



Fourth of July

To see this in print I had to get permission from the corporation I worked for. (Long story). The piece was read by executives all the way up the corporate chain. When I finally received the green light I was told, “You wouldn’t believe how many people appreciated this [piece].”

“I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore.”

- John Adams to Mrs. Adams, 1776.

Being both patriotic and indiscriminating, I observe America’s birthday with the same zeal that I give to every paid holiday. This means that I sleep late, eat too much, and complain about the government. And I always top it off with 30 minutes of eye-shriveling fireworks.

Last year I took my wife and daughter to the city’s display. (Okay,, we didn’t actually go TO it. We went NEAR it.) We parked in a deserted construction site and sat on the trunk of our car. I held a 44 ounce Jot-flavored slurpee and a king-sized bag of M&Ms. My daughter hopped up and down in frustration as we waited for the sun to go down.

I had bought a book not long before: *Our Sacred Honor*, by William Bennett. It is a book of quotations from the founding fathers. The title is taken from the last sentence of the Declaration of Independence: “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

Now obviously the founding fathers didn’t frame their sentences for the modern mind.

They apparently lacked the talent for reducing everything into mental snapshots that can be grasped and discarded in thirty seconds or less. But they did understand the necessity of personal sacrifice, and the price of freedom.

Of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration, five were captured by the British and tortured to death. Nine fought and died in the Revolutionary war. Twelve lost their homes and all their possessions. Others died in poverty, lost their wives and children, or were forced to remain in hiding the rest of their lives. None of them, however, were surprised by their fate. As Benjamin Rush wrote about the signing, “Do you recollect the pensive and awful silence which pervaded the house when we were called up, one after another, to the table of the President of Congress to subscribe what was believed by many of us at that time to be our own death warrants? The silence and the gloom of the morning were interrupted, I well recollect, only for a moment by Colonel Harrison of Virginia, who said to Mr. Gerry at the table: ‘I shall have a great advantage over you, Mr. Gerry, when we are all hung for what we are now doing. From the size and weight of my body I shall die in a few minutes, but from the lightness of your body you will dance in the air an hour or two before you are dead.’”

Anyway, the phrase “our sacred honor” came back to me as I sat there slapping mosquitoes in the twilight. And suddenly the long-awaited fourth-of-July emotions flooded through me like a shot of caffeine. Pride, gratitude, the breathless acknowledgement that men suffered and died for my freedom. All this in the parking lot of an unfinished Quick Trip.

Ten minutes later we were surrounded. Headlights pierced the darkening sky. Teenagers wielding beer bottles accelerated past, feet jutting from the windows of primer-spotted cars. Bare-chested, lawn-chair toting dads jockeyed for prime seating. A sport utility vehicle turned in wary circles in the parking lot, as though looking for a pot-hole to conquer. I smiled uneasily at my daughter, who stared at the sudden chaos around us in stunned fascination. Ah, America.

At some point the fireworks began and ended, possibly when I turned my head to see who was screaming at whom. It ended like world war three. Not with a bang, but a whimper.

When we realized that the display had fizzled out, all of us goal-oriented males jumped for our cars like greyhounds chasing a mechanical promise of happiness.

At home I used my remote control to close the garage against the possibility of my neighbors intruding on my life. I sagged into my couch and closed my eyes.

The thought came to me then, a dull but insistent thud, like the sound of bottle rockets slamming into the shingles of my roof: “is this what the founding fathers pledged their sacred Honor for?”

I sat there awhile until the thought was thankfully interrupted by the demanding sputter of firecrackers in the distance.
