the Indianapolis police, and members of local Masonic orders and the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. Services in Fort Wayne, meanwhile, started with an afternoon march to Lindenwood Cemetery, where residents decorated soldiers’ graves. During the subsequent ceremonies, GAR member R. S. Robertson spoke on the “appropriate and pleasant duty” of decorating the graves of those who had helped to defend “our free institutions.” The rule of European kings, Robertson said, had a foundation based on “conquered provinces, of the millions who owe them the homage of serfs,” but Union victory in the Civil War restored a republican form of government in America.<sup>13</sup>

Memorial Day services became more unified by the mid-1870s and early 1880s. The GAR began to provide “handbooks” that offered specific procedures, poems, and Bible verses for local post commanders to utilize.<sup>14</sup> According to historian Stuart McConnell, “on the day itself, the post as-

---

<sup>12</sup>Colfax quoted in Ernest F. M. Faeltz, *The National Memorial Day: A Record of Ceremonies Over the Graves of the Union Soldiers, May 29 and 30, 1869* (Washington, D.C., 1870), 167-68. Michael Kammen argues that antebellum Americans had an “indifference” about the past and believed that “government ought to bear little responsibility for the maintenance of collective memories.” Historian Denise D. Meringolo similarly argues that “none of the amateur historians among the founding fathers or their successors argued that the study of history should be a function of government,” and that Americans were ambivalent about “the notion of a national culture sponsored by the federal government.” See Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 40-61; Denise D. Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Towards a New Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst, Mass., 2012), 5-7. See also Earl J. Hess, *Liberty, Virtue, and Progress: Northerners and Their War for the Union* (New York, 1988), 27-28; Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York, 1983), 1-14.

<sup>13</sup>Robertson quoted in Faeltz, *The National Memorial Day*, 160-73; Beath, *History of the Grand Army of the Republic*, 90.

<sup>14</sup>Memorial Day rituals probably became more uniform as they evolved through years of experimenting with different practices and “General Order” directives from GAR leadership.

sembled and marched to the local cemetery to decorate the graves of the fallen, an enterprise meticulously organized months in advance to assure that none were missed. Finally came a simple and subdued graveyard service involving prayers, short patriotic speeches, and music . . . and at the end perhaps a rifle salute.”<sup>15</sup> As the ritual of Memorial Day gained importance within America’s commemorative landscape, powerful individuals attempted to use the day’s patriotic speeches to affirm their fealty to the dead. “The Decoration Day speech,” David Blight asserts, “became an American genre that ministers, politicians, and countless former soldiers tried to master.” Orators used Memorial Day to remind audiences that “their soldiers had died necessary deaths, they had saved the republic, and their blood had given the nation new life.”<sup>16</sup> For many aging GAR veterans, in fact, Memorial Day became a commemorative centerpiece for instilling memories of the Civil War that embraced what historian Barbara A. Gannon describes as the Won Cause interpretation of the war, which argues that the fight to preserve the Union and end slavery were mutually laudable and co-existing goals of the United States government.<sup>17</sup> These speeches were addressed to all Americans—not just former Confederates—in an effort to curb what these veterans believed were serious violations of the spirit of Memorial Day through apathy, frivolity, and rampant business interests and greed. At least one hundred published newspaper accounts of Memorial Day speeches in Indiana were recorded from 1868 to 1925, but a few examples provide a general outline of the ideas and themes invoked by Indiana GAR members on the importance of remembering the Civil War and the Won Cause.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>McConnell, *Glorious Contentment*, 184. New York was the first state to designate May 30 as a legal holiday for Memorial Day commemorations in 1873, and by 1890 all northern states had made the day a legal holiday. David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 71; Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 103. For an example of a Memorial Day services handbook used in the twentieth century, see Grand Army of the Republic, *Services For the Use of the Grand Army of the Republic* (N. P., 1923).

<sup>16</sup>Blight, “Decoration Days,” 100.

<sup>17</sup>Barbara A. Gannon, *The Won Cause: Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 2011).

<sup>18</sup>For example, see “The Union Dead,” *Indianapolis Journal*, June 1, 1868; “Decoration Day,” *Greencastle Banner*, June 3, 1880; “Memorial Day Parade,” *Indianapolis News*, May 30, 1901; “Pays Tribute to Colored Race,” *Indianapolis Star*, May 31, 1907. Indianapolis newspapers regularly published Memorial Day speeches in their papers between May 30 and June 3 on an annual basis. The *Indianapolis Journal* (1868-1903), the *Indianapolis Star* (starting in 1904), and the *Indianapolis News* are the best sources for analyzing Memorial Day speeches.

## THE POLITICAL USES OF MEMORIAL DAY

In 1880, Comrade Henry H. Mathias addressed a Greencastle audience on the importance of virtue. Most wars, according to Mathias, stemmed from issues that “grew out of either lust, ambition or greed . . . the worst traits of man’s nature.” The Union war effort, however, had been an exercise in national virtue and sacrifice. “When the resources of diplomacy are exhausted, when national existence is at stake, when the freedom of the citizen is imperiled,” argued Mathias, armed conflict could be justified. “Among nations as among men, there is a well defined rule of right”; those who had died defending the United States “fell in a righteous cause, in defense of those great principles set forth in that immortal instrument, the Declaration of Independence . . . they died that a Nation might live.”<sup>19</sup> For Mathias, the Union dead had not perished in a vain, pointless conflict.

Similarly, former Republican congressman John Coburn addressed an audience in Martinsville in 1886 on the purpose of protecting the “sacred graves” of the fallen. “These men whose memories we honor to-day,” asserted Coburn, “fell in no war of invasion or conquest; not in the strife for power, not to cramp and bind and tax their fellow men, but to give more rights, to uplift the downtrodden . . . And humanity shall sit down to an endless feast, generation after generation, prepared by these dying hands.” GAR veterans did not “glory in war or take pride in its fearful consequences,” but the thought of disunion and “national death” had horrified them more than war. National unification and the end of slavery established an “obedience to war” that recreated America as a “free, progressive, intelligent Nation in her own race of improvement, and in the uplifting of all men from the bonds of their oppressors.” By the end of the war, Coburn argued, the entire human race emerged with an “enlargement of personal liberty.”<sup>20</sup> These advances in human freedom were central to the meaning of Memorial Day, according to Coburn.

For S. R. Hornbrook—a clergyman appointed by Governor Oliver P. Morton as an agent of the wartime Indiana Sanitary Commission—the lesson of Memorial Day was peace. Who were “the men of 1861,” he asked, and what did they represent? “They were men who loved peace and long strove to secure it,” proclaimed Hornbrook. “This is the great lesson which Memorial days must teach the young,” for the terrors of war should be

---

<sup>19</sup>“Decoration Day,” *Greencastle Banner*, June 3, 1880.

<sup>20</sup>“The Union’s Dead Soldiers,” *Indianapolis Journal*, June 2, 1886.



Orphans decorating their fathers' graves on Memorial Day, Glenwood Cemetery, Philadelphia, 1876. This scene from the *Illustrated London News* is typical of ceremonies across the United States which featured children placing flowers on veterans' graves.

Courtesy, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

feared by all. Hornbrook approved of “happy children bearing flowers for the dead heroes,” and the opening of the “book of remembrance” by those who attended Memorial Day commemorations; he invoked Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address in wishing for future peace: “most fondly do we hope, most fervently do we pray . . . that the scourge of war may never come to this rising generation.” But if war came, Hornbrook argued, “let them think upon the firmness of their fathers and shrink not from the trial.” Indiana GAR veterans had passed the trial of war and transitioned into “active manhood.”<sup>21</sup> Memorial Day would challenge younger generations to face future conflicts with an eye towards peace, but with another eye towards honor, bravery, and personal sacrifice if the nation were to face armed conflict again in the future.

Clearly, the Grand Army of the Republic intended to set aside Memorial Day as a day to reflect upon the memories of the Union dead, and

<sup>21</sup>“The Lessons of Memorial Day,” *American Tribune*, May 30, 1890.

many veterans argued that the day was created “for the dead.” But Memorial Day, as it came to be practiced, was just as much about assuaging the concerns of the living. As Drew Gilpin Faust aptly described it, “without agendas, without politics, the Dead became what their survivors chose to make them.”<sup>22</sup> Memorial Day services gained their cultural significance in American society because surviving veterans ascribed a particular meaning to the day. Decorating graves with flowers, reciting poems, singing patriotic songs, and making impassioned speeches all signified attempts by the living to mold the Union dead (and later the dead of other American wars) into their own vision of what it meant to be an American. The dead were incorporated into the mythology of the Union cause and promoted by the living as embodiments of honor, manliness, and American heroism.

Comrade John Coburn’s 1886 speech in Martinsville outlined the importance of remembering the Union dead, but it also reflected on the meaning of the Civil War as viewed by the Republican party: Confederates had seceded because of their desire to maintain slavery, while Union supporters refused to comply with Confederate attempts to build “an empire of slavery, thus cutting us off from our great highways to the South by water and land.” The thought of war was terrible, but “the doctrine that a dissatisfied State might, at any time, upon her own will, secede, [thus making] disunion legal” was worse. The results of the war proved that “the Nation is greater than the State and can compel obedience [to] war to hold together this vast, free, progressive, intelligent Nation.”<sup>23</sup> Coburn asserted that the Won Cause of Union and emancipation was right, and that the use of military force to enact that cause was justified.

For Comrade George W. Spahr, the Civil War finally created a unified nation. In his 1893 Memorial Day oration in Cambridge City, Indiana, Spahr remarked that those who had been marked by the death and destruction of war were “consoled by the fact that we are no longer a doubtful confederation of States; that we are no longer a compact of colonies existing at the will and pleasure of the parties to the combine.” The Civil War ensured that Americans would be governed by laws in a perpetual union, not by the whims of a few politically powerful men. Former supporters of the Confederacy, argued Spahr, were “more prosperous people than they would have been

---

<sup>22</sup>Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York, 2008), 269.

<sup>23</sup>*Indianapolis Journal*, June 2, 1886. For a similar speech on nationalism given by the Rev. A. B. Storms in 1914 at Crown Hill Cemetery, see “Tribute Paid to the Nation’s Dead,” *Indianapolis Star*, May 30, 1914.

had they been successful in the establishment of human slavery and a slave oligarchy.”<sup>24</sup> Based upon his claim regarding postwar economic success in the former Confederate states, Spahr believed that former secessionists should also embrace the Won Cause interpretation of the war.

For GAR members like Spahr, Memorial Day was also an appropriate space in which to advocate for political and financial concerns that benefitted living soldiers. Spahr used his Memorial Day speech to chastise the “class of ungrateful and unworthy citizens” who had opposed the expansion of pension benefits to Union veterans in 1890. These “unworthy citizens” were unpatriotic and had been “too cowardly to fight when the war was on.” Union soldiers had demonstrated “unswerving patriotic devotion and self-sacrificing love of country” during the time of the nation’s greatest need; paying a small monthly pension to disabled veterans through public funds after the conflict ended was but a small credit paid to the debt that could never be repaid.<sup>25</sup>

Veterans’ Memorial Day speeches, however, were not monolithic. GAR veterans did not always agree with each other about the best path for the country’s future and viewed questions of sectional reconciliation, states’ rights, and public aid to African American freedpeople from a range of perspectives. Historian Nicole Etcheson demonstrates that the speeches varied in content based on the orator’s political affiliation. Democratic GAR members sometimes complained when speakers like Republican Thomas Hanna (lieutenant governor at the time of his speech in 1881) focused too much on emancipation.<sup>26</sup> To counteract such orations, Democratic

---

<sup>24</sup>“Memorial Oration,” *American Tribune*, June 15, 1893.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. One critic of government pensions considered them acts of corrupt socialism. See William M. Sloane, “Pensions and Socialism,” *Century* 42 (June 1891), 179-88. See also Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

<sup>26</sup>While an exact number of Democrats in the Indiana GAR is impossible to ascertain, Larry M. Logue estimates that roughly one-third of its members (31 percent) voted for Democrat Grover Cleveland in the 1888 Presidential election. Following the Indiana GAR’s reorganization in 1879, the political allegiances of its membership may have remained consistent in a two-to-one ratio in support of the Republicans. See Larry M. Logue, “Union Veterans and Their Government: The Effects of Public Policies on Private Lives,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 22 (Winter 1992), 411-34; Nicole Etcheson, *A Generation at War: The Civil War Era in a Northern Community* (Lawrence, Kan., 2011), 195. The tactic of reviving negative memories of the war (and promoting memories of emancipation) was often referred to as “waving the bloody shirt,” which Charles W. Calhoun defines as “inflaming the emotions of the war and Reconstruction for partisan purposes.” Republicans attacked both former Confederates and Northern Democrats who they believed had engaged in treasonous wartime behavior. See Charles W. Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age* (New York, 2010), 5.



Members of the GAR Dumont Post No. 18, c. 1900. Speakers at Memorial Day celebrations sometimes used the opportunity to advocate for better benefits for living veterans.

William J. H. Boetcker, *Picturesque Shelbyville* (1902)

political leaders chose speakers who left out any mention of slavery as a cause of the war or emancipation as a positive consequence of its results.

Comrade Courtland C. Matson was one Indiana GAR member often selected by Democrats to make Memorial Day speeches. A Greencastle lawyer, Matson at first rejected the GAR in 1868 and formed a local political organization called the “Union White Boys in Blue” that opposed that year’s election of Republican Ulysses S. Grant as president. At one point, as many as 120 veterans claimed membership in the organization. These men believed that Radical Republicans were to blame for strained relations between the sections, due in large part to their excessive protection of “hordes of unthrifty and indolent negroes” through their support of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.<sup>27</sup>

Addressing an 1875 soldiers’ Memorial Day convention in Indianapolis, Matson went so far as to call for the equal commemoration of the

---

<sup>27</sup>Etcheson, *A Generation at War*, 174.

Union and Confederate dead during the days services. In 1880, he gave speeches on both Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. While the Memorial Day speech was not published, his Fourth of July speech is telling. In it, he praised the Union war effort and the desire for political reunification between North and South. He mentioned how proud he was of his service as a Union soldier, but complained that he had been “[conscripted] by the strong arm of military power, dragged from his home, and deprived of his liberty without writ, warrant, hearing, or trial, and he feels that such an outrage yet calls for the most indignant expression of all just people.”<sup>28</sup> By focusing on sectional reconciliation and the alleged abuses of the federal government in conscripting young men from their homes, Matson challenged the interpretations of Republican speakers like George Spahr who focused on the self-sacrifice of Union soldiers, and he questioned John Coburn’s belief that the war established the federal government—over state governments—as the most qualified arbiter of the people’s freedoms. Additionally, Matson typifies the blatant racism and whitewashing of emancipationist war memories that characterized some white Indiana veterans, both in and out of the GAR.

By 1900, Indiana GAR members and their supporters expressed with increasing frequency their desires to reconcile with former Confederates. Although the GAR and the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) never hosted a joint meeting during their years of active organization, members from both groups increasingly alluded to their mutual battlefield valor and to their wish to bury the political issues that the war had provoked.<sup>29</sup> In 1901, national GAR commander Leo Rassieur remarked at Indianapolis’s Crown Hill Cemetery that the Union soldier had “fully appreciated that [his] service involved a bloody conflict with his fellow-citizens of the South”; the same year at Greenlawn Cemetery in Lafayette, Indiana, Rev. Frederick Matson suggested that the “issues” that had caused the Civil War

---

<sup>28</sup>An Address Delivered by Col. C. C. Matson, at Bloomington, July 4,” *Greencastle Dollar Press*, July 23, 1879; Etcheson, *A Generation at War*, 193-94.

<sup>29</sup>On Civil War memory and reconciliation, see Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 1-5; Cecilia O’Leary, “American All: Reforging a National Brotherhood, 1876-1917,” *History Today* 44 (October 1994), 20-27; Thomas J. Brown, *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 2004), 1-14; Matthew Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar* (Ithaca, N. Y., 2002), 221-34; James H. Madison, “Civil War Memories and ‘Partnership Forgetting’, 1865-1913,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 99 (September 2003), 198-230.

“died on the day of Appomattox, and they are dead forever.”<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, the *Indianapolis Journal* proclaimed in 1899 that Memorial Day had become a “permanent institution . . . recognized throughout the country by all thoughtful people as a day set apart for the recalling of patriotic examples and the consideration of patriotic duties.”<sup>31</sup>

The Indiana GAR, however, was not as positive about the status of their holiday in their home state. Even as the Indiana organization embraced reconciliation with Confederates to expand the meaning of Memorial Day, its members grew increasingly critical of how fellow Hoosiers observed the day.<sup>32</sup> Starting in the 1890s, the Indiana GAR complained that too many Hoosiers were allegedly using the holiday to engage in frivolous activities on the one day of the calendar reserved for reflection on the legacy of the heroic Union dead.<sup>33</sup> In 1913, Comrade George Searce complained that younger people born during and after the war demonstrated a “tendency . . . to forget the purpose of Memorial Day and make it a day for games, races and revelry, instead of a day of memory and tears.”<sup>34</sup> The “races” Searce alluded to took place at the newly built

---

<sup>30</sup>In 1914, Indiana GAR member Newton M. Taylor shook hands with a former Confederate soldier at Greenlawn Cemetery in Franklin, although he stood by his premise that southern politicians brought on the Civil War. In contrast, Comrade Lew Wallace had warned in 1892 that “the Solid South is but another name for the Confederacy.” See “In Memory of the Dead and Over Confederate Graves,” *Indianapolis News*, May 30, 1901; “Blue and Gray Clasp Hands,” *Indianapolis News*, May 30, 1914; “General Lew Wallace at the Annual Banquet of the Loyal Legion,” *American Tribune*, June 2, 1892.

<sup>31</sup>“A Grand Army Institution,” *Indianapolis Journal*, May 30, 1899.

<sup>32</sup>Many of these complaints were recorded in the GAR Encampment Records taken at the Indiana GAR’s annual meeting. Hereafter I will use Gannon’s format for citing GAR National and State Encampment records: “When GAR Encampments are cited, the entry will include the state, the meeting number, and the year the meeting took place.” Gannon, *The Won Cause*, 223.

<sup>33</sup>For example, veteran Ivan N. Walker warned in 1892 that Memorial Day was not “made a day of feasting, festivals and fairs,” nor should it be “given over to base ball and other sports” because it was “set apart as a day sacred to the memory of our heroic dead . . . no day in the year is so important to us as a nation.” In 1904, Indiana GAR commander George W. Grubbs asserted that “the increasing perversion of Memorial Day in many places to mere pleasure, amusement, and frivolity, is a national shame. The apathy which countenances it is a sign of the decline of national gratitude and conscience,” while William Ketcham proclaimed in 1908 that Memorial Day was a “Holy day, on which we meet and pay tribute to our dead . . . For us this day is set apart and sacred to this and no other purpose whatsoever.” See Indiana, *Thirteenth* (1892), 100; Indiana, *Twenty-Fifth* (1904), 102, 159; Indiana, *Twenty-Ninth* (1908), 94. Additionally, in 1907, some members of the GAR opposed the dedication of a statue to Indiana Civil War and Spanish-American War veteran Henry Ware Lawton on Memorial Day, claiming it was an encroachment on the holiday. See Alexander Uribel, “The Making of Citizens: A History of Civic Education in Indianapolis, 1900-1950” (Ph.D. Diss., Indiana University, 1996), 135-39.

<sup>34</sup>Indiana, *Thirty-Fourth* (1913), 102-103.

Indianapolis Motor Speedway. When the Indianapolis 500 was held for the first time on Memorial Day in 1911, a new firestorm of controversy emerged over the meaning of the holiday in Indiana.

#### NEW MEMORIAL DAY TRADITIONS IN INDIANA

The leading figure behind the creation of the Indianapolis 500 was Carl Graham Fisher, a native of Greensburg, Indiana, who had a fascination with new vehicular technologies.<sup>35</sup> In 1891, at the age of seventeen, Fisher invested \$600 in a bicycle repair shop in downtown Indianapolis, where his quirky publicity stunts gained him attention throughout the state. Within ten years he was selling motorcycles and appearing in automobile races around the Midwest.<sup>36</sup> What first appeared to be a risky investment in a gas headlight company with business partner James Allison in 1904 proved to be immediately profitable, and the two became multimillionaires when they sold their company in 1913. Thanks to the success of the Prest-O-Lite headlight battery company, Fisher and three business partners were able to invest in a tract of land five miles west of downtown Indianapolis to build a two-and-a-half-mile racing track in 1908.<sup>37</sup>

Fisher's success in the automotive industry reflected larger economic changes in Indiana. The Hoosier state (and Indianapolis in particular) experienced a considerable increase in its industrial capacities after the Civil War, and by 1880 Indianapolis had a larger percentage of workers in manufacturing occupations than did several northeastern cities, including Philadelphia. Both state investment in an extensive system of railroads and the discovery of a natural gas field in east-central Indiana in 1887 helped to attract new industries to the state. The first automobiles for sale came to the state in 1894, and by 1909 at least 67 Indiana automobile manu-

---

<sup>35</sup>Later in life, Fisher moved to Florida, where his personal papers are housed at HistoryMiami Archives & Research Center. The other three founders of the Speedway—James A. Allison, Frank H. Wheeler, and Arthur C. Newbury—have no known manuscript records. See Carl Fisher Papers, 1896-1958, HistoryMiami Archives & Research Center, online at <http://historymiamiarchives.org/guides/?p=collections/findingaid&id=14&q=&rootcontentid=600>.

<sup>36</sup>For example, in the early 1890s Fisher had a friend make thousands of toy balloons with illuminating gas, fifty of which had "tags" with a redeemable coupon for a free bicycle in them. According to a Fisher relative, "some Hoosiers were so eager to get a free bike that they loaded rounds into their shotguns and shot at the balloons as though they were hunting geese." Quoted in Mark S. Foster, *Castles in the Sand: The Life and Times of Carl Graham Fisher* (Gainesville, FL, 2000), 21-33.

<sup>37</sup>Foster, *Castles in the Sand*, 45-59; D. Bruce Scott, *Indy: Racing Before the 500* (Batesville, Ind., 2005), 6-11.

facturing companies employed 6,800 workers who produced \$24 million worth of goods.<sup>38</sup>

Fisher hosted an inaugural balloon race that attracted a crowd of roughly 40,000 spectators at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway on June 5, 1909, and a three-day series of motorcycle and automobile races later that year during Labor Day weekend. Although serious issues with the racing surface led to several crashes and the deaths of three spectators, one mechanic, and one driver during the Labor Day races, the *Indianapolis Star* nevertheless extolled the benefits of the race and the entire automobile industry. Crowds were sparse for that year's races, however, prompting Fisher to change plans for future races.<sup>39</sup>

In 1911, to generate interest and boost attendance at the track, Fisher made the race a one-day event, lengthened it to 500 miles, and offered the winner a prize of \$27,550—an unprecedented sum at the time. The date of the race was switched to Memorial Day. Newspaper accounts do not explain the reason for the change, although in 1923 Theodore E. Myers, manager of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, explained that no other day would work because “the Fourth of July is very hot and the people are scattered in their vacations . . . We tried in 1919 to hold the race on the day after Memorial day and we know from experience that it is not successful.” Former Indiana state legislator Robert L. Moorhead remarked in 1967 (at the age of 92) that the date was switched due to objections from labor unions who did not want the race on their day. Historian Mark S. Foster, Fisher's biographer, speculated that “Carl Fisher was very likely the inspiration for establishing the date.”<sup>40</sup> Perhaps Fisher's sense of patriotism and personal business interests inspired the date change. At the inaugural balloon race in 1909, Fisher himself got into a balloon and unfurled six American flags, exemplifying an emerging trend of Indianapolis businesses using patriotic symbolism to support their commercial endeavors. Additionally, during the race's early years, Fisher frequently expressed his desire to have popular European drivers come to Indianapolis to race

---

<sup>38</sup>Robert V. Robinson and Carl M. Briggs, “The Rise of Factories in Nineteenth-Century Indianapolis,” *American Journal of Sociology* 97 (November 1991), 627-28; Scott, *Indy*, 3; Foster, *Castles in the Sand*, 43.

<sup>39</sup>Foster, *Castles in the Sand*, 76-80; “Auto's Aid to Prosperity,” *Indianapolis Star*, September 4, 1910.

<sup>40</sup>There is no evidence from newspapers at the time to support Myers or Moorhead, and no known manuscript records exist for Moorhead. “Speedway Through if Bill Passes, Myers Says,” *Indianapolis Star*, January 29, 1923; “May 30 Race Ban Fight Recalled,” *Indianapolis News*, May 30, 1967; “World's Greatest Auto Race Planned,” *Indianapolis News*, September 6, 1910; Foster, *Castles in the Sand*, 80; Terry Reed, *The Race and Ritual of the Indianapolis 500* (Dulles, Va., 2005), 5-13.

Americans. Perhaps Fisher believed Memorial Day was an appropriate time to demonstrate the alleged superiority of American drivers and the Indianapolis automobile industry to the rest of the world.<sup>41</sup>

Whatever the reasons for the date change, Fisher's gamble paid off handsomely, as the Indianapolis 500 became wildly popular throughout the city and the state. "Undoubtedly a boon for city businesses of all types," argues historian Alexander Uribel, "the race was promoted as a unique event and the pride of the city." By 1913, at least 100,000 people were paying admittance fees each year to see the race on Memorial Day.<sup>42</sup> Rather than spending the day decorating the graves of Union Civil War veterans and quietly remembering those who had died in combat, many Hoosiers chose to spend their leisure time at the racetrack watching automobiles go upwards of 100 miles per hour.

#### THE INDIANAPOLIS 500 AND THE 1923 MOORHEAD MEMORIAL DAY BILL

Protests from veterans and religious groups against the Memorial Day race were immediate. The *Indianapolis Star* reported the day before the 1911 race that many churches in Indiana had argued for a "proper celebration in tribute to war heroes." Members of GAR George Thomas Post 17 in Indianapolis attended "a special Memorial Day service" at Central Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church, where the Reverend A. B. Storms proclaimed that "a nation must have conscience and memory" in order to meet its "destiny."<sup>43</sup> Days after the event, a member of the Sons of Veterans began circulating a petition—signed by many GAR members—calling for a law against races on Memorial Day. Fisher and other track leaders acknowledged these protests and made a public announcement that the 1912 race would be held on July 4 so as to not "overshadow the Memorial day tribute

---

<sup>41</sup>Alexander Uribel argues that "the commercialization of Memorial Day in the years before the Great War became rampant. Advertisements by local merchants, perhaps fearing less the wrath of aging soldiers, blatantly coopted [sic] the images of Memorial Day to sell flags, shoes, suits, and other goods. L.S. Ayres . . . advertised a wide assortment of flags for sale, for all budgets." Uribel, "The Making of Citizens," 146; Foster, *Castles in the Sand*, 76, 80.

<sup>42</sup>Uribel, "The Making of Citizens," 141.

<sup>43</sup>"Deplores Sports on Memorial Day," *Indianapolis Star*, May 29, 1911.

paid to the soldier dead." Nothing came of these plans, however, and the race continued to be held on Memorial Day.<sup>44</sup>

The protests continued throughout the 1910s. Speaking at the Indiana GAR's 1914 encampment, Senior Vice Commander John H. Hoffman reinforced his belief that it was "the duty of the Grand Army everywhere to use its influence in every legitimate way to discourage all sports and amusements that in any way detract from the interest in Memorial Day." In 1915, Spanish-American War veterans suggested switching Memorial Day to the first Sunday in June so that the race could continue to be held on May 30. GAR members refused to cede any ground. Former Indiana GAR commander Gil R. Stormont wrote to the *Indianapolis News* complaining about efforts to petition the Indiana General Assembly to change the date. May 30, asserted Stormont, was "the one day of the 365 that the Grand Army has set apart as a memorial to the patriotic dead, and they claim to have earned the right to this one day of the year for the observance of this sacred duty. In the minds of GAR members, the speedway has become a national desecration and an offense to all who have a true regard for the sentiments of Memorial day."<sup>45</sup> If any event needed to be moved, argued Stormont, it was the Indianapolis 500.

Despite the GAR's loud complaints, the meaning of Memorial Day was changing in the minds of Hoosiers, becoming a celebration of forward "progress" and not a commemoration of past virtue. Uribel asserts that Memorial Day celebrations in Indiana evolved to be "based on leisure, auto-races, and a fascination with spectacle, speed, and technology that was loosely rationalized as a new form of patriotic commemoration."<sup>46</sup> The 1899 *Indianapolis Journal* editorial that had applauded Memorial Day as a "permanent institution" for recalling "patriotic examples and the consideration of patriotic duties" was replaced with editorials in Indianapolis papers cautioning against undue protests against the Indianapolis 500. The *Indianapolis News*, for example, complained that the 1911 petition to ban races on Memorial Day was "another example of the frenzy we have for regulating everything and everybody by law." While the values of "honor and good citizenship" were

---

<sup>44</sup>"To Bar Sports on May 30," *Indianapolis News*, June 1, 1911; "Would Bar Sports on Memorial Day," *Indianapolis Star*, June 1, 1911; "Speedway Picks July 4 Date," *Indianapolis Star*, June 3, 1911; Uribel, "The Making of Citizens," 143.

<sup>45</sup>Indiana, *Thirty-Fifth* (1914), 71; "To Maintain Memorial Day," *Indianapolis News*, January 29, 1915.

<sup>46</sup>Uribel, "The Making of Citizens," 146.



Joe Dawson winning the 1912 Indianapolis 500. After controversy in 1911, Speedway owners initially promised that the date of the race would change from its Memorial Day schedule, but the 1912 race, like others after it, was run on the holiday.

Courtesy, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

heartily endorsed by the *News*, education—not compulsory law—was the best method for promoting these values.<sup>47</sup>

A 1913 editorial in the *Indianapolis Star* took a similar stance by suggesting that the GAR was “perhaps a little unreasonable” in its protests against the race. Remembering the soldiers of the Civil War and decorating their graves was important, the editors wrote, but those who attended the race “are of the twentieth century; they are looking forward, not back as it is the nature of each generation to do.” By attending the race, spectators actually “celebrate the triumph of invention and industry that of itself was made possible by the services of the veterans.”<sup>48</sup> By spending money at the race and supporting Indianapolis businesses, the *Star* argued, race spectators actually honored the sacrifices of the Union dead by contributing to the economic success of the city.

The Indiana GAR’s 1922 encampment sponsored a resolution protesting the “desecration of Memorial Day by automobile races heretofore held

<sup>47</sup>“A Better Memorial Day,” *Indianapolis News*, June 1, 1911.

<sup>48</sup>“No Disrespect to the Day,” *Indianapolis Star*, May 31, 1913.

on our holy day.” The GAR made a call to other military organizations including the veterans of the Spanish-American War (even though some members, including Stormont, distrusted them) and the recently created American Legion to protest the race. Realizing that “women [now] have equal rights with men,” the GAR also asked its own auxiliary, the Women’s Relief Corps, to use its political voice to fight for a state law banning the running of the Indianapolis 500 race on Memorial Day.<sup>49</sup>

The GAR’s ongoing effort at petitioning the Indiana General Assembly to take action against the race finally led to a new bill written for the 1923 legislative session. Authored by Indianapolis Republican senator Robert L. Moorhead—himself a veteran of the Spanish-American War and World War I—the Moorhead Memorial Day bill aimed to ban all “commercialized sporting events,” including the Indianapolis 500, on Memorial Day. If racetrack owners Fisher and Allison refused to switch the date of their race, legislators like Moorhead believed they had the constitutional power to control the types of events that took place on legal holidays and ban the race themselves. As Moorhead argued during the Senate debate on the bill, “the time is passed for the desecration of the one day in the year set aside for the honor of the soldier dead.”<sup>50</sup>

The Moorhead bill appeared at a time when both Republicans and Democrats in Indiana embraced conservative social policies, low taxes, and limited government services. After years of progressive reform and strong government action, Hoosiers supported President Warren G. Harding’s call for conservative “normalcy.” According to historian James H. Madison, both parties avoided divisive issues, “whether they were raised by women, veterans, labor, farmers, Anti-Saloon Leaguers, or Klansmen.”<sup>51</sup> Democrat Charles A. Greathouse lamented in 1924 that political consensus between the parties had grown so strong that “party lines and party affiliations are being lost sight of” in Indiana politics.<sup>52</sup> Yet political disagreements did emerge during the 1920s between and within each party over Prohibition,

---

<sup>49</sup>Indiana, *Forty-Third* (1922), 75.

<sup>50</sup>“Way Sought to Save the Speedway Races,” *Indianapolis News*, February 19, 1923; “38-9 Oppose 500-Mile Race,” *Indianapolis Star*, January 19, 1923. If the Moorhead bill passed, Representative Asa Smith was prepared to submit a bill that would give the mayor of Indianapolis the right to declare any day of the year a legal holiday in the city. Smith explained that allowing the mayor to declare another day as a holiday for the purpose of holding the Indianapolis 500 would “protect the speedway in event the Moorhead bill passes.”

<sup>51</sup>James H. Madison, *Indiana Through Tradition and Change: A History of the Hoosier State and Its People, 1920-1945* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1982), 75.

<sup>52</sup>Quoted in Madison, *Indiana Through Tradition and Change*, 63.



Members of the Indiana GAR at Gettysburg, 1913. The organization's statewide opposition to running the Indianapolis 500 on Memorial Day led to the 1923 Moorhead Memorial Day Bill, which would have banned all "commercialized" sports events on the day.

Courtesy, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

immigration, the Ku Klux Klan, and state tax code reform. The Moorhead Memorial Day Bill, too, provoked disagreements in the General Assembly by raising questions about the most conservative course of action for protecting Memorial Day: was it more prudent to enact legislation that regulated the holiday and promoted a patriotic, traditional commemorative observance, or was it more conservative to let Hoosiers decide for themselves how to observe the holiday? Opinions on the measure were strongly divided, and the bill was arguably the most contested piece of legislation during the 1923 session.

The bill initially enjoyed strong support in the Senate, with members voting 38 to 9 for its passage on January 18. All nine senators opposed to the bill were Republicans, however, exposing internal party disagreements between those like Moorhead who desired regulation and others like Senator A. H. Beardsley of Elkhart, who argued that "you can not legislate against irreverence. We can not regulate everything under the sun, even the holidays of the people. We are infringing too much on personal

liberty.”<sup>53</sup> Similar disagreements emerged in the House of Representatives, where the bill passed 62 to 32 on February 13, with a solid Republican minority dissenting.<sup>54</sup> Republicans who opposed the bill were also acutely aware of the economic concerns of many Indianapolis residents and businesses. One local resident who wrote a letter to the Republican-leaning *Indianapolis Star* under the name “A HOOSIER BOOSTER” remarked with concern that “this bill, if passed, would be the deadliest blow that could be struck at the city of Indianapolis and its industries.” Indianapolis doctor J. S. Whitley concurred, arguing that “unwise legislation . . . retards the progress of our great commonwealth.”<sup>55</sup>

The *Indianapolis News* also followed the debate proceedings closely, reporting that “the Statehouse was packed with lobbyists[,] and every means known to legislative procedure was used in efforts to advance or kill the measure.” Religious groups like the Logansport Methodist Episcopal Church and the Indianapolis Church Federation passed resolutions in support of the bill, while Republican Indianapolis mayor Samuel Shank released a letter written on his official stationery in the *Indianapolis News* in favor of the bill, arguing that “the time has come when the American People can well afford to take one day off to worship at the Shrine of Patriotism.”<sup>56</sup> By reflecting on the memories of “our soldier heroes of all wars,” argued Shank, Hoosiers would “help checkmate radicals and anarchy in this country, and reestablish Memorial Day as it was originally intended.”<sup>57</sup>

Shank’s concerns about “radicals and anarchy” were particularly acute because of the rampant labor disputes that took place during his time in office; the two-term mayor had actually resigned from office during his first term in 1913 after continued labor strikes by streetcar and teamster

---

<sup>53</sup>Indiana General Assembly, *Journal of the Indiana State Senate during the Seventy-Third Session of the General Assembly* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1923), 92; *Indianapolis Star*, January 19, 1923.

<sup>54</sup>Indiana General Assembly, *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Indiana during the Seventy-Third Session of the General Assembly* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1923), 370.

<sup>55</sup>“Keep Speedway Race,” *Indianapolis Star*, February 5, 1923; “Would Save Speed Classic,” *Indianapolis Star*, January 28, 1923; see also Homer McKee, “Keep Their Spirit Alive,” *Indianapolis Star*, January 29, 1923.

<sup>56</sup>“Memorial Day Bill,” *Indianapolis News*, March 6, 1923; “Want State Censorship,” *Indianapolis Star*, January 5, 1923; “Praise Race Bill Vote,” *Indianapolis News*, March 1, 1923; “Shank on Record for Race Bill,” *Indianapolis News*, March 5, 1923; “Mayor Shank Quits,” *New York Times*, November 29, 1913; “Shank, Samuel Lewis (Lew)” in David J. Bodenhamer and Robert G. Barrows, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis* (Bloomington, Ind., 1994), 1254-55.

<sup>57</sup>*Indianapolis News*, March 1, 5, 6, 1923; *New York Times*, November 29, 1913; *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, 1254-55.

workers in the city threatened to lead to his impeachment. Strikes were common in Indiana at the turn of the twentieth century, and as late as 1920 there were 99 strikes throughout the state, many in Indianapolis.<sup>58</sup> Shank believed that remembering the soldiers who had fought to preserve “law and order” against Confederate secession in the Civil War and German aggression in World War I would inspire Hoosiers—especially those in labor unions who may have embraced radical political beliefs—to eschew ideologies like communism, socialism, and anarchism.<sup>59</sup> Throughout its history, many Indiana GAR members—reflecting their allegiances to the Republican Party—vocalized their distrust of labor unions and socialism, and Shank’s comments about the usefulness of Memorial Day as a “checkmate” against radicalism undoubtedly garnered support from GAR leadership. For example, in 1887, the Knights of Labor and the GAR in Terre Haute planned a series of Independence Day festivities, but a last-minute change led to Robert Schilling of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, serving as the keynote speaker. Schilling was a member of the Knights of Labor, but his speech was boycotted angrily by the GAR once it was discovered that he was a socialist. For the Indiana GAR, as Michael Kammen has written, “socialism was not merely un-American, but apparently antithetical to the principles for which battles on behalf of the Union had been fought.”<sup>60</sup>

Likewise, news of the Pullman Strike in 1894 brought strong condemnation from Hoosier veterans. Department Commander Albert O. Marsh remarked that year that “dangerous and un-American doctrines” had nearly left “the entire country in disorder and bloodshed.” Marsh stood in favor of “law and order,” and he proudly proclaimed that the example of the Grand Army of the Republic had compelled Americans to “take a stand in favor of the enforcement of law, and the prevention by force of

---

<sup>58</sup>In 1881, there were eleven strikes in Indiana. By 1903, that number jumped to 172, with 22,678 employees going on strike. Clifton J. Phillips, *Indiana in Transition: The Emergence of an Industrial Commonwealth, 1880-1920* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1968), 346-60.

<sup>59</sup>Working-class voting returns in Indiana during the first quarter of the twentieth century do not follow any simple pattern. Historian Julie Greene argues that regional party allegiances often shaped working-class preferences more than union leadership groups like the American Federation of Labor, although many laborers identified as Democrats or Socialists. Julie Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917* (Cambridge, UK, 1999), 209.

<sup>60</sup>“Couldn’t Stand Schilling,” *New York Times*, July 5, 1887; Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 104.

lawlessness and crime against life and property.”<sup>61</sup> Finally, just a few weeks before Memorial Day in 1919, National Commander Clarendon E. Adams proclaimed in Elkhart that “the ideal of the Grand Army of the Republic is ‘America—one country, one language, one flag,’ and you must agree in this hour of unrest that we can not allow the red flag to prevail on American soil.”<sup>62</sup> Apparently, quiet reflection on Memorial Day would also ensure that America stayed free of socialism, communism, and labor strife.

Indiana GAR members strongly advocated for passage of the Moorhead Memorial Day Bill and wrote many public letters explaining their views on the measure. Comrade Lewis King understood that there were two sides to the issue, “on the one side money, on the other sentiment.” Thanks to the Indianapolis 500, “steam cars, interurban cars, and street cars will be filled to overflowing. Hotels, cafes and other eating places will handle many a dollar as a result.” Making money was appropriate in its “proper place,” King argued, but when the GAR established Memorial Day in 1868, “we expected the American people would use their [leisure time] joining with us in its observance . . . we never expected to see our own state disgraced by the spectacle of a mighty sport enterprise laying hands on the day. If money wins this game, it will be a deep sorrow to at least some of us who have not forgotten. If sentiment wins it will indicate that patriotism and affection survive.”<sup>63</sup> For King, no less than the fate of American patriotism and a proper love of country hung in the balance with the Moorhead Memorial Day Bill.<sup>64</sup>

Despite vocal support from the Indiana GAR, the bill drew much criticism from other organizations and from many politicians. Powerful

---

<sup>61</sup>To be sure, some Indiana GAR members did support labor unions and perhaps even the tenets of socialism. The *American Tribune* remarked in 1890 that “we believe in labor federations. Since labor began to organize, the intelligence and prosperity of those concerned in the movement has improved fifty per cent, and it has not disturbed the prosperity and happiness of the rich either.” *American Tribune*, September 5, 1890; Indiana, *Sixteenth* (1895), 110-111.

<sup>62</sup>Indiana, *Fortieth* (1919), 6-7; “G.A.R. Leader Scores Bolshevik Propaganda,” *Indianapolis News*, May 7, 1919.

<sup>63</sup>In his letter to the editor, King explained that he was in Florida, “Away Down South in Dixie.” It is not clear if King had moved to Florida or was merely visiting the state at that time, but his use of the phrase “our own state disgraced” suggests that this may have been the Reverend Lewis King, who was a former state commander of the Indiana GAR and a member of the Isham Keith Post number 13, Columbus, Indiana. “Memorial Day Thoughts,” *Indianapolis News*, February 20, 1923; Northcott, *Indiana Civil War Veterans*, 388.

<sup>64</sup>The remainder of this essay will rely heavily upon primary sources, some of which were found with assistance from Chandler Lighty of the Indiana State Library. Secondary sources on the Indianapolis 500 and its relation to the Moorhead Memorial Day Bill are lacking. To my knowledge, this is the first analysis of the bill and the Grand Army of the Republic’s support of it.

interest groups including the Indianapolis Federation of Community Civil Clubs voiced their resentment at the legislature's attempts to shut down the 500, which was arguably one of the city's largest money-making operations. The automobile industry and its boosters—including the Hoosier Motor Club, the Indianapolis Automobile Trade Association, and the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce—passed a resolution against the measure at a joint meeting in late January 1923, decrying the bill as “an encroachment on the personal liberties of citizens.” Trade Association president John R. Orman went even farther, telling the *Indianapolis Star* that “no one violates the sanctity of the day by enjoying himself, but on the contrary the holding of a great international event of this kind serves to mark the day as an outstanding holiday, a fitting tribute to those who fought.”<sup>65</sup> Ten of the eleven House members from Indianapolis (again, mostly Republican) opposed the bill. Included in the opposition's ranks was Republican Russell B. Harrison, son of former U.S. president and Indiana GAR member Benjamin Harrison.<sup>66</sup>

In Harrison's opinion, the bill did not go far enough. “This bill is so grossly unfair,” announced Harrison at one legislative session, “that it is unconstitutional. It should include all amusement or none.” For many veterans in Indianapolis, it seemed as though the Indy 500 was nothing to be concerned about. Russell Harrison, a veteran of the Spanish-American War, and his comrades annually observed Memorial Day at the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, roughly five miles east of the racetrack. He informed the legislature that “we are not bothered by the speedway races. No! We are bothered by two theaters, one on each side of the Monument. Bands are out playing in front of theaters while our exercises are in progress.” Harrison challenged his fellow legislators by asking them, “how many of you who are going to vote for this bill can truthfully say you go to the Memorial day exercises every Memorial Day?”<sup>67</sup> Those who planned to vote in support of the Moorhead bill, said many of its critics, needed to understand that the owners of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway were not the only offenders of the unwritten rules of Memorial Day. Effective legislation would need to prohibit more activities than just one race.

---

<sup>65</sup>“Action Started to Prevent Passage of Anti-Race Bill,” *Indianapolis Star*, January 22, 1923.

<sup>66</sup>“Race Bill Wends Way to Governor,” *Indianapolis News*, February 28, 1923; *Indianapolis News*, February 19, 1923.

<sup>67</sup>“Memorial Bill is Passed by House,” *Indianapolis News*, February 27, 1923.

The Indiana GAR placed particular importance on enlisting the help of the American Legion in gaining support for a ban against the race. Following the end of World War I in 1918, Lt. Col. Theodore Roosevelt Jr., son of the former U.S. president, and a group of World War I military officers formed what would become the American Legion, a new fraternal organization for the veterans of that war. The American Legion was similar in some respects to the GAR; Lt. Col. George White, a leader during the organizations formative years, even referred to the Legion as “the new GAR.” As the Civil War had done before it, “World War I had given American soldiers a common experience and a sense of fraternity toward one another,” helping to inspire the organizations formation, according to historian Dean J. Kotlowski.<sup>68</sup>

When it came to politics and the Moorhead bill, the Indiana GAR thought they had an ally in this new veterans’ organization. Legion leaders shared similar concerns about the rise of communism in Russia and fears that “left-wing doctrines might infect the restless troops” once they arrived home. To combat these threats, Legion leaders promoted “Americanism,” the idea of “continued service to the nation,” and pension benefits for World War I veterans. Furthermore, delegates from southern and western states at the Legion’s inaugural convention in 1919 banded together with Hoosiers to locate the Legion’s national headquarters in Indianapolis—not Washington, D. C.—so that the “poorest man in the country can come to the headquarters.”<sup>69</sup> Instead of an alliance, however, a war of words emerged between members of both organizations.

Upon hearing that the Moorhead Memorial Day Bill was passed by the House of Representatives in late February, members of sixteen posts of the American Legion in Indianapolis and surrounding Marion County signed a letter to be published in the *Indianapolis News*. The letter, addressed to Governor Warren McCray, asked him to veto the bill. According to these Legion members, Hoosiers “do not require legislative direction in their private observance of Memorial Day . . . We ex-soldiers of Indiana bitterly resent the imputation that we have no respect for our comrades killed in action, and [we] deny any man and any force the right to use this sacred sentiment for political bombast.” How one observed Memo-

---

<sup>68</sup>Thomas R. Rumer, *The American Legion: An Official History, 1919-1989* (New York, 1990), 33; Dean J. Kotlowski, “Launching a Political Career: Paul V. McNutt and the American Legion, 1919-1932,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 106 (June 2010), 124-25.

<sup>69</sup>Kotlowski, “Launching a Political Career,” 129; John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N. J., 1992), 86.

rial Day was a private affair, according to the letter writers. Defining the terms of patriotism and imposing those terms upon the entire population through legislative fiat was decidedly un-American, something a despotic monarchy or authoritarian government in the “Old World” would do, but not “freedom-loving” America.<sup>70</sup>

An anonymous Civil War veteran sarcastically responded that he was surprised to see that the American Legion “now assume[d] to tell the Governor of the state what to do and to dictate to him as to where his duty lies” (apparently, the GAR had not done this through their support of the bill). According to the veteran, “honoring the memory of the men who made the American Legion possible” was now apparently considered “unAmerican and unpatriotic” by Legion members. The “egotism, arrogance and assumption[s]” of World War I veterans had led to a failed understanding of the “terms” of Memorial Day, according to the Civil War veteran, who signed his letter to the editor by describing himself as “A VETERAN OF THE (FROM THEIR STANDPOINT, OBSOLETE, FORGOTTEN AND NOT TO BE CONSIDERED) WAR FOR THE SUPPRESSION OF THE REBELLION.”<sup>71</sup>

Another ex-soldier named “G. L. M.” (who most likely fought in World War I) responded with a biting attack on the supporters of the Moorhead Memorial Day Bill. Correctly noting that the members of the House of Representatives from Indianapolis opposed the bill, G. L. M. decried the bill as “class legislation” that unfairly targeted business interests seeking to earn a part of their living on Memorial Day. “I do not like the idea of the state legislature to point out to me what to do on Memorial day or any other day,” the veteran complained. In plain language directed towards supporters of the bill in the General Assembly (and the GAR, ostensibly), G. L. M. asserted that “[the] bill was passed by a bunch of hicks, who were born and reared in some little jerk-water town, older than Indianapolis . . . these fellows are not accustomed to progress as we are.” Supporters of the bill from rural areas in the state, argued the veteran, were ultimately “jealous of Indianapolis, our growing and prosperous city.”<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup>“McCray’s Action on Race Bill Awaited,” *Indianapolis News*, February 27, 1923.

<sup>71</sup>“A Civil War Veteran’s View,” *Indianapolis News*, March 1, 1923.

<sup>72</sup>“Disgusted With Memorial Day Bill,” *Indianapolis News*, March 2, 1923.

To have rural residents who lived far away from Indianapolis dictate the business activities of Indiana's most economically viable city was wrong.<sup>73</sup>

The term "class legislation" was used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to convey messages about legislation that was perceived as unfairly targeting certain groups in society; the term was frequently used in discussions regarding the legality and unfairness of legislation that favored tariff increases or labor regulations.<sup>74</sup> Some newspaper editors in cities outside of Indianapolis used similar cries of unfairness to criticize the Moorhead Memorial Day Bill. The *Evansville Courier* remarked that "if the only form of recreation to be penalized was the Memorial Day race at Indianapolis, then it would appear, from a commonsense viewpoint and without any appeal to legal technicality, that the bill was class legislation." Meanwhile, the *Lafayette Journal* stated that "the danger point is reached when attempts are made to legislate against the plain constitutional rights of the citizen and to set up rules by laws restricting this or that class."<sup>75</sup>

On March 5, 1923, Governor Warren McCray vetoed the Moorhead Memorial Day Bill, citing the same "class legislation" argument that opponents of the bill had vocalized in the legislature and the press. When the bill was returned to the General Assembly, the Senate largely agreed with McCray's opposition to the measure and voted to uphold the governor's veto by a 35 to 5 vote. A political cartoon published in the *Indianapolis News* on March 7 ("Anti-Speed Way Bill") shows a race car flipped over on the track, its tires blown out and oil leaking from the engine, suggest-

---

<sup>73</sup>Julie Greene cites the election of 1908 as an example of deep political differences between rural and urban Hoosiers. That year progressive Republican governor J. Frank Hanly helped advance a measure that gave all counties the right to prohibit alcohol with their boundaries, but "[the] proposal pitted rural against urban voters, allowing the mostly rural supporters of temperance to outlaw liquor . . . despite the opposition of urban voters." Historian Leonard Moore, however, argues that Indianapolis was "more closely related to Indiana's smaller industrial cities and rural communities than to other large midwestern cities" thanks to a large native-born Protestant white population that reflected the state's demographics at the time. Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics*, 207; Leonard Moore, *Citizen Klansman: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1991), 82.

<sup>74</sup>For example, in 1892 Democratic Indiana governor Isaac P. Gray criticized the 1890 McKinley Tariff which raised tariff duties on imported goods to the United States. Gray argued that this "extravagant . . . class legislation" would "enrich special private interests and protect special industries from competition." Likewise, former Indiana governor and vice president Thomas Marshall—also a Democrat—asserted in 1919: "I believe that every inequality which exists in the social and economic condition of the American people is traceable to the successful demands of interested classes for class legislation." "Gov. Gray's Speech," *Jasper [Indiana] Weekly Courier*, July 8, 1892; "Vice President Marshall's Creed of Americanism," *Washington Times*, February 8, 1919.

<sup>75</sup>"Veto of the Memorial Day Bill," *Evansville Courier*, March 6, 1923; "The Speedway Bill," *Lafayette Journal*, March 6, 1923.

ing little possibility of another blowup over the race in future legislative sessions.<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, in a move to punish opponents of the bill within the American Legion, Indiana State Commander Perry Faulkner, on the same day as the veto, suspended the charter of the Skidmore-Dean Post in Indianapolis, suggesting the possibility that Legion members were divided in their support of the bill.<sup>77</sup>

This vocal division in the American Legion most likely played a role in shaping Hoosiers' opinions about the bill. As GAR member George Scarce remarked in 1913, a barrier existed between those who had experienced the Civil War firsthand and those who had either learned about the war in history books or ignored it completely. For those born after the Civil War, World War I became the conflict from which shared memories of the U. S. in combat were created, and, as Barbara A. Gannon explains, "contemporary Americans understood that World War I soldiers and their tales of valor were displacing Civil War veterans."<sup>78</sup> As the few remaining Civil War veterans aged, American Legion members redefined what it meant to be a veteran in the United States, and a large part of this redefinition came in the form of new civic commemorations established by Legion members.

John Bodnar reminds us that the veterans of World War I, especially those who joined the American Legion, worked to create their own holiday on November 11, the day of Germany's surrender from the war. In the years after World War I, Armistice Day (now Veterans' Day) overtook Memorial Day as the major celebration of the American veteran in the nation's commemorative landscape. "People did not normally parade on the Fourth of July or Memorial Day," argues Bodnar, "but they always did so, between the [world] wars in Indianapolis, on November 11th."<sup>79</sup> Memorial Day was ultimately contested not only between veterans and non-veterans in Indiana, but between different veterans' groups as well. While veterans of the Civil War and World War I remembered war in a wide range of ways, the contrasting nature of Memorial Day and Armistice Day is significant. GAR veterans desired to remember the past by reflecting on the efforts of Union soldiers to save an imperiled nation from traitorous rebels within the country. In dealing with the shock and horror of Civil War death, these veterans determined that quiet and somber reflection was the most

---

<sup>76</sup>"The Last Lap," *Indianapolis News*, March 7, 1923.

<sup>77</sup>"Governor Vetoes Memorial Day Bill," *Indianapolis News*, March 6, 1923.

<sup>78</sup>Gannon, *The Won Cause*, 188.

<sup>79</sup>Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 85.

appropriate method for honoring the memories of the Union dead. American Legion veterans, in contrast, sought a more celebratory holiday that reflected the nation's collective joy in defeating a German enemy that was viewed by many Americans as despotic and undemocratic.

Two months after McCray's veto of the Moorhead Memorial Day Bill, the Indiana GAR held its annual state encampment in Muncie. Comrade F. M. Van Pelt announced: "I believe that I reflect the sentiment of the entire department when I say the greatest disappointment of the year was the lack of consideration given to Memorial Day . . . a protection which we think it deserves." Memorial Day was the "most sacred day of the entire year" and there was supposedly "universal appeal that came from the loyal law abiding people of the state" in support of the bill. Yet the "unfinished work" of ensuring that "sufficient safeguards are thrown around [Memorial Day]" would soon have to be left to the next generation. One could only hope that in the future, "the cry of class legislation will be consigned to the oblivion to which it belongs," argued Van Pelt.<sup>80</sup>

Seeking an opportunity to defend his patriotic reputation and explain his actions, Governor McCray traveled to Muncie to address the veterans. "I have a sacred reverence for the day designated as Memorial Day," announced McCray. "I always observe the proprieties of the occasion faithfully and reverently. To me the day revives certain distinct memories of my early boyhood."<sup>81</sup> The type of patriotism demonstrated by Civil War soldiers—"devotion to duty and not personal choice"—was needed "today in public service," the governor argued. "The patriotism of peace," according to McCray, required "courage to do what you believe to be right and not inclination to follow the lines of least resistance."<sup>82</sup> What constituted "right," argued McCray, was a devotion to the nation, the state of Indiana, and their respective constitutions.

What had been right in the eyes of Governor McCray also included a veto of the Memorial Day bill. Despite strong sympathy for the views of the Indiana GAR, the governor told his audience that he would not sign into law an "act in direct violation of [his] oath" to uphold the state constitution. McCray put several rhetorical questions to his audience:

---

<sup>80</sup>Indiana, *Forty-Fourth* (1923), 48-49.

<sup>81</sup>What sorts of memories McCray specifically refers to goes unstated, but it should be noted that McCray was born on February 4, 1865, three months before the official end of the American Civil War. Perhaps he is referring to the observation of Memorial Day services during his youth.

<sup>82</sup>In this quote, McCray is referring to concerns about political radicalism. Indiana, *Forty-Fourth* (1923), 78-79.

“Laws to be respected and observed must also be reasonable and fair. Is it right to single out a certain amusement and deny its right of existence, and at the same time permit other forms of amusement to operate without prejudice? Is there any reason why a circus, a theater, or a moving picture show should be permitted to give exhibitions without violating any law, and yet make it prohibitive under the law to hold a race of any kind?” McCray concluded by asking, “Is it justice for two to play golf in a tournament [one] for a prize and the other for amusement only and yet one be guilty of law violation under the act and the other not?”<sup>83</sup> Echoing Russell Harrison, McCray concluded that to ban the Indianapolis 500 while permitting other events on Memorial Day was discriminatory and illegal.

Following McCray’s speech, Comrade Robert W. McBride rose to speak. An attorney and former Indiana Supreme Court justice, McBride argued that “the explanation by the Governor is wholly unsatisfactory and inadequate.” The justice explained that there was a difference between “the consciousness [sic] profiteer who would rob us of the one day for the gratification of greed and a legitimate business with a theater or a motion picture show that operates day after day throughout the year.” Such a difference, McBride believed, was akin to “piracy and honest business.” To punish other “honest businesses” because of the Indianapolis 500’s “desecration” of Memorial Day was not the intention of the Indiana GAR, and “the reason given by the Governor furnishes no excuse for denying the protection we ask.” The proper observation of Memorial Day “testifies to the world that we as a people have not forgotten the cost of a great . . . undivided Republic nor have we forgotten the men who offered their lives that the Republic might be.”<sup>84</sup> To the Indiana GAR, the Indianapolis 500 violated the sacred relationship between the Union dead and those who lived to reap the benefits of their victory over disunion and treason. Relegating Memorial Day to a day of trivial amusements would lead to a society unpatriotically forgetting about its past.

The Indiana GAR’s efforts to ban the Indianapolis 500 on Memorial Day demonstrate the ways in which historical memories evolve and alter

---

<sup>83</sup>Indiana, *Forty-Fourth* (1923), 78-79.

<sup>84</sup>Indiana, *Forty-Fourth* (1923), 81; “Voices Criticisms of Governor’s Veto of the Memorial Day Bill,” *Indianapolis Star*, April 23, 1923. On McBride, see Linda C. Gugin and James E. St. Clair, eds., *Justices of the Indiana Supreme Court* (Indianapolis, Ind., 2011); Indiana Supreme Court, “Justice Biographies: Justice Robert Wesley McBride,” at <http://www.in.gov/judiciary/citc/2768.htm>; Robert W. McBride, *Lincoln’s Body Guard: The Union Light Guard of Ohio, With Some Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1911).

over time. During Memorial Day's transformational phase, the memories of Indiana GAR veterans were directly challenged by younger generations seeking to find their own methods for coming to terms with the past. Even as Governor McCray took pains in his 1923 encampment speech to assert his respect for Indiana's Civil War veterans, he did so by reflecting on nostalgic memories of seeing veterans during his boyhood more than fifty years earlier, essentially placing these veterans in a remote past detached from the present. Left unsaid in McCray's speech was any mention of whether or not the Indiana GAR's influence in creating Memorial Day in the first place gave them any right to continue setting the terms for an appropriate commemoration of their service as long they remained alive. The Indianapolis 500 helped to advance the transformational phase of Memorial Day from a day of quiet reflection to one of amusement, sport, and a showcase for civic pride and technological advancement. The Indiana GAR's efforts to turn back the clock and remove all "distractions" from Memorial Day failed partly because most of its members had died, but also because, by the 1910s and 1920s, those still living were seen as less significant to society's memories of its Civil War dead. Indeed, the Indiana GAR's failure alerts us to just how fragile and temporary our shared memories of the past really are.

