

...So bands will play and fireworks will light up the night sky

The grand and glorious Fourth of July commemorates our nation's independence from British rule. For over 200 years the United States of America has maintained its independence from any but its own democratic government. That remarkable fact is well-worth the recognition given it by fireworks displays, parades of marching bands, and patriotic speeches by politicians.

Democracies are not only admirable political systems but are also notoriously short-lived because extraordinary demands are made by democracies upon their peoples. To withstand the pressures that threaten our own democracy and to overcome weaknesses that are an intrinsic part of every democracy, Americans need to respond to any and all signs of imminent collapse. A democracy needs constant attention, alert recognition of commencing fatigue, and concerted action to counter erosion, wear, and decay. Democracy is the most idealistic form of government and that makes it particularly vulnerable.

Because democracy is idealistic, though, it holds strong appeal for those who are independent of spirit. The principles of self-rule, of self-government, of law as self-imposed, carry the implicit and corollary idea of self-discipline. No democracy can long endure unless its people participate in the process of majority rule and are willing to follow up their participation with acceptance of and obedience to the resulting regulations.

Within that description of how a democracy operates lie all the seeds for its failure to thrive, for most people are basically lazy. While they may willingly give their lives for a cause when a cherished belief is threatened, they prefer to do as little as possible to preserve that belief until the threat is too obvious to be ignored. Only then will they exert themselves; too often, action comes too late.

Democracy and independence are today in grave danger, danger that goes largely unrecognized because it wears the disguise of apathy. Apathy is a far more serious threat to democracy than attack from outside our nation's borders.

Consider: we elect men and women to represent us at every level of government without ever laying eyes on them, without ever hearing their opinions, without ever finding out anything about their past performance or future aspirations

We cast our votes because somebody else says this person or that one is deserving. Or we vote for whomever is running on the ticket we have traditionally supported. Or we go to the polls, read through a list of names we don't recognize, and make our marks based on how a name is spelled, its ethnic implications, or because it's near the top of the list.

We approve or disapprove a ballot question without knowing what is at stake, without bothering to find out ahead of time, without knowing what the end result will be if the measure fails or passes. Or, in some instances, we don't vote at all because we haven't bothered to inform ourselves. Almost three-quarters of this nation's population that is eligible to vote does not participate in the electoral process.

What we have, then, is no longer true democracy. What we have is not majority rule. What we have is government by the majority of the 25% to 30% of the population that votes. Or even that small number, however, many vote for or against a union, for or against a party, for or against one plank of a platform rather than arriving at a decision based on intelligent appraisal of the candidates and their principles.

As we celebrate Independence Day this year we enter a four-month period of political pitchmanship. Between now and Election Day we shall grow impervious to all the hype. We shall shrug off most of the promises because we know they are hollow. Most of what the candidates declare will be discounted as political rhetoric.

Some of us made up our minds who and what we will vote for months ago. Some of us won't make up our minds until we stand in the privacy of the voting booth and face the ballot. Some of us don't even think about it because we know we won't take time to go to the polls on Election Day.

Who among us has a right to celebrate Independence Day? And who among the celebrants watching the fireworks seeing the parades, and hearing the speeches will think that beneath the glare of bursting rockets lie responsibilities as behind the stirring music of the marching bands stand duties?

Only an aware and responsive citizenry can be assured that bands will play, that fireworks will light up the night sky and that the Stars and Stripes will still be snapping in the wind atop the flag pole on the village green, next year.