

Some Thoughts on the Eve of July 4, 2002

On the eve of July 4, 2001, *Newsweek Magazine* included a feature article on the *founding fathers* of America: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Hancock and George Washington, among others. The central theme was a presumed nostalgia for these brave and esteemed men, who, along with their colleagues, defied King George, III and the Parliament of Great Britain in their quest for our country's independence.

David McCullough's eponymously titled Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of John Adams was the impetus for this story. McCullough's meticulously researched work is an eminently readable and vivid portrait of the second president of the newly organized United States and the roles he played in achieving the goal of a sovereign nation. The author offers a rich and thorough look at pre- and post-revolutionary war America and the struggles of those determined to wrest freedom from the oppressive British government.

This year on the eve of the Fourth of July, I'm reading Gail Buckley's detailed history of African-Americans in the military from the Revolutionary War through Desert Storm. This work is aptly titled, *American Patriots*. Mrs. Buckley is the daughter of Lena Horne and author of *The Hornes*, a biography of her mother's family. *American Patriots* is an equally exhaustive study of the roles, treatment and experiences of Black men and women who fought in every military conflict in the history of America since the Revolutionary War.

Both authors have given me the feeling that I'm learning information I never knew before. In many respects this is probably *very* true. What is particularly fascinating for me, however, is my own edification. I was a history major in college and I *hated* American History. The history of the United States I was taught was lily white, sanitized and devoid of the crushing reality surrounding the evolution of our country. I don't recall any frank discussions about Abraham Lincoln's purposeful aversion to ending slavery. I don't recall reading about Black soldiers in the American Revolutionary War other than Crispus Attucks. The Civil War, Reconstruction and imposition of Jim Crow laws, lynching and the Ku Klux Klan didn't come up much, either. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were lionized as heroes although both were slave-owners. For many years after graduation from college, I continued to be disinterested in the history of the United States.

Somewhere along the way, though, I began reading about U.S. History. The book that started it all was John Dean's *Blind Ambition*. I was fascinated by his tell-all memoir recounting his years in the Nixon Administration and his involvement in the Watergate conspiracy. From that point on I was hooked. I began reading books on the history of the United States, not from an historical perspective, per se, but through the eyes of the players in the political dramas that played out at the highest echelons of power. There was David Stockman's *The Triumph of Politics*, his take on the Reagan years and his role in that *success story*. Hedrick Smith's *The*

Power Game, How Washington Works, provides insights into modern political party-based warfare that are as timely today as they were twenty years ago.

James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* is a comprehensive and absorbing history of the Civil War. It set the stage for Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s hard-hitting look at Lincoln and the civil war in his book, *Forced into Glory*. *Speak Now Against the Day*, *The Generation before the Civil Rights Movement*, by John Egerton and *Parting the Waters*, by Taylor Branch together create a monumental body of work that examines the United States on the eve of the civil rights movement and the work of the people who paved the way. I have a greater appreciation of how, through the convergence of time, effort and happenstance, this country has evolved to its present state of being. American history, a subject that had once been distasteful, disappointing and of little value to me has developed into full blown hunger. The more I learn, the more I want to know – not as it is presented in the media, but factually with thoughtful analyses added.

On the eve of the Fourth of July 2001, the authors of the *Newsweek* article on the founding fathers put forward a subtle argument that these men, if they were around would, somehow have met our collective need for real leadership. The logic was so simple it was breathtaking. There were no overt references to the current resident of the Oval Office but the implications were clear.

Fast forward to 2002. The Fourth of July is fast approaching. Nine months have passed since September 11, 2001. Most days the memory of the horrific events of that date are insinuated somewhere in our consciousness. Automobiles still sport flags and bumper stickers declaring a sense of solidarity that is ephemeral at best. Many retail establishments still have prominently displayed statements of support and concern.

As tragic as the bombings on September 11th were, there has been precious little effort to put them into historical perspective. America has always been an uneasy melting pot. This is a nation born out of violence coupled with racial and religious intolerance. This is a nation of people whose founders displaced the original inhabitants, consigning them to reservations and enslaved another population. This is a nation profoundly ignorant of the world around us, yet supremely confident of our status as the greatest nation on earth. This is quite a contradiction in terms.

On the eve of the Fourth of July 2002, our government, under the current leadership, seems determined to do away with our Constitution, literally, if not figuratively in order to achieve an unprecedented level of domination and all in the name of national security. There is no talk of our history. There are no public discourses on how our history has brought us to this place and time. Freedom of speech is under assault. The simplistic and idiotic pronouncements of President Bush that if you're not with us, you're against us seems to describe who and what we are in the early Twenty-first Century. It is our history that defines us and our lack of knowledge of that history is a troubling fact.

On the eve of the Fourth of July 2002 our lack of knowledge of our history complicates our understanding of why and how September 11, 2001 came to be. We're preparing to enjoy a

national holiday perhaps without understanding, appreciating or even caring about its significance. Flags will fly; we'll enjoy fireworks, patriotic songs performed in a variety of venues across the country and on the July 5th, it will be business as usual. So...I offer just a few thoughts on the eve of the Fourth of July 2002.

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