

War and tales of war

By [Edward J. Blum](#)

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Living in San Diego and having family in Norfolk, Virginia, I probably hear more sermons that involve military life than most Americans. I thought little of it this past Sunday when a video of a naval officer's account of war and call for church members to help those in combat and their families ran across the church televisions. But then we prayed for service women and men. And the pastor had all "retired and active" service people stand. It seemed a bit excessive. Then I realized it was Memorial Day weekend. Any complications of following a crucified Savior who never counseled bloodshed, while paying taxes to a nation-state with the world's most powerful military, were washed away in seas of storytelling, applause, and appreciation.

War tales and memories are nothing new for churches. Nothing that happened this Memorial Day weekend was particularly jingoistic or bellicose. Rather, it was all somewhat matter-of-fact. The marriage of church and military seemed comfortable and affectionate.

It reminded me of the sermons of Gilded Age evangelist Dwight Lyman Moody. Before Billy Graham or Billy Sunday, there was Dwight Moody. Born into small-town farming life in New England, he moved to Chicago several decades before the Civil War. After a conversion experience, he became sold out for Jesus. He was known on the streets as "crazy Moody" because of his intense appeals to young men. During the Civil War, he worked as a chaplain and then traveled to Great Britain with singer-songwriter [Ira Sankey](#) for a series of revivals.

Moody became an American national sensation during the middle of the 1870s. Thousands flocked to hear him. At the time and after, commentators fixated on the economic depression that had started in 1873. Joblessness and the restriction of capital had left many Americans open to discussions of their souls, and not simply their balance sheets.

Another reason for Moody's popularity was his tactical use of war-related stories and themes. The Civil War had ended a decade earlier in 1865, but war was anything but

distant. Moody's main rival for newspaper attention in 1876 was General George Custer and his "last stand" at Little Big Horn. Moreover, Americans had been fighting the peace of the Civil War in the process of Reconstruction. Federal troops had occupied parts of the South for years. White vigilantes had terrorized southern African Americans and their white supporters so dramatically that the federal government held a series of hearings in the early 1870s to discern if there was a conspiracy against citizens of the nation. Rival state legislatures had threatened military action against one another in several southern states. The presidential election of 1876 had some Americans wondering if another full-blown Civil War was in the near future.

Amid these wars and rumors of wars, Moody told tales of war. He preached sentimentalized stories that emphasized personal experiences and minimized political contexts. "When I was in Nashville during our late war," Moody often told the thousands who flocked to hear him, "a great strong man come up to me, trembling from head to foot. He took a letter out of his pocket and wanted to have me read it. It was from his sister." In the letter, "The sister stated . . . that every night as the sun went down she went down on her knees to pray for him. The sister was six hundred miles away, and said the soldier, 'I never thought about my soul until last night. I have stood before the cannon's mouth and it never made me tremble, but, Sir, I haven't slept a wink since I got that letter.'"

Moody wanted his listeners to feel like this soldier. Death could come at any time, and soldiers knew this better than many others. Where would your soul go if you died tonight? The background and the context were inconsequential. Why the man was fighting, why he was in the South, what happened after the war all were irrelevant for Moody's agenda. What Moody left unsaid was that northern and southern whites were working together to limit the freedoms won by African Americans during and after the Civil War. What Moody left unsaid was that Jim Crow segregation was beginning to take over the land.

Almost 150 years later, in our era of wars and rumors of war, soldiers tell stories of affection for comrades and concerns for family members. Churches applaud the women and men who have the material to destroy humans, terrain, and even the entire world. Only at points few-and-far-between do we wonder what we did then or what we're doing now.

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