

4 July 2008

It's been exactly five years since I sent out my message titled "Independence Day."
(<http://hackneys.com/blog/2003/07/04/independence-day/>)

In the intervening 60 months, we learned a few lessons about our own independence, our freedom, mostly related to how precious it is, how much we prize it and how we consider it the most important attribute of our lives. In the same intervening 60 months we witnessed citizens of other countries of the world long for and dream of freedom, or cling to and prize what little freedom their governments offered. In contrast, in those same intervening 60 months, most Americans continued to take their freedom for granted, consistently showing by their words and actions that alternatives such as entertainment, materialism and celebrity worship rank much higher on their value scale than the freedom their country provides.

As our freedom morphed from an initial year to another to something longer, finally totaling 1,827 days, we spent more and more time considering and discussing how hard we worked to get it, what we gave up to obtain it and what we sacrificed to keep it. Conversely, in those same 1,827 days, as we alternated our location between the U.S.A. and the rest of the world, we saw clearly, again and again, that most Americans had little to no idea of how hard their freedom was to obtain, what was given up to obtain it or what was sacrificed to keep it.

Obviously, you can't miss what you've never had. By the same token, you can't fully appreciate what you've always had, regardless of the price others paid to win it and sustain it. It is also true that what is not appreciated, what is not maintained, what is not continuously invested in, will deteriorate, decay, and dissolve away.

We spent the last six months in two countries that recently experienced multi-decade dictatorships. We are just about to cross the border into three countries where governments of wildly varying levels of repression change as often as calendar pages. Most Americans smugly believe that the U.S.A. is immune from anything but the status quo of freedom. Very few Americans have any sense of history, much less knowledge of it, so they don't know how often the country has been close to losing its freedom during its brief lifetime. Up to now, America's freedom has dodged the bullets of economic crisis, attack from without, attack from within, disinterested citizens and entrenched, alternating party, government by highest bidder. The future cannot be so certain.

The American post war generations were blessed with the closing decades of the American century and mostly spent their time enjoying the party, with precious little reinvestment in the enterprise. Our global travels have demonstrated clearly that the immediate, near, mid and long term future, in contrast, will be filled with a never ending string of existential threats and challenges unlike anything the last 60 years have seen. What we are in and what is coming will make the Cold War look like just another beautiful day at the beach. There will be no simple solutions, no magic bullets, and no superhero or cavalry charging over the hill to save the day. The challenges are many, massive and life-, culture-, society- and world-threatening. No single person, no single group, no single party, no single nation, no single continent, no single hemisphere has all or even a few of the answers. This contest will be long and the stakes are the highest they have ever been. The contest is already under way, but very few Americans ever heard the opening bell; it's like that when you're at a party, the music is too loud and the distractions too many to notice the oncoming threats.

Our international exposure has also reinforced one fundamental maxim, one universal law, one inescapable fact of government: A democracy requires an educated, informed, engaged and motivated electorate. Without one, a democracy simply cannot govern efficiently or effectively. It inevitably becomes just another variation of a state controlled by a separate, ruling class, which is in turned owned and controlled by power brokers and financial interests. It is just another variation of the revolution that overturns a privileged, ruling class only to replace it with another privileged, ruling class. A democracy without an educated, informed, engaged and motivated electorate is either well on its way to becoming ruled by a privileged, ruling class or already is one, albeit one usually equipped with the means to keep the electorate distracted from that fact. The overwhelming evidence of multi-decade, bi-partisan non-leadership; multi-decade, bi-partisan non-governance; and multi-decade, bi-polar partisan sideshows strongly support the latter scenario for modern America.

Just over four months from now America will elect a new president. That election is not a guarantee of another four years of freedom, another year of freedom or even another month of freedom. The new president does not sign a contract to provide or protect freedom, their contract is to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” The only time the word freedom appears in the constitution is in the Bill of Rights, guaranteeing the freedom of speech.

Freedom is not codified as any politician’s job, anywhere, not even the president. Not a single elected politician is required to provide your freedom or maintain it. No elected politician gets up every day with the mission, goal or defined task of providing or sustaining your freedom.

Your freedom is up to you. You earn it, you sustain it, you preserve it, you protect it, and you pass it down to the next generations.

The way you do that is to be part of an educated, informed, engaged and motivated electorate. Educate yourself on the facts of the issues by getting your information from multiple sources: left, right and center. Stay informed without becoming indoctrinated by getting your news from multiple sources: left, right and center. Get and stay engaged with the issues by discussing them in depth with people of all political persuasions: left, right and center. Become and stay motivated by demanding real action from all elected politicians: left, right and center.

America has muddled through the last 60 years mostly running on autopilot with a distracted, disinterested, misinformed, disengaged and increasingly psychotically polarized, partisan electorate. America will not survive the next six years on autopilot, possibly even the next six months. America, your country, needs you – now. Become part of an educated, informed, engaged and motivated electorate.

Today is July 4th, 2008, the 232nd anniversary of congress adopting the Declaration of Independence.

232 times the American people have gathered together to celebrate their freedom.

How many more July 4th celebrations of freedom can you guarantee your children and grandchildren there will be?