Why Veterans Day is often confused with Memorial Day

By Valerie Strauss
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(I ran a version of this post in 2013 and a number of people told me they thought it was helpful, so here it is again:)

Veterans Day is often confused with Memorial Day. Why? According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs:

Many people confuse Memorial Day and Veterans Day. Memorial Day is a day for remembering and honoring military personnel who died in the service of their country, particularly those who died in battle or as a result of wounds sustained in battle. While those who died are also remembered, Veterans Day is the day set aside to thank and honor **ALL** those who served honorably in the military – in wartime or peacetime. In fact, Veterans Day is largely intended to thank **LIVING** veterans for their service, to acknowledge that their contributions to our national security are appreciated, and to underscore the fact that all those who served – not only those who died – have sacrificed and done their duty.

Veterans Day and Memorial Day have different histories.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Veterans Day has its origins early in the 20th century. In November 1919, one year after the armistice ending World War I went into effect, President Woodrow Wilson declared November 11 as the first commemoration of Armistice Day with the following words:

To us in America, the reflections of Armistice Day will be filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country's service and with gratitude for the victory, both because of the thing from which it has freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of the nations...

In 1938, Congress approved a bill that made November 11 an annual, legal holiday known as "Armistice Day" that would honor the cause of world peace, but it was primarily used to honor World War I veterans. In 1954, after World War II, the law was amended, the word "Armistice" was changed to "Veterans" and November 11 became a day to honor veterans of all American wars.

The first official observance of Memorial Day was on May 28, 1868, [history.com says May 30] when flowers

The ceremonies centered around the mourning-draped veranda of the Arlington mansion, once the home of Gen. Robert E. Lee. Various Washington officials, including Gen. and Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant, presided over the ceremonies. After speeches, children from the Soldiers' and Sailors' Orphan Home and members of the GAR [Grand Army of the Republic] made their way through the cemetery, strewing flowers on both Union and Confederate graves, reciting prayers and singing hymns.

After World War I, the holiday was extended to all soldiers who had fallen in all American wars.

One thing you may have noticed is that there is no consensus about how to spell Veterans Day. There's the way I just spelled it, or Veterans' Day, or Veteran's Day. So which is correct? According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Veterans Day does not include an apostrophe but does include an "s" at the end of "veterans" because it is not a day that "belongs" to veterans, it is a day for honoring all veterans."

As for why some public schools stay open for Veterans Day and some close, the department says it is all up to the states and/or school districts because there is no legal requirement to close. It said that most schools that stay open schedule Veterans Day schedule assemblies or other activities to honor America's veterans.

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Valerie Strauss is an education writer who authors The Answer Sheet blog. She came to The Washington Post as an assistant foreign editor for Asia in 1987 and weekend foreign desk editor after working for Reuters as national security editor and a military/foreign affairs reporter on Capitol Hill. She also previously worked at UPI and the LA Times. **Follow** 🐦