

Commentary: July 4th most American of holidays

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June 30, 2009 -- As an American, I am honored and proud to share with my country and the men and women in the nation's armed forces in annual celebration of our nation's birth. July Fourth, a celebration of the freedoms and independence we share and defend as Americans, must be the most American of our holidays.

As Americans celebrate our independence and freedom today, the reminders abound that freedom is far from free. The threat to liberty may be more distant today than it was to our revolutionary forebears fighting scant miles from their farms and villages, but it is just as real, and every bit as lethal, if not more so. Today, as they have throughout our nation's 233-year "experiment in Democracy" as it's been called, Americans in uniform stand at the front to maintain our independence as a nation and our liberty as free men and women.

Here at Carlisle Barracks, these men and women refine the skills they will need to continue protecting our country. Each year almost 700 student-leaders graduate from the Army War College and continue their journey as our strategic leaders in the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard and DoD and government agencies. Upon graduation these men and women are charged with leading our military. In these times I cannot think of a more important mission.

Behind them though, stand an "army" of civilian employees, retirees and family members who play just as an important a role. Whether it's teaching a new concept in a seminar, watching their children at the Child Development Center, making sure a laptop is ready to go before they head out on a TDY, catching a potentially life-threatening medical condition during their APFRI assessment or taking the kids to the movies so mom or dad can finish up their SRP before the deadline, each one of them play a vital, if not unseen role. Without the support of these men and women, our servicemembers could not

clearly focus on their goal, protecting the greatest country in the world. At this time of year we should thank them as well.

One aspect that makes America so special is the way that people from all walks of life can work together to support a common goal. There is no American "race." It is our American creed that binds a nation of rich multiplicity. Our creed is founded in the rights of man, expressed by representative government, justice and the rule of law. Personal responsibility and tolerance smooth the interactions of citizens who may share significantly differing backgrounds, ethnicities or beliefs.

This creed has woven and lifted the lives of America's millions over the generations, and is the essence of what we celebrate on the Fourth. In turn, those generations have so often unselfishly outstretched a hand to others abroad. We are doing so today. Today the Army has approximately 245,000 Soldiers deployed to 80 countries around the world. There are 447,000 Soldiers serving on active duty, with approximately 83,000 Army National Guard and Army Reserve Soldiers mobilized.

So on our nations birthday, let's celebrate each in our own way to mark the blessings of life and freedoms for which many others can only hope. As we give thanks for those blessings, let us also recall that freedom is not free. Let us give thanks for those who in each American generation have been willing to pay the price so that this annual celebration of liberty might continue.