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The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory

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Abstract

Using as data the events and persons commemorated in the United States Capitol this inquiry demonstrates how the significance of historical events

changes from one generation to the next according to a changing infrastructure of societal problems and needs. Before the Civil War, two historical periods, colonization and revolution, produced the only events and heroes on whose commemoration a deeply divided Congress could agree. Once the unity of the nation was brought about by force of arms, the pattern of commemoration changed. Belated recognition was given to the events and heroes of the postrevolutionary period and to outstanding regional, as opposed to national, figures. The commemoration of office incumbency was superimposed on that of extraordinary military and political achievement, thus celebrating the stable institutional structures into which the charisma of the nation's founders finally became routinized. These and other changes in the Capitol's commemorative symbolism reflect the Civil War's solution to the antebellum problems of integration and pattern maintenance. The bearing of these findings on different theories of collective memory is discussed.

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