Let Freedom Ring

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, hot dogs on the grill, and fireworks in the evening. For me, this weekend is a time for reflection, admiration, and thanks to those in the past who sacrificed greatly to establish and protect the freedoms we take for granted today.

Particularly this year, July 4th is also an occasion to recognize the men and women who are currently risking their lives so we, and others around the world, may enjoy “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

We in the United States have the blessings of freedom established by our country’s founders and set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. It was a radical idea at the time to declare that each person owns him- or herself and is not a vassal of the state, a king, or an autocrat of any kind.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

Today, 232 years later, these are still the guiding principles for our country.

Other people and nations are not so lucky. In my lifetime, I have seen despots and tyrants rule over citizens around the world with a bloody fist. Those who oppose them are detained, tortured, and often killed. Hitler’s blood-soaked march across Europe, Japan’s brutal conquest of vast areas around the Pacific, the harsh communist takeover of Eastern Europe and Vietnam, Stalin’s meting out death to at least 20 million Soviet citizens, Mao’s “democide” of at least 40 million Chinese, North Korea’s attempted conquest of South Korea, Castro’s iron-fisted rule in Cuba, the Khmer Rouge “Killing Fields,” in which one out of every five Cambodians perished, the genocide in Rwanda, Saddam Hussein’s vicious rule in Iraq and invasion of Kuwait – all took place in the past 75 years, and this horrifying listing is far from complete. The genocide in Darfur (Sudan) and the tragedy of Zimbabwe under the violent rule of Robert Mugabe unfold at this very moment. Over the years, governments have tortured, starved, and murdered untold millions. (For a more complete reckoning, see www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/20TH.HTM, compiled by University of Hawaii “democide” scholar, Professor Rudolph Rummel.)

A few lucky, brave men and women have been able to escape oppression in places like these and flee to the United States. That includes Mai Ho and Quyen Phan, members of our ‘ohana, who fled Vietnam’s oppression as “boat people,” with others, braving the open ocean in 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 families 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 clerking for Judge Michael D. Wilson. In September, he will be starting at the Department of the Prosecuting Attorney in Honolulu under Peter Carlisle. Daughter Lisa has a master’s degree in human resources and is working for Hawaii Pacific Health.

Mai wrote an outstanding article on what the United States of America and freedom mean to her. It is on page 7. We should always keep the lessons of the past in mind as we go forth in this troubled world.

The summer of 2008 is a particularly difficult period for the United States and other countries, including Australia, that have joined the battle against oppression and terrorism that continues today. The fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan has dragged on for over five years, costing the lives of over 4,000 U.S. servicemen and -women and leaving about 30,000 seriously wounded (http://icasualties.org/oif/). Particularly in Iraq, a far greater number of local military, police, and civilians have been killed and wounded by relentless terrorist attacks. Many other Iraqis have been found tortured, blindfolded, bound, and murdered by those who hope to disrupt their country’s progress toward democracy and prefer a return to the old autocracy or a form of jihadist theocracy.

The terrorists have succeeded in turning the opinion of many Americans against the efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan,
despite tremendous, but poorly reported, progress in the past year on both the military and political fronts in Iraq. The ongoing death toll and cost in money have discouraged many of us, particularly as our culture has conditioned us to expect immediate answers to problems.

With instant, worldwide television coverage of today’s battles, many armchair generals lose patience when progress seems slow or reversals occur. Politicians seeking headlines abet this mood. This was certainly true of the Vietnam War where U.S. domestic impatience led to the withdrawal of American forces even though the battle was gradually being won.

With the march to freedom progressing slowly in Iraq and Afghanistan, the same home-front discouragement and political opportunism are again manifesting themselves, although thankfully not yet to the degree seen during the Vietnam era, when a much higher casualty count (47,000 American battle deaths) and the existence of the military draft inflamed feelings.

It is legitimate to second-guess the decision to go into Iraq and Afghanistan, but now that we are there, I believe we must stay the course. To do otherwise would hand the terrorists a monumental victory and almost certainly mean a death sentence for many thousands of those left behind, as happened after the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam.

The battle would then inevitably shift back to U.S. soil and other civilian targets around the globe, as it did during the past decade. If one has any doubts, just think about the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen, and the September 11 hijackings that ended in massive death and destruction in New York City, Washington, D.C., and a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. All those unprovoked attacks – and many others – took place long before the U.S. became involved in Afghanistan and Iraq.

There are currently nearly 140,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and 40,000 in Afghanistan. As we light up the barbeque grills this weekend, we should take a moment to give thanks to these brave, conscientious men and women, about 0.05 percent of our country’s population, who are making it possible for the 99.95 percent of the rest of us to enjoy the day in freedom.

No one makes this point better than Adm. Jeremiah Denton. Adm. Denton was a Navy pilot who was shot down and spent eight years in a North Vietnamese prison. As related by California Assemblyman John Campbell*, in 1966, while Denton was a prisoner of war, he was interviewed by North Vietnamese television in Hanoi after torture to get him to “respond properly.” During this interview, he blinked his eyes in Morse code to spell out the word “torture.” After his eventual repatriation and a distinguished military career, he was elected to the U.S. Senate from his home state of Alabama.

In a speech to a group of state legislators about the meaning of the Fourth of July a few years ago, Adm. Denton said that the war on terrorism may be the most difficult war we have yet fought. He went on to say that he fears that partisan attacks on our mission and our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan sound too much like the Vietnam experience. In his words:

*It is the soldier, not the reporter,*  
*Who has given us freedom of the press.*

*It is the soldier, not the poet,*  
*Who has given us freedom of speech.*

*It is the soldier, not the campus organizer,*  
*Who has given us the freedom to demonstrate.*

*It is the soldier,*  
*Who salutes the flag,*  
*Who serves beneath the flag,*  
*And whose coffin is draped by the flag,*  
*Who allows the protester to burn the flag*  

*In 1776, Thomas Paine said, “Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must undergo the fatigues of supporting it.” After 232 years, that statement remains true, and those who are at this moment “undergoing the fatigue” should be remembered and recognized.*

So, speak out on this issue, and if you see a serviceman or -woman in our lobbies or corridors this weekend at any of our U.S. or Australian properties, make an effort to stop and say, “Aloha (or g’day), and thanks for helping keep us all free!”

*The full text of Assemblyman Campbell's communication, dated June 30, 2004, can be found at www.breakthechain.org/exclusives/johncampbell.html.