

Photo of the Day |



The Calisthenics Club group bonding after a Calisthenics dodgeball event on Saturday, Sept. 19, 2026. At the beginning of the fall semester, many students look to get involved in clubs. PHOTO BY ANDY CHERRY, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

What makes the American hero



An American flag waves in the wind. PHOTO COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

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The legacy of the famous is often determined by what follows the news of their passing. Barring any initial shock, when celebrities we love pass, there is a sense of quiet that passes through the community. It’s a mourning filled with sorrow, confusion, fear and despair. It’s a unanimous wake for a person we’ll put in the history books as a trendsetter for positive change. It’s after the quiet that we erupt in a boisterous sound. Sounds of remembrance of the good they achieved, the love they spread and the impact they made on the people they affected. When the divisive, polarizing or often controversial pass, there is no quiet. We move straight to noise. This noise becomes contentious, cacophonous, and often riddled with mockery. It is often hard to place these people in high regards, when their legacy will be remembered more for the indecision they caused and less for the life they lived.

Since the passing of country legend Dolly Parton a few weeks ago, the concept of legacy and heroism has been living rent-free in my mind. In life, her positive contributions were known, but in death it seems we understood them tenfold. Since her passing, I’ve felt this void, that had me honestly wondering, “Who’s going to step up next?” I know it’s up to the American public to be “the change we wish to see”, but who will shine as the next great precedent for future generations? Moreover, what does it take to be the next American hero?

Our friend Dolly was deeply loved by all. It was almost like she was the epitome of the hero. In the wake of her death, people from both sides of the political aisle mourned. Flags were lowered to half-staff by

order of the President of the United States, despite him actively opposing the causes Parton valiantly championed. Many of the issues the country star fought for have been vehemently attacked by Trump.

Seemingly, Dolly’s favorable stance on LGBTQ+ rights was acceptable to by the president, despite him often belittling homosexual politicians such as Pete Buttigieg. Dolly’s prevailing goal of spreading love made her, in turn, loved. Despite that some radical conservatives surely disagreed with her, any division caused by her was not created with that intent. This is why the noise that followed the mourning period was beautiful, warm and importantly hopeful. Despite the sadness of the passing, the world seemed a little bit brighter. Somehow, in her death, we all were reminded to live a bit kinder life. We were reminded that connection makes for a heroic trait.

Shortly after the mourning period for Ms. Parton ended, America was reminded of another death. The time was nearing the one-year mark since political podcaster Charlie Kirk was shot and killed. The podcaster’s death lives in stark contrast to the one of the country singer, as his death was followed by mass confusion and argument rather than any real mourning.

As a man who built a career around controversy and dividing young adults for views, many did not mourn the podcaster. Instead, they (in complete and utter irony) instantly turned his likeness, imagery and legacy into a mockery. The AI rampage that occurred after Kirk’s death was something I have never seen before. Kirk was made a fool, with AI songs, videos and infamously deepfakes spreading along social media at unprecedented speeds. In essence, his likeness after death

became vastly greater than any semblance of legacy he had while he was alive. His death did not build upon his work. It simply created something different and very strange, if I’m being honest.

While Dolly’s death had little large ramifications on society as a whole, the “kirkification” of images opened the floodgates to AI deepfakes on just about everything; war, any aspect of culture and myriad political figures. It’s easy to point fingers at the people who opposed Kirk who are mocking a man’s death, but honestly, the real catalyst was the man himself. His inability to bring people together, as an American hero should, created this culture in his death. He championed vile causes while he was alive, and so the fate he got was one of totally ridiculous absurdity. Despite arguments saying he merely did what he did in the name of free speech, Kirk cannot be seen as a hero in any regard. He pushed back the American youth, the next drivers of change, instead of using his words to bridge gaps. I’m sorry Kirk, but clip farming isn’t going to get you remembered the way you wanted it to.

Let it also be remembered that the memorialization of those who divided America never seems to end well. In 2020 alone, almost 200 confederate general statues were torn to the ground. Bigotry and division should not be remembered with grandiosity.

In the unsettling times we live in, when we choose to memorialize the legacies of Americans, I strongly urge us to remember those who bring the American public closer and not push sides further apart. Who is the American hero? They’ll never be someone who stands for one form of self-beloved nationalism, but one who stands for a patriotism everyone can get behind.