

Melaleuca

Freedom Celebration

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM!

“Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God!

“I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”

One might recognize these words, attributed to the great patriot Patrick Henry. There is no hollow rhetoric to his sentiment, no questioning his true motive. Mr. Henry—and thousands more like him—believed a better existence was possible, and they staked their very lives on bringing that about.

In an era when it is easy to take for granted the countless liberties we enjoy, we might harken back to the days when such freedoms did not exist, when men and women could lose their lives for things we would consider commonplace.

What has freedom come to mean to us today?

Ask that question and some will quote from the Bill of Rights: freedom of speech, freedom to bear arms, and freedom to worship as one pleases.

Others might answer that freedom is the ability to choose: to pursue an occupation of our own interest, to live where we want, to travel when the urge strikes, to follow our dreams to the type of life we can best make for ourselves.

Still others may say freedom is independence; more specifically, the absence of some dominating power: no government body to repress our ideas, no “secret police” knocking down the doors of our homes and dragging us off to prison for dubious offenses, no high-ranking official to ban an “unsuitable” book or film.

Some will simply say, “Freedom is being free!”

Indeed, freedom is all these things. Yet, true though these answers are, we may easily forget a most important element of our freedom: sacrifice. The sacrifice of the soldier’s mother who occupied herself with daily chores of cooking and cleaning, just to dull the worry that plagued her days. The father who worked until all hours of the night to avoid the phone and the mail, fearing the day he would find a message that his son would not be coming home. The wife who worried about her children growing up without a father. The nurse who toiled away in a VA hospital after years of serving in the same capacity overseas during the war. The woman who strove to bring her veteran husband out of melancholy, if only long enough to enjoy a day at the zoo with the children.

And ultimately, the soldier’s sacrifice: his long, anxious hours in the trenches; his wrenching, painful helicopter flights to medical stations; his years of therapy and struggle in trying to recover

the innocence he lost on the battlefield; the sacrifice of his very life in a ravaged field of swampy marsh or endless, sticky jungle.

According to *The World Almanac*, since the American Revolution in 1775, an estimated 1.4 million American men and women have been wounded, while 650,604 died in battle and another 489,585 died of other causes during war efforts. For every one of those, there were countless more mothers and fathers, brothers, sisters, wives, husbands, and children who suffered and sacrificed as well.

Freedom has never been cheap; it comes at a tremendous price. And that price has been paid, not by us, but by someone else who came before us.

A soldier goes into battle knowing—and we accept—that he may have to give his life for his country. Give his life! We see this as the way it must be. We try to picture the hundreds of thousands of sweat-streaked soldiers lined up in dirt-caked uniforms, charging forward under determined, fear-stricken faces, then hit, over and over again, one and then another falling, stumbling, some struggling to rise again, others rushing on into enemy fire. We try to imagine the hundreds of thousands of still bodies, broken and dismembered in the smoky aftermath of battle.

But we can’t know it. We can’t know it unless we were there, unless we choked on the smoke in our own lungs and felt the sticky blood on our own fingers. Instead, we see only our mind’s fabrication of those few soldiers, those few that will fit in the limited view of our experience here in the relative comfort and safety of insulated lives. Maybe we can reference the scenes we have witnessed in films, the scenes that show a little of the blood, a little of the death, a little of the suffering that so many endured. But as these visions come to life, we turn away. We black them out as if with a permanent marker, we avoid the pain, we shake our heads, we feel a faint sense of sadness, perhaps guilt. We say, “That’s too bad, all those young men and women.” And maybe we

offer a momentary thought of appreciation and thanks. And then we move on with our lives.

We move on with the lives we have been given in our free society. Do we take that gift for granted? Some of us vote; most of us don’t. Some of us volunteer; most of us don’t. Some of us get involved in our communities, striving to change them for the better; others chase only after prestige and position in the realm of public office. Many of us experience the trauma of losing a job, the struggle of living on welfare, the tragedy of knowing young children on drugs. In the midst of it all, we passively scorn our leaders in government, we gossip, we joke. We find the stories of government scandal and intrigue more interesting than the poor who still walk the streets or the dwindling conditions in the public schools or the raging inner-city crime. And yet most of the time, we feel secure; we’re America—we’re a free country.

Freedom has never been cheap; it comes at a tremendous price. And that price has been paid, not by us, but by someone else who came before us. We reap the benefits, but they paid the price—and for some it was a horrible price. In fact, that they paid with their lives meant they could never again enjoy that very thing they fought and died for.

Have we forgotten that sacrifice?

If we remember the price, if we remember the sacrifice, we realize that freedom, in addition to all the wonderful things it brings us, ultimately becomes something much more: responsibility. Responsibility to ourselves and to those who follow after us, to not only preserve what we have, at any cost, but to make it better, to constantly polish and perfect, as a sculptor creating a masterpiece.

So many lives have been lost or marred to provide us with the precious gifts we have as Americans. It is our responsibility to remember, to imagine, to appreciate, to strive to understand—and most importantly, to act in the best interests of our nation, our state, our communities, and in the sacred names of those who died for the liberty that is, whether we realize it or not, such a big part of each one of us.

To all those who have lost or sacrificed to protect our liberty, we salute you on this Independence Day. Every minute of our celebration, every shell fired, and every song, is a tribute to you!