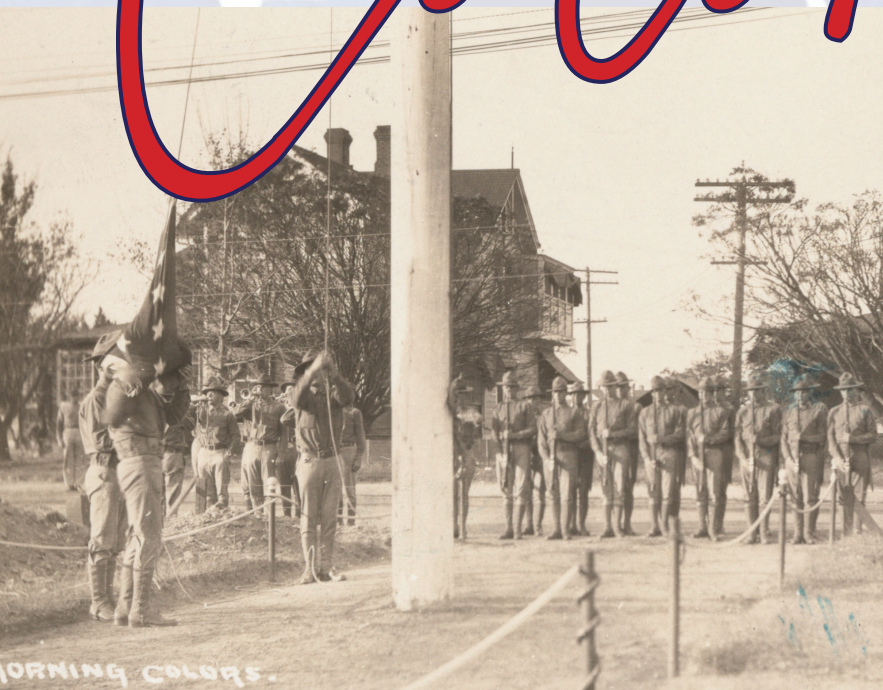


Colors

**On patriotism,
remembrance, and
the daily work of
citizenship**



Left: "Morning Colors," postcard from Parris Island during World War I, 1918. Courtesy Library of Congress.
Right: "Evening Colors," modern-day scene from Camp Pendleton. Photo: Sgt. Tabitha A. Markovich.

By Col. Alan Miller

Every morning at 0800 (8 a.m. for the uninitiated), life on a military installation pauses.

The bugle sounds. The flag is raised. Morning colors begins.

It is a simple ceremony, repeated every day across U.S. bases and posts around the world. It is also one of the customs that quietly shape military life. When the call for colors sounds, everyone stops. No one keeps walking. No one keeps talking. Vehicle traffic comes to a halt. Service members turn toward the flag or the music and render the proper salute. Civilians pause and place their hands over their hearts. For a brief moment, the motion of the day gives way to something more important than whatever seemed urgent a few seconds before.

If we are honest, of course, the first thought is not always noble. Sometimes the ceremony feels inconvenient. I am in a hurry. I have somewhere to be. I have work to do. This tradition is in my way. But that is precisely the point.

The ceremony interrupts us. It reminds us that even important work must be ordered toward something more significant than busyness. It asks us to stop long enough to remember the oath, the mission, the cost of freedom, and the nation whose Constitution we swore to support and defend.

On some days, admittedly, we simply render the salute and move on. On other days, the pause does what it is intended to do. It restores perspective. It invites

gratitude. It calls us away from urgency and back toward purpose.

America's 250th anniversary can serve in much the same way.

Throughout 2026, Americans are rightly celebrating the Semiquincentennial with ceremonies, speeches, parades, concerts, conversations, fireworks, and public acts of remembrance. We should celebrate. A free people *should* take time to mark the extraordinary achievement of this republic. We should remember the courage of those who declared independence, the sacrifice of those who secured it, the wisdom of those who framed a Constitution, and the generations who have labored, fought, and sacrificed to make the American promise more real.

But an anniversary, like morning colors, is not an end in itself. Its purpose is not merely to stop us for a moment. Its purpose is to return us to a more meaningful context of our work.

Beyond 250

The great question after 2026 will not be whether we celebrated well. It will be whether we can remember well. It will be whether the celebration formed a deeper habit of citizenship in us. When the fireworks fade, the stages come down, and the commemorative banners are packed away, what then? What will we do the next morning? The next year?

The Declaration of Independence gives us more than words for public ceremonies. It gives us a daily examination. Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness are not museum pieces. And the Declaration is not only a statement about what Americans were willing to risk in 1776. It is a mirror held up to each generation. It asks what we are doing with the inheritance they secured.

That question can stir gratitude. It can also stir disappointment.

Some look at our history and see hypocrisy more clearly than hope. A mature patriotism should not dismiss such disappointment. To love one's country truthfully is not to pretend that it has always lived up to its ideals.

But when America disappoints us, the answer is not to abandon the promise. The answer is to ask whether we are becoming the kind of people capable of fulfilling it. We must return more seriously to the work of citizenship.

We the People is not a passive preamble to our Constitution. It does not allow us to speak of America as something outside ourselves. In a republic, the nation

is not merely an institution in the distance. It is the virtues, character, and courage of its citizens. If the country has fallen short of its ideals, then we must not ask what "America" has failed to do. We must ask where "we the people" have fallen short.

If our efforts toward a better and more harmonious future are to bear fruit, we must return to the words of the Declaration itself. America rests on the claim that all are created equal, that we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that governments are instituted to secure those rights, "deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Beginning there gives us common ground and reminds us that compromise is not surrender. It is the necessary foundation of responsible self-government.

With those unifying principles in mind, the questions become clearer. Have we shaped our public life to reflect those foundational beliefs? Have we listened well? Have we served locally? Have we treated disagreement as an opportunity for engagement...or as evidence of another citizen's moral defect? Have we asked what we owe to others...or only what we are owed?

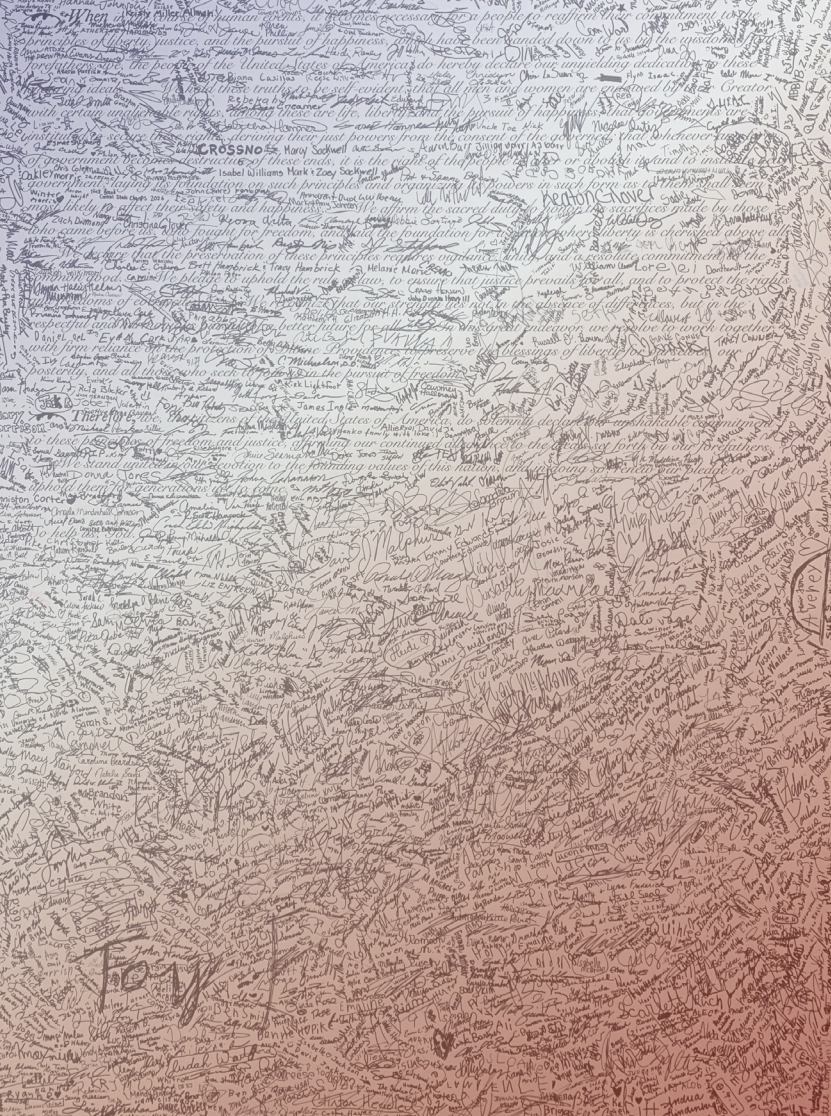
That kind of citizenship requires empathy. In our public life, we too often judge before we listen. We assume we know another citizen's story, motives, or experiences before the conversation has begun. But if we are serious



Top: Students raising the flag at Alabama College (now the University of Montevallo), in 1944. Bottom: At the March Against Fear, organized in 1966 to encourage black Southerners to register to vote. Images courtesy Alabama Department of Archives and History.

July 4, 2026

A Declaration of American Principles



"A Declaration of American Principles," signed by guests during American Village's Semiquincentennial celebration. Signers pledged to reflect on, and recommit themselves to, living the Declaration's principles more intentionally. Courtesy American Village.

about self-government, we must recover the discipline of seeking first to understand, then to be understood. Persuasion is slower than condemnation, but it is the lifeblood of a republic. Citizens who share power must also share ideas and, sometimes, enough humility to be changed by them.

That is not weakness. It is the work.

Real reflection, real patriotism

That is why the country needs more than occasional patriotic display. Flags, songs, fireworks, and ceremonies help us remember. They give beauty and form to gratitude. But patriotism is not genuine when it gives us an easy way to feel righteous without requiring us to become better citizens.

Real patriotism is harder. It asks us to love the country truthfully: to see its wounds without despising it, its achievements without becoming blind to its failures, and our neighbors as citizens whose dignity and hopes are bound up with our own.

The republic is not kept only in capitals, courtrooms, or battlefields. It is kept in daily acts of responsibility: when we vote seriously, listen attentively, serve without applause, teach our children that freedom is not indulgence, and choose gratitude over grievance.

That is why we need regular habits of remembrance. We need to pause, in gratitude and humility, and ask whether we are becoming worthy keepers of the republic we have been given.

We do not necessarily need a bugle at 0800 or a flagpole in front of headquarters. But we do need some regular interruption that calls us back from hurry, resentment, distraction, and self-importance. We need some habit of remembrance that asks: What have I been given? What do I owe my fellow Americans? Am I helping my community become more worthy of the ideals we celebrate?

The wisdom of morning colors is that it happens every day. The flag is raised. The day begins. The flag is lowered. The day ends. The ceremony repeats because the need repeats.

America 250 should be a great national pause. We should celebrate it with gratitude and hope. But if the celebration does its work, it will leave us with something quieter and more durable than a memory of the anniversary. It will leave us with a renewed sense of duty.

The work is daily.

At some point, the bugle sounds. The traffic stops. The hurried grow still. We look toward the colors. And we are asked, in our own time and in our own way, whether we will keep what has been entrusted to us.

Col. Alan Miller, J.D., is a retired colonel of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. He serves as CEO of the American Village Citizenship Trust and is a member of the board of directors for the Alabama Humanities Alliance.