

# My Fourth of July: Hope for America

My Fourth of July began when I placed six small American flags at intervals along the sidewalk of the front porch of my daughter's house. As I pushed the flagpoles into the grass, I thought of my deceased wife, who had purchased these and other American flags, and who for years had decorated the lawn of our bed and breakfast with them. Kris loved America and the Fourth, and even dressed herself and our children in red, white, and blue to honor the day.

Later that morning I headed south to spend some time with my friend John. Driving down Route 522 toward Richmond, I passed through those Virginia towns bypassed by our expressways – Flint Hill, Culpeper, Mineral, and other communities so small you whip through them in the space of a couple breaths. Here were fields with their enormous bales of hay, old tumbledown barns, beautiful houses, more country churches than I could count, and woodlands whose trees dashed light and shadows across the window of my car.

John arrived at the gas station in Gum Tree before me and spent 15 minutes at a picnic table conversing with a Vietnam War veteran. The man had carried an M-60 machine gun in the war, seen plenty of combat, come home, worked for the postal service, and was now retired. Like John, he was both saddened and enraged by the disrespect of some Americans for their country and their flag.

On my arrival, we went into the convenience store, where John bought his favorite, a fried baloney sandwich, and I picked out a chicken sandwich. The young woman behind the counter generously told us to help ourselves to a cup of ice if we so wished.

We ate at the picnic table beneath an oak tree whose shade made the heat bearable and then, at John's suggestion, we drove back to Culpeper to explore that town. We took a different route than the one I had traveled earlier, passing through the towns of Louisa and Gordonsville, and traveling through a countryside that surely comes as close to paradise as anywhere on the face of the earth.

Downtown Culpeper was a star-spangled celebration of America: flags large and small everywhere, and red, white, and blue bunting in shop windows and on various porches. We strolled the central business district, the old part of town where nearly all the buildings appear to date back to the early part of the last century. Local Republicans were setting up tents and booths for a celebration of America and the Constitution in a large parking lot, and two breweries had attracted crowds of people with live music and outdoor seating beneath canopies.

John is a connoisseur of ribs, and when we came upon a hole-in-the-wall barbeque joint, we stopped to split a half rack of ribs, drinking iced tea and sitting on a porch beneath a ceiling fan that offered relief from the hot streets. In the parking lot beside the porch a smoker was working its magic on the pork, and magic it was, for according to John the ribs were some of the best he'd ever eaten.

Another stroll toward the other side of town brought us into a neighborhood of houses, again most likely constructed a century before. Most of these homes were built before air-conditioning, cooled by the shade of oaks and maples, and furnished with wide porches where families might sit in the cool of the evening and visit with one another and their neighbors.

Back on the street where we'd parked our cars, John and I said our goodbyes, wished each other a happy Independence Day, and departed for home, he back to Richmond, I to Front Royal,

where at twilight I carefully rolled up the six flags once treasured by my wife and stored them inside the house.

Because of the coronavirus, Front Royal offered no fireworks, but some of my neighbors more than made up for this deficiency. Some fired off guns, while others shot off fireworks that rocked the night with explosions and painted the sky with light and color. The bigger explosions brought cheers from the young people who live on the other side of the stand of pines across the road.

I ended my day by watching part of the speech President Trump had delivered the previous evening at Mount Rushmore. The president reminded Americans of their proud heritage and of some of the deeds done by the four presidents whose faces are carved into the rock of that mountain.

This was my Independence Day. And this is the America I cherish: its beauty, the goodness of so many of its people, its freedoms.

It was a good day. It was the way it's supposed to be.

God bless America.

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