

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Fourth of July

JOHN UPDIKE

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*In this selection, first published in New England Monthly in the late 1980s and reprinted in his book *Odd Jobs: Essays and Criticism* (1991), the prolific 20th-century novelist, poet, and literary critic John Updike (1932–2009) offers reflections on the place of the Fourth of July in the rhythm of our summer holidays and on the ways in which we celebrate it.¹ He comments on the following topics, among others, all of which merit conversation: the summer heat in Philadelphia, 1776; the clothing of summertime and freedom—the “freedom felt in the body itself”; the “sadness” of fireworks; the uniquely delayed climax of this holiday; bonfires, and their association with independence; the varying, yet simultaneous, ways of celebrating the Fourth across the country; the “long day’s dry American silence.”*

In his discussion of bonfires, what does Updike mean by suggesting that “conflagrations and constitutions keep close company,” or that “established statehood rests upon triumphant violence”? What, according to Updike, is the virtue of this holiday? What does he mean by calling it “the unmoving pivot” of the American year? Why does he say, “the Fourth of July makes us a little wary, a touch cranky”? Do you agree with his judgments and claims? Is there something missing in Updike’s account of how we celebrate the Fourth? If so, what should be added? How do you celebrate the Fourth? Can you do something to make it more meaningful?

It is a human providence that scatters the holidays around so conveniently on the calendar. The American summer has three days to mark its phases—Memorial Day to signal its beginning, the Fourth of July to mark the start of high summer, and Labor Day to bring it to a gentle close. Of these three, the first and third were invented and bestowed upon the year by government fiat, and even the Fourth is somewhat arbitrary. The Continental Congress actually declared that “these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be Free and Independent States” on July 2, 1776, and on the fourth merely voted to adopt the Declaration of Independence, which was publicly read in the yard of the Pennsylvania statehouse in Philadelphia on July 8. It was not copied onto parchment and

¹ Updike’s account may be usefully compared with Ronald Reagan’s reminiscences of the Fourth of July celebrations of his youth (see above).

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signed by the delegates in attendance until August 2, and the last of the fifty-six signatories, Thomas McKean of Delaware, did not affix his name before 1777.

Read the essay on page 79 at

http://books.google.com/books?id=ys51j6KtJBwC&printsec=frontcover&dq=editions:NmI2TZI-3FwC&hl=en&sa=X&ei=F67EUYKTAZTr0QGp_4CYAw&ved=0CDUQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false

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