

VETERANS DAY



Veterans Day originated as “Armistice Day” on Nov. 11, 1919, the first anniversary of the end of World War I. On the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918, World War I ended. This day became known as "Armistice Day.

This first Armistice Day was conceived as a day to be set aside for public parades, meetings, and a two-minute suspension of all business activity at 11:00 a.m. Other countries also observed the day, with many British Commonwealth nations using the red poppy—taken from John McCrae’s poem, “In Flanders Fields” (1915)—to honor their fallen soldiers. At Armistice Day ceremonies the following year, 1920, the United Kingdom and France both established tombs of the unknown soldier, at Westminster Abbey and the Arc de Triomphe, respectively. In 1921, the United States Congress approved the creation of the country’s own tomb of the unknown soldier and set aside November 11 of that year as a federal holiday to honor all those who served in the war. At an Armistice Day ceremony officiated by President Warren G. Harding, an unidentified American soldier killed in France “a soldier known but to God,” as the tomb’s inscription states—was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. Five years later, on June 4, 1926, Congress, once again in the spirit of promoting international peace, passed a resolution that officially recognized the end of

the Great War and encouraged the continued annual observance of Armistice Day.

In 1926, the United States Congress officially recognized the end of World War I and declared that the anniversary of the armistice should be commemorated with prayer and thanksgiving. The Congress also requested that the president should "issue a proclamation calling upon the officials to display the flag of the United States on all Government buildings on November 11 and inviting the people of the United States to observe the day in schools and churches, or other suitable places, with appropriate ceremonies of friendly relations with all other peoples."

With a new generation of American veterans following World War II, a national movement was started to expand the holiday’s purpose to honor all veterans, not just those who served in World War I. In 1945, Raymond Weeks, a veteran of World War II from Birmingham, Alabama, met with General Dwight D. Eisenhower to discuss the creation of a National Veterans Day, an idea Eisenhower supported. Two years later, on November 11, 1947, Weeks organized the first Veterans Day celebration in Birmingham. In 1953, citizens of Emporia, Kansas, officially re-named their Armistice Day commemoration “Veterans Day,” leading Kansas Congressman Edward H. Rees to propose legislation to change the name of the federal holiday to Veterans Day as well.

In 1954, after lobbying efforts by veterans’ service organizations, the 83rd U.S. Congress amended the 1938 act that had made Armistice Day a holiday, striking the word “Armistice” in favor of “Veterans.” President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the legislation on June 1, 1954. On June 1, 1954, the name was changed to Veterans Day to honor all U.S. veterans.

In 1968 the Uniforms Holiday Bill (Public Law 90-363 (82 Stat. 250)) made an attempt to move Veterans Day to the fourth Monday of October. The bill took effect in 1971. In 1971, the Uniform Monday Holiday Act moved the national observances of four holidays—

Washington's Birthday, Memorial Day, Columbus Day, and Veterans Day—to Mondays, creating three-day weekends for each of these holidays. The change as it affected Veterans Day, however, was unpopular with many Americans, who believed that the November 11 date carried great historical significance that was inseparable from the anniversary it marked. As a result of public opposition, including forty-six states continuing to celebrate the holiday on its original date, in 1978, the national observance of Veterans Day was once again fixed to November 11.



Today, the Veterans Day National Ceremony is held each year on November 11 at Arlington National Cemetery. The tradition-rich ceremony commences at 11:00 a.m. when the president (or his representative) lays a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and a bugler sounds "Taps." The ceremony then continues inside the Memorial Amphitheater adjacent to the tomb, where a color guard composed of members from each of the Armed Forces and various veterans' organizations participates in a parade of flags.

Finally, it should be noted that Veterans Day remains a unique federal holiday, with a purpose distinct from that of Memorial Day. That holiday, observed on the last Monday in May, stems from the Civil War's "Decoration Day" (when towns would decorate with flowers the graves of the fallen) and is set aside to remember and honor veterans now deceased—both those

who were killed in the line of duty and those who have since passed away. Veterans Day, on the other hand, is chiefly a day to thank and recognize veterans who are still living—and, in many cases, serving.

Sources:

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