

BRIEF HISTORY ON MEMORIAL DAY

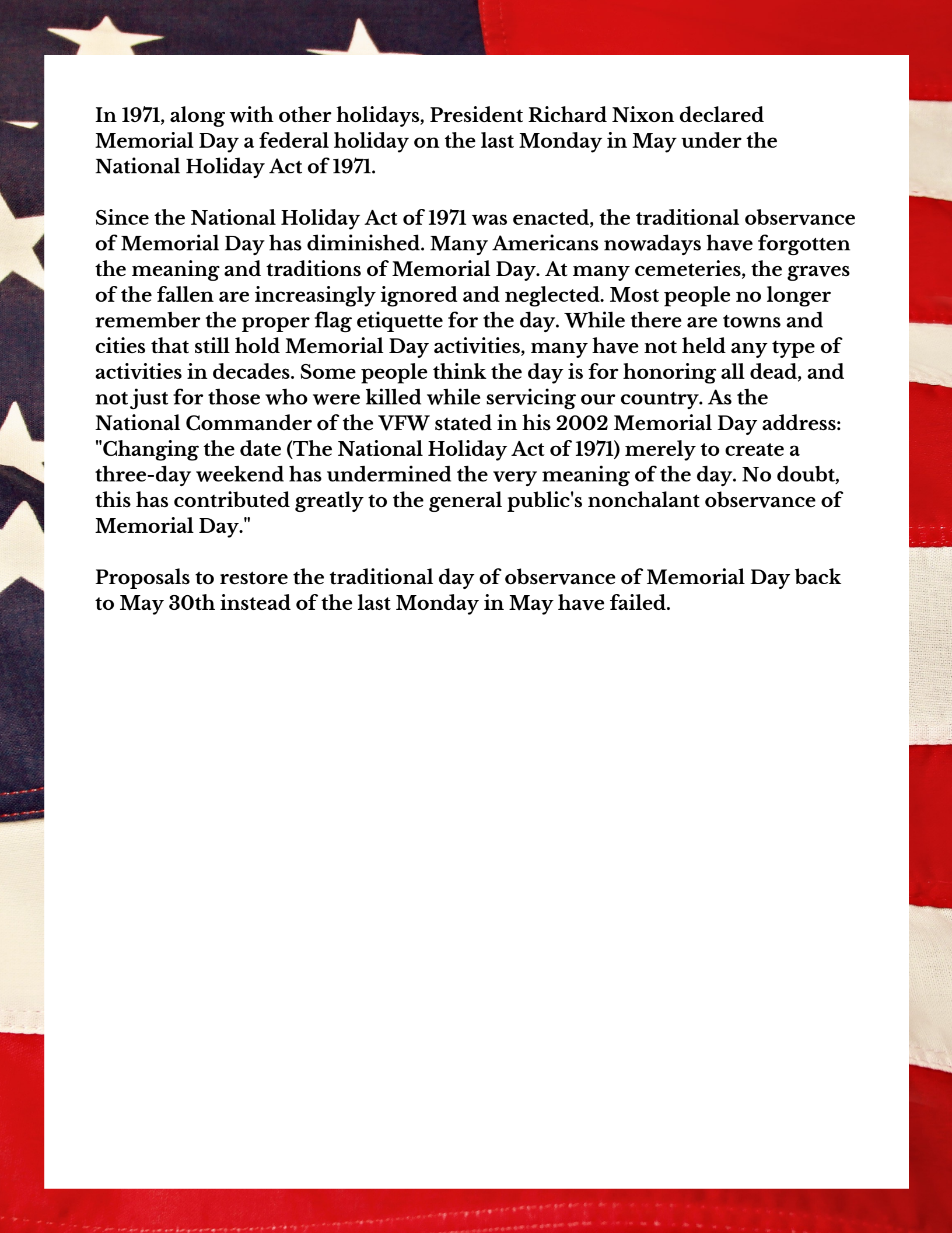
Courtesy from Marty Martinez, Harker Heights Veterans Council Member

Originally called and known as Decoration Day, it is a day of remembrance for service members who have been killed while serving in our nation's Armed Forces. This day is not the same nor should it be confused with Veterans Day.

There are many stories as to its actual beginnings, with over two dozen cities and towns laying claim to be the birthplace of Memorial Day. One of these stories is that Henry Welles, a drugstore owner in Waterloo, New York, who came up with an idea. He suggested that all the shops in town close for one day to honor the soldiers who were killed in the Civil War and buried in the cemetery. On the morning of May 5, 1866, the townspeople placed flowers, wreaths, and crosses on the graves of the Northern soldiers in the cemetery. There is also evidence that organized women's groups in the South were decorating graves before the end of the Civil War. It is more likely that it had many separate beginnings; each town and every planned or spontaneous gathering of people who came together to honor the war dead in the 1860's, and tapped into the general human need to honor the dead that were killed in the Civil War; it was about coming together to honor those who gave their all.

Decoration Day was officially proclaimed on 5 May 1868 by General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, in his General Order Number 11, which reads in part: "The 30th of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard in the land. In this observance no form of ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit." In the Northern states the 30th of May was observed as Decoration Day; the Southern states commemorated their war dead on different days, and in some states they still do.

In 1882, the name was changed from Decoration Day to Memorial Day and soldiers who had died in previous wars were honored as well. Memorial Day was also designated as a public holiday in most states.

The background of the page is a close-up of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes. The stars are white on a dark blue field, and the stripes are red and white.

In 1971, along with other holidays, President Richard Nixon declared Memorial Day a federal holiday on the last Monday in May under the National Holiday Act of 1971.

Since the National Holiday Act of 1971 was enacted, the traditional observance of Memorial Day has diminished. Many Americans nowadays have forgotten the meaning and traditions of Memorial Day. At many cemeteries, the graves of the fallen are increasingly ignored and neglected. Most people no longer remember the proper flag etiquette for the day. While there are towns and cities that still hold Memorial Day activities, many have not held any type of activities in decades. Some people think the day is for honoring all dead, and not just for those who were killed while servicing our country. As the National Commander of the VFW stated in his 2002 Memorial Day address: "Changing the date (The National Holiday Act of 1971) merely to create a three-day weekend has undermined the very meaning of the day. No doubt, this has contributed greatly to the general public's nonchalant observance of Memorial Day."

Proposals to restore the traditional day of observance of Memorial Day back to May 30th instead of the last Monday in May have failed.