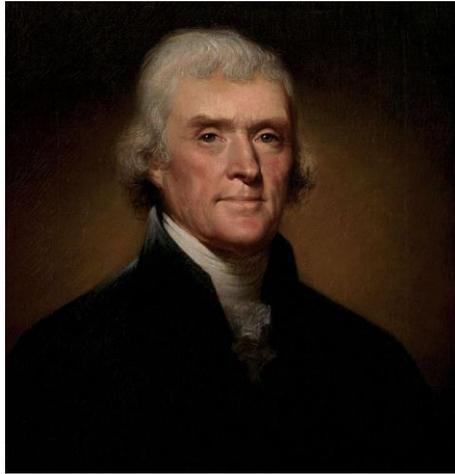


JEFFERSON LIVES

by Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.
for the Sunday Gazette



"The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival...It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever more."

-John Adams, letter to Abigail, July 3, 1776.

That "second" in the opening quote is not a typo; there are at least three dates that might have been chosen as Independence Day: the motion to declare independence was voted on July 2; Jefferson's exact words were adopted on July 4; and the Declaration was not signed until August 2. But no other date would resonate as euphoniously as "The Fourth of July."

On his death bed on Independence Day, 1826 John Adams uttered his last words: "Jefferson lives." But Jefferson had died a few hours earlier, the same day as Adams, and on the 50th Anniversary of the day we celebrate the Declaration of Independence. And five years to the day later—on July 4, 1831—our fifth President, James Monroe, died. At the other end of the scale of life, our 30th President, Calvin Coolidge, was born on July 4 (1872). So was Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804), and so was that other great Yankee patriot, George Steinbrenner (1930).

In the lyrics of his Yankee Doodle Dandy, George M. Cohan claimed that he was "born on the 4th of July," but his birth certificate says July 3, 1868, the 15th anniversary of the last day of the battle of Gettysburg.

In my very first essay for these pages—five years to the day, also a July 6—I wrote:

"July 4 is my favorite secular holiday. All my life, I have been a ceremonial conservative. I love '76 Trombones,' fireworks, parades that feature Sousa marches and Old Glory, and the patriotic songs of George M. Cohan and Irving Berlin. Like John F. Kennedy, my favorite song is 'Hail to the Chief,' but I liked it better when it was played for him."

The column in which I wrote this was about flag burning, a practice which is both the approved way of disposing of an old flag and, under other circumstances, an act considered so despicable in some quarters as to warrant a constitutional amendment against doing so, first amendment notwithstanding. But though I do not want to spend all of my 800 or so words on flags, there are two things about them, or images of them, which I do wish to comment on. (OK, so I ended with a preposition, which some consider heresy. I like what Winston Churchill said about that alleged rule: "That's the kind of nonsense up with which I will not put.")

In the rush to display fervent patriotism, the drivers of many a vehicle with a visible spare tire on the back, cover it with an image of a U.S. flag with the slogan "There's Only One." Well, of course there is only one American flag, just as there is, to my knowledge, only one Brazilian flag, one French flag, one Danish flag, etc. It is the illogic that bother me, not the desire to display Old Glory. Whatever happened to "Long May it Wave"?

The other silliness has to do with politicians who either wear flag pins in their lapel or are castigated for their absence. If wearing a flag pin makes one more patriotic, then why not wear one on both lapels and be twice as patriotic? How about on their pajamas?

I thoroughly enjoyed the Democratic primary season. I watched every minute of Hardball every night, until, finally, Barack held on in the bottom of the ninth. That suited me fine; recall my favorable review of "The Audacity of Hope" in late 2006, 19 months ago. But now what?

Suddenly, at least in New York State, assumed deep blue by both major party candidates, there is no national campaign. Hardly a penny is being spent on relevant TV ads. One has to go to the Internet, or to the national newspaper columnists, to learn what is going on.

I, and many others, have pointed out the reason for this more than once before: the Electoral College. I don't think we are in any danger of having someone win the popular vote and lose in the College this year, as (supposedly) happened in 2000, but the continued use of a system that has far outlived its usefulness surely keeps the candidates out of all but a few "swing states." Yes, a few more are swinging this year, but without the College, the candidates would go to several cities in every state, all that have reasonable TV coverage. Large states, small states, red states, blue states, purple states. Or more fittingly, every state would be red, white, and blue.

"Oh beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain..." Happy Fourth of July weekend.

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