

July 4th

A Day I Once Celebrated with Much Greater Enthusiasm

Every year American citizens gather around their national flag, sing praise to their nation's past, and fill the sky with colorful firework displays. It is a time of joy, reverence and devotion. Unfortunately, it has become for me a ritual of mixed emotion.

The large boom and clatter of each display reminds me of the cannon and machine gun fire that have layed so many to rest and damaged so permanently the lives of many more. In the lingering smoke that rises high above me I see the spectres of heinous acts of war. In my joy I celebrate our political freedom and way of life, and in my reverence I pay tribute to the seemingly inevitable nature of war and the need for bravery. Accordingly, I highlight the heroic words of our national anthem and shout with praise and devotion when the words "O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!" are finally uttered.¹

National pride is a feelings that we all share to one degree or another, if not by choice, than surely by birth and up-bringing. As July 4th is our day of national triumph, we rarely think that others -- human beings, just like us -- are doing the same in distant lands with a similar sense of joy, reverence, and devotion. This ignorance bespeaks the human condition and a deeply rooted contradiction about which we often laugh in countless jokes about each other's nations as we travel abroad.

Each of us has the choice to engage or not engage in war, but it is often an undesirable choice whose alternatives are undeserved humiliation or prison.² Then too, there are those who freely choose to go to war and become soldiers of fortune in service of their own or another's government. For their extraordinary hardship and acts of brutality, they are awarded public honor. Let us not forget the enemy -- those who serve another government whose intentions are invariably depicted as

1 Francis Scott Key. 1814. The Star-Spangled Banner. Historic Documents. [<http://www.ushistory.org/documents/banner.htm> | [online reserve](#)] (Downloaded 10/07/04).

2 UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Commission on Human Rights. Conscientious objection to military service. [<http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/0/5bc5759a53f36ab380256671004b643a?Opendocument> | [online reserve](#)] (Downloaded on 10/07/04).

as contrary to our own, those who are the same people with whom we would otherwise share a table in a local café or a smile in the street, if only we could meet them in times of peace.

Surely our mercenaries are an adventurous and practical lot. For death is as inevitable as life itself, and the wounds of war can wreak havoc on the individuals who incur them. As human beings, damned on the one hand by the thought of our own death, and lauded on the other for our sacrifice to those with whom we struggle to survive, engaging in war is surely the consummate human struggle.

Unlike soccer, football, and other competitive league sports in which the same teams battle for the same title repeatedly year after year, in war each opponent seeks to eliminate his adversary to the extent that he can never claim title again. Surely, it is this sense of permanent defeat and humiliation that each side fears, and for which each is prepared to sacrifice everything to avoid.

It is also for this reason that one should never enter into war unless one feels a sense of impending annihilation or an opportunity to obtain another's title with no real threat to oneself. Indeed, it is for this latter reason that those who declare war, rarely engage in the actual fighting, and those who fight and support the war must be made to believe that they risk annihilation.

What disturbs me on this July 4th, and every July 4th since we first led a war against Iraq in 1990 is the persistent absence of the threat of annihilation. Even the destruction of the World Trade Center and the US Pentagon proved to be little more than a well-planned attack by a handful of ideological extremists who could have been more easily stopped through better international cooperation and a strengthening of our national borders.

Indeed, it is the opportunistic nature of the wars that the United States has led during the past two decades that have led me to the conclusion that there is something seriously wrong with our national government and many of our nation's citizenry.