

## Topic Page: [Veterans Day](#)

Definition: **Veterans' Day** from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

holiday formerly observed in the United States as Armistice Day in commemoration of the signing of the Armistice ending World War I. Nov. 11 officially became Veterans' Day on May 24, 1954, by act of Congress. The day is set aside in honor of all those who have fought in defense of the United States.

### Summary Article: **Veterans Day**

From *Encyclopedia of War and American Society*

Veterans Day, formerly known as Armistice Day, officially received its name in America in 1926 through a congressional resolution. In 1917, Pres. Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that the World War I would be the “War to End All Wars.” If these idealistic hopes had succeeded, November 11 might still be called Armistice Day. Within years of the holiday’s proclamation, however, war broke out again in Europe. Millions more Americans were called to fight and many died in battle; in order to honor them and those who would serve in future wars, Armistice Day was renamed Veterans Day. A day reserved for remembrance and reflection was not immune, however, to the political debates surrounding most American wars, and Veterans Day often became a time when conflicting views about the necessity of specific wars were aired.

At 11:00 a.m. on November 11, 1918, World War I came to an end with the signing of the cease-fire agreement at Rethondes, France. One year later, November 11 was set aside as Armistice Day in the United States to remember the sacrifices made by men and women during the war. Veterans’ parades and political speeches throughout the country emphasized the peaceful nature of the day, echoing the theme of national unity against tyranny. Since the Civil War, Memorial Day (originally Decoration Day) had traditionally been a day when the dead of all conflicts were honored during reverent ceremonies, and their graves decorated with flags and flowers. Veterans of the Civil War and the Spanish–American War continued to honor their dead on Memorial Day in May (April in some southern states), whereas Armistice Day was designated as a national day commemorating America’s participation in World War I.

Armistice Day ceremonies in the United States were similar to those observed in France and Great Britain, with processions, wreath-laying ceremonies, and a moment of silence to pay homage to those who died in the war. On the 3rd Armistice Day, November 11, 1921, America further followed the example of its allies by burying an Unknown Soldier in an impressive ceremony over an elaborate tomb at Arlington Cemetery in Virginia. The event not only bolstered efforts by the American Legion to make Armistice Day a national holiday but established rituals intended to unify a nation still ambivalent about its involvement in the war.

Although united in their desire to pay tribute to those who fought and died in the war, Americans could not agree on the precise nature and intent of Armistice Day commemorative rituals. The American Legion, the largest veterans’ organization to emerge following the war, endeavored to ensure that the achievements of American veterans were remembered. Featuring hymns and prayers in memory of loved ones who had died in the war, ceremonies sponsored by the Legion emphasized the terrible cost of war and the need to work for a new, more harmonious, world order. Despite the strong message of peace, Legion parades often included a military component, including rifle or artillery salutes to the dead.

Others preferred to strip Armistice Day of its militaristic character, emphasizing instead the tragedy of war and the preservation of peace. In the 1920s a series of disarmament treaties and pacifist promises such as those of the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, which outlawed the use of aggressive war by its signatories, created a sense of optimism that there might never be another war. Members of national peace movements believed war could only be stopped through disarmament and pacifism, while the American Legion insisted military preparedness provided the best assurance against future wars. The lack of consensus reflected the ongoing ambivalence Americans felt about the path that led to intervention in World War I and the ultimate purpose of the sacrifice of so many lives.

Despite years of political lobbying and campaigning by the Legion, Congress did not vote to designate Armistice Day a federal holiday until 1938. By this time, it was obvious that another war was imminent and once again Americans risked being called to fight. Emotional memories of the previous conflict stirred isolationists and peace groups to urge the government away from another foreign entanglement and toward stringent neutrality. However, after the unprovoked attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, patriotic fervor and the perceived need to defend the nation against further attacks proved the decisive factors that united the nation behind another war.

After 1945, Americans continued to observe Armistice Day on November 11 as the Legion opened its membership to a new generation of veterans. Together they joined each year in the same rituals and commemorative ceremonies established previously. In 1954, Pres. Dwight D. Eisenhower signed a bill proclaiming that November 11 would now be called Veterans Day, to honor veterans of all American wars. In 1971 Pres. Richard Nixon declared it a federal holiday on the second Monday in November. Seven years later, however, the nation returned the annual observance of Veterans Day to November 11, regardless of where it fell in the week. Thus, the historical significance of the date was preserved and attention once again was focused on the initial purpose of Veterans Day—to honor the nation's veterans, not to provide Americans with a long weekend.

Despite its origins in World War I, each generation of veterans has embraced Veterans Day as a moment for collective reflection. Each war leaves in its wake a plethora of monuments, holidays, cemeteries, museums, and archives that serve as reminders of the human sacrifice war entails. These remain, like Veterans Day, effective in providing people with a sense of common identity as Americans no matter how divided they may otherwise be by class, region, gender, religion, or race.

### **Related Entries**

American Legion; Memorial Day; Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

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