Independence Day 2009

Independence Day in the USA means different things to different people. For countless Americans, the Fourth of July means a day off, an afternoon at the beach, and hot dogs on the grill.

I’ll admit to enjoying an occasional hot dog and a booming fireworks display. However, for me, this coming weekend is always a time for reflection, admiration, and giving thanks to those who have sacrificed or are currently sacrificing greatly to establish and protect the freedoms we take for granted in the United States of America.

I always remind myself that in July 1776, 233 years ago, 56 brave and dedicated individuals signed the U.S. Declaration of Independence. They were courageous beyond belief. This was an act of treason in British eyes, and they were literally betting the farm—their lives and their fortunes—on their struggle for freedom.

Since then, many more have given and continue to give of themselves so that we can enjoy the many blessings of freedom.

Many of us tend to forget this. This year, as it has been for the past several years, too few even think about the stark contrast between the Independence Day weekend planned by the general public in the U.S. and that planned by some 200,000 men and women currently stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan as members of our armed forces.

For Americans at home, it’s fun and games. The American Automobile Association estimates 37.1 million will travel 50 miles or more from home in pursuit of leisure, and the National Hot Dog & Sausage Council predicts 155 million hot dogs will be consumed over the weekend.

Many time zones away in Iraq and Afghanistan, our servicemen and -women will be risking everything, while they do all they can to bring peace to those nations and hopefully prevent oppressive dictatorship from spreading around the world. I am sure each individual perseveres, feeling he or she can make a difference, despite the awareness that some 5,000 of their colleagues have been killed and over 35,000 wounded since operations in Iraq and the Afghanistan area began about seven years ago.

An article by Jason Straziuso and Evan Vucci published this week in the Washington Post made this very clear to me. The authors described their recent visit to a U.S. military hospital in Afghanistan, as the hospital’s physicians and staff tended to the occupants of two Humvees blown up by a roadside bomb a few miles away. The fact that the list of those treated for serious wounds that day included Pfc. Anthony Vandegrift of Mililani, Hawaii, brought the story very close to home.

This week’s news reports were also filled with images from Iran, as that country’s people protested a stolen election and sought a chance to enjoy the blessings of freedom we take for granted in the United States. The photos of Neda Agha-Soltan dying in a pool of blood on a street in Tehran have galvanized many. The just-released movie, The Stoning of Soraya M., describing the brutal execution by stoning of a 35-year old Iranian woman for alleged infidelity, reminds us of another aspect of freedom and justice that we in the U.S. too often take for granted.

I know that two members of our ‘ohana, Mai Ho and Quyen Phan, are among those who fully appreciate the blessings of freedom. I spoke with Mai this week. She recounted how she and Quyen fled the oppression in Vietnam about 26 years ago as “boat people,” braving the open ocean in a small rickety craft, facing mortal peril every step of the way, before arriving at a refugee camp and an unknown future.

Through a series of miracles, Mai and Quyen ended up in Hawaii. Mai began working for Outrigger in 1987. Quyen joined our ‘ohana in 1990. They have been outstanding employees, and they
have taken advantage of everything Outrigger and Hawaii have offered, raising and educating their
family and assuming greater and greater responsibilities along the way. Their three children were
educated at the University of Hawaii. Son Nguyen is an electrical engineer working for Northrop
Grumman in California. Son Nam recently graduated from the University of Hawaii’s William S.
Richardson School of Law and is currently working at the Department of the Prosecuting Attorney in
Honolulu. Daughter Lisa has a master’s degree in human resources and is working for Hawaii Pacific
Health.

Mai and Quyen recently visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., to give thanks to
the thousands of Americans who gave their lives attempting to bring freedom to Vietnam 40 years
ago.

Mai’s gripping account of her flight to freedom was printed in Saturday Briefing last year. The
article is so inspirational we have reprinted it in today’s edition; it can be found on page 5.

So, as you put some hot dogs on the grill this weekend, please take a moment to think about
the true meaning of this holiday. As you do, think about what Thomas Paine said in 1776:

“Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom
must undergo the fatigues of supporting it.”

Those words are still just as true on July 4, 2009.

And, if you see a serviceman or -woman in our lobbies or corridors during the next few days,
make an effort to say, “Aloha, and thanks for helping to keep us all free!”

God bless the U.S.A.