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## We Must Be Vigilant to Preserve Proper Respect for Our Veterans

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## We Must Be Vigilant to Preserve Proper Respect for Our Veterans

**By David Head**  
UCF Forum columnist  
Wednesday, November 4, 2020

In our country's early days, most Americans didn't want to honor those who served in the military.



American flags line Memory Mall in honor of Veterans Day. (Photo by Nick Leyva '15)

Americans of the founding generation would be shocked by how Veterans Day on Nov. 11 is celebrated nowadays — and not because it's become commercialized with sales, deals and discounts. In the days following the American Revolution, most Americans didn't want to honor veterans at all.

Yes, Americans celebrated their independence and they feted leaders, particularly George Washington. But people had little sympathy for the ordinary soldiers and officers of the Continental Army. The gulf between our respect for men and women in uniform and the beliefs of the earliest Americans shows how precarious veterans' place of honor in America really is.

“Despite their image as the ultimate patriots, Revolutionary War-era Americans didn't see veterans the way I think most of us do today.”

Despite their image as the ultimate patriots, Revolutionary War-era Americans didn't see veterans the way I think most of us do today.

While we feel gratitude, early Americans felt suspicion. While we honor the sacrifice of men and women in uniform, early Americans thought of their own privations. While we look to our armed forces to defend liberty and keep us safe, early Americans saw armed men as threats to their safety and their freedom.

We shouldn't feel superior to early Americans, however. They were responding to the dominant culture of their time, and their ideas of liberty and power did launch the Revolution that created the United States. Throughout the Revolution, civilians saw their own army's soldiers as dangerous.

In part the concern was practical. Wherever the army camped, its thousands of men quickly overwhelmed small local communities. Army hygiene wasn't the greatest. Diseases such as dysentery, and distresses such as scabies (then known as “the itch”), were endemic to a soldier's life. Cold soldiers broke fences for firewood. Bored soldiers harassed civilians. Desperate soldiers stole money. Hungry soldiers swiped food. No one liked to see the commissary officer coming. He could legally carry off livestock for the army's use and leave behind an IOU that might never be paid.

Civilians' objections to soldiers were also ideological.

In the eighteenth-century way of thinking, an army might be necessary to defend a nation against its enemies, but if it were a professional army of men who did nothing but soldier, alarm bells rang. In the thinking of the time, professional soldiers were the tool of a tyrant, just as likely to be used to oppress the people they supposedly served rather than fight a foreign enemy. In this mindset, the only form of military service safe for liberty was the militia, because its ranks were filled with citizen-soldiers, men who, motivated by patriotism alone, served a short time and then went home.

Men who'd served in a professional force couldn't be trusted, many civilians thought. Trained in military discipline, they were unable to control themselves without someone giving them orders.

Most threatening of all were the officers. For Americans steeped in the conventional wisdom about armies and liberty, officers were budding aristocrats eager to rule America like a titled nobility.

Army critics pounced when they learned the officers had formed a fraternal order for veterans called the Society of the Cincinnati. Named after the Roman general Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, who defended Rome and then returned to his farm, the group's membership was restricted to gentleman officers.

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Appropriately so, attitudes toward Revolutionary War veterans began changing in the early 1800s, as writers highlighted the unusual sacrifices made by the Continental Army compared to civilians or even members of the militia. As time went on, books, articles, and speeches invoked the image of Revolutionary War veterans as, to use historian John Resch's phrase, “suffering soldiers:” aging men, who gave everything to win independence.

Today there are 18 million people who have served in our military, about 7 percent of the adult population. We should be humble about the complexity of the past—and vigilant today to preserve the proper respect owed to these veterans.

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