This Memorial Day, many of us will visit cemeteries, monuments, museums or other places that honor the courage and sacrifice of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines. This tradition is ancient. No act of courage and sacrifice is more iconic to the shared civilization of the West than the gallant defense of Thermopylae, Greece, by King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans in 480 BC. Subsequent generations traveling past their burial mound have read the inscription: “Oh, passerby, tell the Lacedaemonians that we lie here, obeying their orders,” and knew they were on sacred ground. One could justifiably argue that all ground on which Americans have died for their country is sacred, but certain places are so broadly revered, so representative of our national values, so heavily visited and so iconic that they have become American Thermopylae. We have identified some of these places.

Lexington Common. Our most hallowed military tradition is that of the citizen-soldier. Americans rise to the defense of their country when called. Such a call went out in Massachusetts on the night of April 18, 1775. The British government of King George III had summarily dismissed the idea of negotiating grievances with the estranged colonists and had subjected Boston to the heavy hand of military rule. British soldiers marched out to destroy colonial supplies and found themselves confronted on Lexington Common by hastily assembled militiamen who had risen in the dark of night to defend their families and their community. Regardless of who actually fired it that morning, “the shot heard ‘round the world” at Lexington Common precipitated the military phase of the American Revolution—and showcased the citizen-soldiers who would fight on the American side.

Trophy Point. Military institutions require a continuity of presence and purpose to take root and flourish. If the U.S. Army has a single place that embodies this principle, it is the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., and, most particularly, Trophy Point. Trophy Point watches over and is overwatched by fortifications that made West Point our most pivotal Revolutionary War bastion. In 1784, West Point and Fort Pitt (now Pittsburgh, Pa.) were the only remaining garrisons authorized by Congress. Trophy Point became the premier collecting point for military macro-artifacts, monuments and memorabilia for well more than a century. More significantly, West Point became home to the academy wherein professional soldiering—vital to an expanding nation ofcontinental proportions—became reconciled with the democratic principles of the soldier-as-citizen. Eschewing aristocracy, the young republic selected cadet officers by legislative appointment from every state and from all walks of life. Graduates were public servants committed to duty, honor and country, and they swore to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. This commitment to constitutional precepts expanded to our entire defense establishment and has protected our liberties well.

Historically Speaking
American Thermopylae
By GEN Fred Franks, U.S. Army retired, and BG John S. Brown, U.S. Army retired

Trophy Point, at West Point, N.Y., a pivotal stronghold in the Revolutionary War.
Yorktown, Va. Militiamen such as those who fought on Lexington Common, although brave, could not stand up to British regulars in a pitched battle. Professional soldiers, such as those from West Point, would be generations in the making. To secure our independence, we had to demonstrate that citizen-soldiers governed by a democracy could measure up to those disciplined by autocratic regimes. We did so at Yorktown, Va. The Yorktown campaign was masterful in many ways: sweeping strategic maneuver; meticulous cooperation between allies; methodical state-of-the-art siege craft; technically sophisticated use of artillery; thoughtful integration of multiple arms and services; and ample displays of raw courage. Until then, the British had relied upon qualitative superiority to offset our potentially greater numbers. From that moment, they could no longer do so. Their war was lost, and our expectation that citizen-soldiers could provide both technical sophistication and mass was born.

The Alamo. For several generations after the American Revolution, most of our military history was made as the United States expanded across the North American continent. The battlefields of this transcontinental expansion were generally too vast and sweeping to offer emblematic sites. An exception was the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas. Here, a group of settlers, frontiersmen and adventurers defended the emerging Mexican-American civilization of Texas against the dictator Antonio López de Santa Anna, who had swept aside the Mexican constitution to concentrate power in his own hands. The defenders of the Alamo represented both the noble and the profane in our westward growth. Their courageous defense was the single episode most similar to Thermopylae in American military history, and it bought time to assemble the forces that secured the independence of Texas at the battle of San Jacinto in 1836.

Fort Sumter. The United States could not move forward as a cohesive nation until divisive issues with respect to slavery and states’ prerogatives were resolved. By the middle of the 19th century, public opinion had hardened into two highly polarized camps, and no solution short of force could reconcile the divisions between them. The dramatic attack on and defense of Fort Sumter in the harbor of Charleston, S.C., augured the beginning of America’s bloodiest war, the Civil War. Sumter stands today as a monument to the courage, sacrifice, costs and consequences of that terrible carnage—and as a reminder of the terrible prices paid by those no longer willing or able to achieve satisfaction through constitutional processes.

Little Round Top. The Civil War ground on for four long years. The turning point came with the twin Union victories at Gettysburg, Pa., and Vicksburg, Miss., in the summer of 1863. The Little Round Top at Gettysburg particularly evokes the dramatic “high tide of the Confederacy” and the desperate courage with which soldiers from both sides contested what became hallowed ground. Gettysburg was the Civil War’s bloodiest battle, and its most memorable. One of the most stirring episodes in American military history is the gallant defense of the Little Round Top by COL Joshua Chamberlain and his 20th Maine Volunteer Infantry Regiment. They threw back one determined assault after another in fierce firefights and, when their ammunition ran out, charged with fixed bayonets.

Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery. Leaving the carnage of the Civil War behind them, American servicemen secured the remainder of the continental United States, and by century’s end had served overseas as well. The United States became the world’s largest economic power and an indispensable international player, ultimately finding it impossible not to assist its embattled sister democracies during World War I. The price paid was daunting and is perhaps best captured by the “crosses row on row” in the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery at Romagne-sous-Montfaucon, France. Here we established a selfless tradition: The only recompense we would ask for when defending free peoples elsewhere would be sufficient ground in which to bury our dead.

USS Arizona Memorial. World War I was advertised as the “war to end all wars,” but it did not. Within a generation, economic disaster and the inattention of the democracies plunged the world into yet another global struggle with ruthless totalitarian states. Americans vainly hoped to avoid involvement but were shaken from such complacency by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1942. The USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor preserves the memory of that fateful day and evokes the sacrifices made by all of our servicemen members throughout World War II. It also reminds us that we cannot isolate ourselves from the world and its troubles.

Corregidor Island. Americans paid a price for their unpreparedness going into World War II, and that price was most heavily borne by tiny peacetime
and Allied forces who bought the time necessary for the United States to organize, mobilize and deploy. Corregidor Island in the Philippines represents the competence, courage and sacrifice of those early defenders—American and Filipino. Bombed, shelled and terribly outnumbered, they held out for six months against impossible odds. Those six months proved critical in positioning American forces for the decisive turning points of the battles of Midway and Guadalcanal. In 1945, Corregidor again made history as the location of a brilliantly conceived and daringly executed combined airborne and amphibious assault during GEN Douglas MacArthur’s dramatic return to the Philippines.

Pointe du Hoc. On June 6, 1944, after two-and-a-half years of war, the United States was at last prepared to liberate Europe. D-Day, the beginning of Operation Overlord, was a pivotal point in the 20th century. On that day, there were few villages, towns or communities throughout Europe wherein citizens could speak their minds, choose their leaders or control their destinies. From that point, a tide of liberation—and then democratization—rolled irreversibly forward, across Europe and into the world at large. The daunting task of battering a path into Hitler’s *Festung Europa* is nowhere more apparent than at the fabled Pointe du Hoc, France, perched above the ocean with vistas sweeping the length of the Normandy beaches and inland. Here, small contingents of U.S. Army Rangers scaled formidable cliffs to secure the vulnerable flank of Omaha Beach. Their success in the face of great adversity became a metaphor for the campaign as a whole.

The Berlin Wall. The liberation and democratization of Europe progressed in stages, impeded by a totalitarian Soviet Union that threw up the postwar Iron Curtain, isolating the nations it held in thrall. The response of the democracies was containment. Rather than risk catastrophic nuclear warfare, they chose to hold the line in Europe and elsewhere until the communist behemoth collapsed—from its own internal contradictions and the aspirations of its subject peoples. The resultant Cold War became hot from time to time in local theaters, but our servicemembers spent most of it securing a vast arc running from Norway through Europe and the Middle East to Korea, Japan and the Bering Sea. The most visible manifestation of the Cold War and containment was the Berlin Wall and similar construction along the inner

The French erected the Pointe du Hoc Ranger Monument to honor the men of the American 2nd Ranger Battalion who scaled the 100-foot cliff at Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944.
German border, built by the communists not to keep us out, but rather to keep their own citizens in. After two generations of Western vigilance, the Soviet Union did collapse, freeing both its subject peoples and, ultimately, the Russians themselves. The demolition of the Berlin Wall symbolized this collapse; only fragments remain in memoriam. Vantage points along the inner German border, such as Observation Post Alpha in the Fulda Gap, similarly evoke the drama and perseverance of the struggle.

**Ground Zero/The Pentagon.** The end of the Cold War ushered in unprecedented democratization, globalization and prosperity, but not an end to threats to our liberties. Ground Zero in New York City and the Pentagon Memorial in Arlington, Va., provide chilling reminders of the dangers that remain, even when no nation chooses to contest our values in a trial of strength. Notably, of 2,500 civilians killed in the World Trade Center attacks, almost 500 were from overseas: 67 Britons, more than 30 people from India and more than 20 Japanese, among others. The World Trade Center was a global village wherein citizens from around the world sought to secure the bounties of liberal international trade. The uniformed men and women who perished were domestic police and firefighters sworn to serve and protect citizens, residents and visitors, whatever their origin. The attack was an assault on civil society and an emerging global community. Our current war on terrorism is a defense of the same.

Thermopylae came to be revered not just by Lacedaemonians or Greeks, but by billions who shared the values of the civilization they defended. Similarly, American soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines have sacrificed not only for their own country, but also for causes that transcend the nation itself. Americans have long cherished a vision of a safe and prosperous world wherein free peoples enjoy the fruits of their labor and the benefits of unfettered commerce. America was to be a “City on a Hill,” inspiring by example, and a champion for the liberty-loving and the oppressed. It is easy to make the case that the shot heard ‘round the world at Lexington Common inspired the defense of freedom everywhere, or that soldiers buried in the soil of France died for both the United States and their fellow men. While the identification of the specific sites that best represent our military heritage is certainly debatable, the underlying message of courage, competence and sacrifice is hopefully less so.

**Recommended Reading:**

