Independence Day 2006

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 weekend 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.”

This year, as for the past three years, there is a stark contrast between the Independence Day weekend 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. this weekend, the American Automobile Association estimates 40.7 million Americans will travel 50 miles or more from home in pursuit of leisure, and the National Hot Dog & Sausage Council predicts 150 million hot dogs will be consumed (about a thousand for each serviceman and -woman 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 2,528 killed and over 18,000 wounded since Iraq operations began on March 19, 2003.

The situation is somewhat similar to that which existed in July 1776, 230 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 falls to a small group, our all-volunteer armed forces.

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. Examples of that 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 countries 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?

So, 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, 2006.

And, 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.