

May

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8		10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

July

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU
	1	2	3	4



Opinion
Daniel Pink

Why not shake up America's national holidays?

Let's start with Memorial Day.

May 22, 2024



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(Washington Post staff)

Don't fall for the hype that America is a divided country. On one issue, central to our identity and crucial to our freedom, we are bound by a conviction that citizens of every race, gender and political persuasion will defend with all their honor.

We believe in the three-day weekend.

Regular federal holidays — free from work and school and caboose to Saturday and Sunday — are not just an American ideal. They're the law. In 1968, the [Uniform Monday Holiday Act](#) replanted four of our major national commemorations to more convenient time slots and rooted a tradition.

The impetus was kind — more leisure! — but the outcome less gratifying. Memorial Day, rounding the bend again later this month, was designed to honor Americans who died in war. Today, it has become a hive of beach traffic reports and unbeatable deals on home appliances. According to a [2021 YouGov poll](#), less than 1 in 10 Americans visit a gravesite on Memorial Day or participate in other events honoring our fallen service members.

And it's not just Memorial Day. Whether we're supposed to be honoring civil rights icons or heroic presidents or American workers, the year has become so barnacled with extended holidays that each tribute risks losing its original meaning. What began as national obligations to share and reflect have become personal entitlements to shop and relax.

The Why Not? Project

Help us deliver a jolt of adrenaline to the American imagination!

Share your [bold, unexpected idea](#) for improving our country, our organizations or our lives. We read every submission and will select the most intriguing ideas to explore in future columns.

Just as we periodically renovate our public spaces, it's time to do the same with our public calendar.

Vacations are essential, of course. Americans spend more hours on the job than workers in most peer nations. We receive fewer paid vacation days than all but one country in the world. We lack even a government-backed guarantee of sick leave. We deserve an occasional reprieve.

But reimagining national holidays isn't about making them less enjoyable. It's about making them more meaningful. It's about setting aside a few days where we can find satisfaction more enduring than momentary diversion — Thanksgiving-like secular Sabbaths that could help our complicated, sometimes combative, population deepen their connection to each other and to a shared American identity.

In advance of the United States' 250th birthday, why not reconfigure, remove and reinvent our national holidays — beginning with the next one on the docket?

1. Reconfigure: Move Memorial Day to restore its meaning.

Memorial Day emerged in the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War, explained Matthew Dennis, a historian at the University of Oregon and author of "Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar." More than 600,000 Union and Confederate soldiers died in what remains America's deadliest conflict — and survivors searched for ways to make sense of the carnage. This sense-making impulse, Dennis told me, powers most holidays — secular and religious. "There are certain times where we want to pause and reflect, where normal business doesn't proceed, and we think about who we are and where we're going."

In 1868, Gen. John Logan, founder of a Union veterans' organization called the Grand Army of the Republic, designated May 30 as a day to adorn war graves with flowers. These local decoration days soon spread through the Northern states. The tradition went national after World War I, which took the lives of more than 100,000 Americans, and solidified after World War II, in which an additional 400,000 Americans died. In the first half of the 20th century, many U.S. citizens held a direct connection to someone lost in service to their country.

Yet as time passed — and as subsequent conflicts grew less deadly and were fought by smaller share of our population — Memorial Day, now grafted onto an ordinary Monday, lost its urgency and became merely the launch day for summer.

But we can revive its significance. Daniel J. Seehafer, National Commander of the American Legion, supports returning the holiday to its original date, May 30, irrespective of the day of the week — a direct assault on the three-day weekend industrial complex. This change, he told me, would restore "what the original day was set for — to take time, pause, observe, decorate those graves and know the cost of freedom."

Another possibility could be to fold Memorial Day into Veterans Day — which, since 1954, has bounced from Nov. 11 to the fourth Monday in October and back to Nov. 11. Many Americans, polls show, already confuse the two holidays, which has diluted the meaning of each. As a result, combining the holidays won't minimize them. It could concentrate them into something more powerful — a single, inviolable day of the year when American life halts and we honor everyone, from Civil War soldiers to the newest 18-year-old Marine, who has risked their life in military service.

A more provocative idea: Move Memorial Day to July 3 and pair it with Independence Day. This is the model in Israel, which observed Yom HaZikaron (Israel's Memorial Day) on May 12 and Yom Ha'atzmaut (its Independence Day) on May 13.

In the United States, July 3 could be a solemn day — including preserving and extending a national moment of silence — to honor the nearly 1.5 million Americans who've perished in wars. Then on July 4, we could celebrate the freedom those sacrifices have wrought. Solemnity would legitimize the next day's celebration; celebration would deepen the previous day's solemnity. Each holiday would enlarge the other — reverence and revelry working in tandem.

2. Remove: Get rid of holidays that have outlived their usefulness.

Reconfiguring Memorial Day is a fine start. But any effective renovation requires more than shifting around existing pieces. It also means removing some pieces. And that runs against our instincts. Social scientists have repeatedly discovered that when we confront complex problems — from designing a bridge to reviving the American spirit — our default response is to add. We routinely overlook opportunities to subtract.

So, let's resist this cognitive bias — and hit the delete button on a few of the United States' 11 federally ordained holidays.

We can begin with Columbus Day, already so fraught that it's been renamed and replaced in many jurisdictions. Were it to disappear, few would miss it. (And those who might are still free to hold a parade.) Imagine we were drawing up the American calendar from scratch today. Would we really allocate one of our scarce holiday spots to a 15th-century Italian sailor who mistakenly landed in the Bahamas nine generations before our country was even founded? Goodbye, Columbus.

While we're in subtraction mode, perhaps we can also lose Presidents' Day — the combo platter of George Washington's and Abraham Lincoln's birthdays that became a general tribute to the 45 people, some less distinguished than others, who happen to have held our top job. Maybe we'd be better off celebrating the entire U.S. Constitution rather than just Article II. That's certainly preferable to watching this holiday further mutate into our National Day of Mattress Sales.

3. Reinvent: Create a new kind of national holiday.

Pruning the calendar of one or two moribund holidays would allow us to plant a new holiday — and to rethink our relationship to these national rites.

People often say that they “observe” holidays. The word implies that we view them at a distance, positioning ourselves as spectators rather than participants. What if we took a less passive approach to America's commemorations — and established a holiday whose very purpose was action?

For instance, how about a National Day of Service?

We could designate one day of the year, perhaps even a full weekend, devoted to serving others. Offices and factories could close. Schools could let out. And all Americans, young and old, could spend the time in acts of service. No parades. No speeches. No clearance sales. Just action.

We could pick up trash, refurbish playgrounds, deliver food to the homebound, paint buildings, tutor students, install public WiFi, repair homes, register voters. The list is limitless. But the goal is twofold: To shine the focus away from ourselves and onto others — and to honor American ideals not with words but with deeds.

A holiday dedicated to service — coast to coast, top to bottom — might rankle some. It would demand a day on rather than deliver a day off. It would force us into contact with people we often don't encounter. It would replace leisure with effort.

Dennis, the historian, is skeptical about its prospects. "The past doesn't necessarily convince me that this is something that could easily emerge," he told me.

Then he paused and asked, "However, why couldn't it?"

Do you agree with everything I've proposed? I hope not! As I explained in [Why Not's inaugural column](#), the goal of this project isn't conversion. It's conversation. So, we'd like to hear from you. Do you support moving Memorial Day? Which federal holiday would you eliminate? And what's your own idea for a new American holiday? Tell us in this [simple online poll](#). I'll report the results in a future column.

What readers are saying

The comments on the article discuss various ideas for restructuring holidays in the United States. Some suggest combining Memorial Day and Veterans Day on July 3rd to create a solemn day before Independence Day, while others propose making Election Day a national holiday to... [Show more](#)

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