Presidents’ Day in the U.S.A. – What are we celebrating?
By Dr. Richard Kelley

This Monday, Feb. 16, many members of our ‘ohana who work in our U.S. offices will have a holiday. However, if you ask any of them, “What are we celebrating?” I’ll bet you get a range of answers, almost all of which will be correct. This holiday was originally celebrated on Feb. 22, to mark the day that George Washington, the first president of the United States, was born in 1732. He was a remarkable leader, and it was considered appropriate to remember him each year and celebrate his many contributions to our nation and the world.

However, there was some question about what date to use. Twenty years after Washington was born, Great Britain, together with the 13 North American colonies that would later become the United States, made the switch from the old Julian calendar (which had been in use since Julius Caesar devised it in 45 B.C.) to the newer Gregorian calendar, which had been introduced in most European nations in A.D. 1582 at the behest of Pope Gregory XIII. The change was made because the Julian calendar was getting increasingly out of sync with actual solar time – it had been losing 11-and-a-half minutes a year, which meant that the four seasons were arriving noticeably earlier than they should, as measured by Earth’s annual orbit around the sun. By the time the British decided to get back in step with the rest of Europe (and the solar system!) in 1752, there was a difference of 11 days between the two calendars.

Washington had been born on Feb. 11 according to the Julian calendar. But as measured by the Gregorian calendar – the one we still use today, with minor adjustments – he was born on Feb. 22. So when, in 1885, the birthdate of George Washington was made a legal holiday, it was decided to celebrate it on the Gregorian anniversary of his birth.

Abraham Lincoln was another president of pre-eminent stature. Born on Feb. 12, 1809, he led the United States through the bloody Civil War, saving it from being divided in two and, in the course of that war, ending the pernicious institution of slavery, which had been the root cause of the war. In 1874, less than a decade after the end of the Civil War and Lincoln’s tragic assassination (both of which occurred in 1865), the first official commemoration of his birthday took place.

As a kid, I was always pleased to have two days off from school each year – Feb. 12 and 22 – to celebrate these presidential birthdays.

There have been many changes in the observance of these two statesmen’s birthdays. In 1951, bills were proposed in Congress that would establish a “President’s Day” on March 4 to honor all U.S. presidents.

In 1968, Congress decided to create a uniform schedule of federal holidays, all of which would fall on Mondays. Legislation was introduced to designate the third Monday of February as Presidents’ Day, which would honor the memories of both Washington and Lincoln. The concept of one federal holiday was achieved, but due to legislative error, the official name is Washington’s Birthday.
However, the terms Presidents Day and Presidents’ Day are both widely used and considered correct.

Presidents’ Day is also a time to pay tribute to American men and women who have been injured while serving their country in military uniform. The history of that association dates back to 1782, when General George Washington, then commander-in-chief of the Continental Army in the War of Independence (the Revolutionary War), created the “Badge of Military Merit,” which was to be awarded to rank-and-file soldiers who had been injured in battle.

For unknown reasons, only three soldiers ever received this award. It lay authorized but dormant in the archives for a century and a half before it was revived thanks to the efforts of Army Chief of Staff, General Charles Summerall, and his successor, General Douglas McArthur. On Feb. 22, 1932, the 200th anniversary of George Washington’s birth, the medal was reintroduced as the Purple Heart, an award “For Military Merit,” which is inscribed on the reverse side of the medal.

In December 1942, during World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized the medal to be awarded to members of all military services “wounded or killed in any action against an enemy of the United States.”

In February 1984, President Ronald Reagan authorized awarding the Purple Heart for injuries resulting from terrorist attacks or injuries received while serving as part of a peacekeeping force subsequent to March 28, 1973.

Notable recipients of the Purple Heart include:
- James Arness (actor)
- Charles Bronson (actor)
- James Garner (actor)
- John F. Kennedy (35th president of the United States)
- Lee Marvin (actor)
- Audie Murphy (actor)
- Colin Powell (former U.S. Secretary of State)
- Eric Shinseki (Hawai‘i-born former Army Chief of Staff)
- Chuck Yeager (First test pilot to break sound barrier)

Anyone following the news knows that we all live in dangerous, challenging times no matter where we reside. This Monday, whether you are working at one of our Outrigger or OHANA or condo properties, if you have the day off for shopping or time at the beach, I hope you will pause for a moment to consider that we have all benefited from the hard work and sacrifice of so many brave and dedicated people who have gone before us – and remember that the Purple Heart was first awarded at the initiative of one of our two most revered presidents, George Washington, and but for an accident of history that led this medal to lie dormant in the archives for 150 years, might also have been awarded to the thousands of gallant soldiers and sailors who perished or were wounded in the Civil War.