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# Mike Ryan: Reflections on Memorial Day—an oath unbroken

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**Each year at this time, I reflect back upon the ultimate sacrifice made by our military service members in the defense of our nation as we solemnly observe Memorial Day.**

It has been nearly 250 years since this Republic was first founded on the radical notion that the people—and only the people—had the right to decide how they would be governed. But much has changed in the world during this period. Great powers have risen and fallen; seemingly enduring alliances have been enjoined and then abandoned; countless treaties have been negotiated and subsequently abrogated. This ever-evolving landscape has made for unsettled international relations and unstable geopolitics.

Here too at home a great many things have changed. Societal values and mores shift from one generation to the next, causing policies to be altered and laws to evolve. Once trusted institutions fall into disfavor while new untested ones emerge to capture the favor of societal preferences. Relationships are both entered into—and also exited from—without formality. Pledges and commitments that may have been viewed as absolute and enduring in years past may now be seen as conditional in nature and fleeting in duration. Promises by elected officials—which tend to be viewed with caution to begin with—can be dismissed within a single news cycle. This gnawing sense of impermanence leads us to question the durability of this grand experiment.

Yet against this increasingly frenetic backdrop, there is one commitment that has stood the test of time and endured across the ten generations of America's existence. It is the oath taken by every service member. Oxford defines an oath as

"a solemn promise, often invoking a divine witness, regarding one's future action or behavior." The United States Armed Forces oath of enlistment demands that each service member pledge to "defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic." While the oath as we know it now was not formally adopted by Congress until September 29, 1789, soldiers in the Continental Army made a similar pledge as early as June 14, 1775—more than a full year before the nation had declared its independence.

This year, therefore, marks the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our military service members' pledge to stand in defense of this nation. So, while much has indeed changed over the past 2 ½ centuries, the commitment of our military has never faltered, and their resolve has never wavered. Even when treated poorly by some of their own fellow citizens during the darkest days of the Vietnam War, they still took an oath and made the pledge. On this Memorial Day I will take a moment to honor those 1,354,664 soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines who gave their lives to defend our freedoms. With the very last breaths that they drew they honored that pledge and sanctified the oath.

It is an oath that remains unbroken to this day.

Mike Ryan

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