



UP
front

We celebrate two distinct milestones in this issue of The Skinnie. America's 250th birthday and high school graduation for Skidaway Island students. I have thoughts about both.

First, America 250. Some people bristle when they infer political points of view from my writing. I've been given this compliment (?) several times over the years: I enjoy your essays, although I don't always agree with your politics. My essays are, by design, apolitical. They don't endorse specific candidates or parties. If you ask me which system or systems of societal organization is/are likely to produce the "best" results, I'd answer that competition optimizes human nature and liberty is righteous and just. But I recognize that my definition of "best" doesn't necessarily match yours. And I don't think any American political party or politician steadfastly or effectively mirrors or champions my ideals.

I've seen recent reports that many Americans are opposed to celebrating the nation's semiquincentennial. This is – actually – insane. Your brother can be a jerk, but you still send him a card. Your kid acted up; she gets cake and ice cream, nonetheless. As for the United States, we're talking about our homeland – either the life into which we were born or the one we chose as immigrants. Which-ever the origin story, the great good fortune we enjoy is real, unless we make a conspicuous commitment to deny, reject, and denigrate it. Our standard of living is high. We enjoy abundance, mobility, innovation, and shared achievement. We are heirs to hard-won limitless prospects. We can and should be both humble and proud.

The U.S. population is roughly 349 million; there are about 8.3 billion people in the world. So, as a human on Earth, you have a 4.2 percent chance of being American. If you draw three cards from a well-shuffled deck of 52, you have a 4.2 percent chance of getting all hearts. If you're an average baseball team entering the bottom of the ninth inning trailing by one run, you have a 4.2 percent chance of rallying for a win. These things happen, but they are relatively rare. Being American is more like a lottery win than a mini-flush. What fault can you find with the intentions of a society founded on the principles of personal and collective freedoms (liberty) and satisfaction (the pursuit of happiness)? It is our responsibility to honor and perpetuate these founding motivations. If we do, we all win.

Incidentally, it's interesting that the Founding Fathers, through Thomas Jefferson's voice, chose the phrase "the pursuit of happiness." They didn't have the arrogance or naivete to codify "happiness," rather they defined a vir-

tuous nation as one that facilitates the opportunity for its citizens to work towards it. Happiness itself isn't an inherent, guaranteed right. It's the product of plentiful options, wise decisions, consistent effort, and a bit of luck. America provides such options and the spiritual and practical infrastructure to realize them to their fullest extents.

Graduation. It's a marker along an individual's pathway to fulfilment, a measure of success in the pursuit of happiness and a life well-lived. Both a terminus and a point of embarkation. A moment to reflect and celebrate, and a moment to imagine and begin new work.

I couldn't wait to head to college. To be (sort of) on my own. To shed the strictures associated with home life in favor of a self-governed dorm room. To learn things. To meet girls.

I don't remember a shred of sadness when high school ended for me. I was supercharged for what came next. Four years later, I was similarly excited about New York and a new job, though I can still summon the bittersweet emotions swirling through me as my fraternity emptied that final May, a few guys leaving each day, until only three of us were left sitting on our threadbare outdoor couch looking down the empty hill, draining one last pitcher of beer.

That was 40 years ago. Forty amazing years, none of which I would trade or redo. If only youth were permanent, and we could both insatiably experience things and never face the inevitable end.

When we celebrate milestones, we do so with optimism that we will reach more. Here's hoping America's quarter-millennia is the first of four in the first thousand years of an unending run. And each graduation is a special day in a long lifetime comprised of many more special days.

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