Memorial Day 2016

By Dr. Richard Kelley

On Monday, the United States will observe Memorial Day. For some, this will be a day of solemn prayer, reflection and mourning for the nearly 2 million men and women who have given their lives for our country since 1775. For too many others, regrettably, it will be just another holiday with backyard barbecues and excursions to the beach, the mountains or the shopping malls. In fact, a few years ago, when children touring Washington, D.C., were asked what Memorial Day meant, they responded, “That’s the day the swimming pools open!”

This year will be particularly meaningful for me because, just over six months from now, we will again pause to recognize that 75 years have gone by since Pearl Harbor was attacked, killing more than 2,400 U.S. military personnel and civilians on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, an act that catapulted the United States into World War II.

On that morning, I stood with my sisters, Jean and Pat, next to our parents, Roy and Estelle Kelley, and watched the attack from the rooftop patio of our Waikiki home until a loud explosion erupted about 500 feet away, reminding us that civilian areas were at risk too.

This weekend, during his visit to Japan, U.S. President Barack Obama is also scheduled to visit Hiroshima, where, on August 6, 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb that virtually destroyed the city and killed an estimated 90,000 to 140,000 people. Three days later, on August 9, Nagasaki was hit by a second atomic bomb with roughly similar results, which led to Japan’s unconditional surrender on August 15, 1945.

World War II was the bloodiest conflict in human history, with an estimated death toll of up to 85 million people or nearly 4 percent of the world’s entire population – including nearly 60 million civilian casualties. Despite its unmitigated horrors, in the 71 years since the guns fell silent, the world has not had a respite from war. Armed forces commanded by aggressive, corrupt governments, individual dictators and fanatics have brought death to additional millions and continually disrupted peaceful commerce and travel.

I have witnessed the Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War (to liberate Kuwait), the Iraq War and the Afghanistan War – to name only the major conflicts involving U.S. armed forces. Worldwide, there have been many more wars, some unbelievably brutal. All have resulted in the death and serious injury of countless men, women and children. These are people – alongside the fallen American soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen to whom Memorial Day is
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dedicated – that we should also remember and pray for on Monday.

I am sure that each member of our ‘ohana has a similar thoughts and perhaps personal experiences.

Accordingly, on this and future Memorial Days, as we honor the men and women of the U.S. armed forces who have given their lives to preserve our freedoms, we should also strive to understand and learn from the events referred to above.

Let us not forget the words of philosopher, essayist and poet George Santayana who said:

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

And, he sadly added,

“Only the dead have seen the end of war.”

U.S. military cemetery above the D-Day invasion beaches of Normandy, France, where the liberation of Nazi-occupied Europe began

Arlington National Cemetery