

Taking Pride in the Nation

By Glen Gardner, VFW National Commander

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Patriotism is in the air especially this time of year, and we should embrace all it stands for. Those who guarantee our freedoms must not be forgotten.

June and July contain two very important holidays—Flag Day and Independence Day. Both symbolize what it means to be an American. As veterans, these special days may have added meaning. Actually fighting for the values the flag represents and the liberty we celebrate on July 4th has a way of leaving lifelong impressions.

While the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have largely receded from the collective public mind, military families and those of us concerned for their welfare still pay close attention. Proudly flying the flag, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, singing along with the national anthem and revering the Founding Fathers are traditions worth maintaining, particularly to this segment of the population.

Other than voting, a USA Today/Gallup Poll last year found that 87% of Americans see serving in the military as the most patriotic act. Obviously, to these Americans, patriotism is not an abstract virtue. It means demonstrating it in a tangible way. Patriotism without sacrifice is hollow, no matter how one defines it.

At the core of this creed is a cause greater than self-interest, something bigger than one's self. Today, only a tiny minority of Americans bear the burden of defending the frontlines against enemies who would destroy everything the nation represents. And GIs have paid a steep price in loss of life, physical and psychological wounds, disrupted family lives and postponement of personal aspirations.

As VFW members, we owe it to them to not allow their immense sacrifices to be forgotten in the rush of backyard barbecues and fireworks displays. Respecting the symbols of our country is essential. But remembering those who have preserved the values they represent is equally, if not more, important.

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Overall, Americans are the most patriotic people in the world, according to a University of Chicago National Opinion Research study in 2008. This sense of pride was based on answers to questions in 10 areas covering politics, history, culture, economics and the military. A Rasmussen Reports study backed up the university results, finding that 75% of Americans are proud of their past.

Americans are undergoing some trying economic times right now. Their faith in our fundamental institutions is being tested like seldom before. Yet the American spirit has prevailed through far worse crises. It is a testament to our national character that no matter how tough things get, we overcome. That, after all, is the essence of patriotism.

Taking pride in the nation is something that lasts all year round. Still, the national calendar does set aside two days in summer to place it on public display. Use these opportunities wisely. Subtly spread VFW's message of selfless devotion to country to friends, neighbors and colleagues. Teach children the real meaning of what it means to be an American.

And remind those around you that even though newspaper headlines rarely proclaim it, GIs continue to prove their pride by serving the nation in Afghanistan and Iraq.