Independence Day 2007

Independence Day in the U.S.A. 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. For me, this is a time for reflection, admiration, and thanks to those in the past who sacrificed so much to establish and protect the freedoms we take for granted today. Particularly this year, it is also an occasion to remember the men and women who are currently risking their lives so we, and others around the world, can continue to enjoy “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

In 2007, as for the past four years, there is a stark contrast between the Independence Day week planned by the general public in the U.S. and that planned by some 150,000 men and women currently stationed in Iraq as members of our armed forces, as well as the roughly 17,000 more stationed in Afghanistan.

In the U.S. during this July 4th period (June 30 to July 8), the American Automobile Association estimates 41.1 million Americans will travel 50 miles or more from home in pursuit of leisure.

Those traveling by air are facing some real challenges. Airports are congested. Long security lines wind through terminals. Airline schedules are disrupted. During the past week, all of the major airlines, United, American, and Northwest, cancelled hundreds of flights due to a variety of problems ranging from computer glitches to weather issues to pilot shortage.

Many Americans will opt to stay home and perhaps have a backyard barbecue with hot dogs and hamburgers and all the fixings. The National Hot Dog & Sausage Council predicts a total of 150 million hot dogs will be consumed over the July 4th holiday. That’s equivalent to about a thousand for each serviceman and -woman serving in Iraq!

Many time zones away, our servicemen and -women will be risking everything while they do all they can to bring lasting peace and freedom to Iraq. They hope they can make a difference and, at the same time, avoid having their names added to the list of over 3,500 killed and over 25,000 wounded since Iraq operations began on March 19, 2003.

In some respects, the situation is not unlike that which existed in July 1776, 231 years ago. The 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence were courageous beyond belief. This was an act of treason in British eyes, and they were betting the farm—their lives and their fortunes—on their struggle for freedom. Indeed, many did suffer retribution, torture, and imprisonment.

Today, as in 1776, the burden of defending freedom is carried valiantly by a small group, our all-volunteer armed forces. William Hamilton, a featured commentator for USA Today, notes, “With only 1.4 million Americans on active duty plus their 1.9 million dependents, our armed forces and their dependents represent only 1.1 percent of the total U.S. population of 300 million.” He adds that in today’s U.S. Congress, only 131 members, or 25 percent, have served in uniform, a drastic decline since 1973 when 390 members had military experience. Will the diminished military experience of our elected officials open the door for partisan politics to “pull the rug out from under the brave young men and women we send in harm’s way?” It seems that those who sacrifice the most for their country deserve far better.

That is not to say that others are not also demonstrating responsibility by working in different ways to improve our country, be it by volunteering time for community organizations or by donating funds to help worthy causes. For example, my daughter Linda Jane Kelley and her husband Sean “Pea” Pagett are organizing the 30th annual Hapua Roughwater Swim, scheduled for the Big Island community on July 1. More examples of community service by countless members of the Outrigger and OHANA family can be found almost every month in the pages of Saturday Briefing.
Margaret Thatcher, former prime minister of Great Britain, notes that the U.S., like her own country, has derived its strength from the concept of morality and freedom with responsibility. Think about the first American colonists who settled in a strange land with no government subsidies. Everybody pitched in and worked together for the good of their neighbors in the villages and towns that arose along the East Coast and later spread across the continent.

I felt that spirit as a young man growing up in the era of World War II. My proud contribution was growing food for my family in a “Victory Garden” in the backyard and collecting any piece of scrap iron I could find in the neighborhood.

I feel that over the past 50 years, there has been a significant change in the attitudes of people in the U.S. and perhaps in other counties as well. People still want their freedom, but often without as much responsibility. Instead of solving issues at the local level, citizens increasingly turn to Washington, D.C., and the federal government. Need a new road? Want to improve your airport? Does your school need some more classrooms? Have your representative in Congress earmark funds for those projects in the next federal appropriations bill.

As we take less and less local responsibility for the things we want, more and more power shifts to Washington, D.C. The result is less individual freedom and less freedom for communities to decide what is really best for them. Is that the best direction for our nation?

If we are to continue to enjoy individual freedom, we should remember the wise words of leaders who have gone before us.

Teddy Roosevelt said, “Patriotism means to stand by the country. It does not mean to stand by the President or any other public official save exactly the degree in which he himself stands by the country.”

John F. Kennedy put it even more succinctly when, in 1961, he said, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

And finally, as you put those hot dogs on the grill this weekend, think about the meaning of this holiday and 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 true on July 4, 2007. So, if you see a serviceman or -woman in our lobbies or corridors this weekend, make an effort to say, “Aloha, and thanks for helping keep us all free!”

God bless the U.S.A.