

tions rather than as matters of debate. A conviction may be personal or religious, but it has to be defended rationally against people with different principles, or there is no point in discussing it at all.

The hollowing out of our civic culture has many causes that help explain the decline of political debate. A crucial one is the rise of the therapeutic ethic. Starting in the 1960s, the nation's sense of itself has been deeply influenced by the rapid spread of therapies, encounter groups, self-help, the languages of self-esteem and personal growth, and an array of New Age notions, some of them quasi religions based on the primacy of the self. This has created a vast Oprahized culture obsessed with feelings and subjective, private experiences. In some ways, this culture of therapy has positioned itself as the antidote for America's fragmentation and the decline of civic culture. But it pushes young people into monitoring their own psyches and away from environments where they might learn civic and political skills. And it tends to kill any chance for political debate by framing values as mere matters of personal taste: You like vanilla, I like butter pecan.

It is important to reverse this process. We need a lot more emphasis on public discourse and common problems, and a lot less mooning about our individual psyches.

A New Fourth: A National Unity Day?

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The way we celebrate our holidays tells volumes about the values to which we are committed. Over the last decades, in many suburbs, patriotic parades of bands playing Sousa marches, veterans carrying tattered flags, and fire departments proudly displaying the community's shiny new truck, have been replaced by barbecues in backyards and an additional day on the beach. We no longer measure the day by the number of flags raised from rooftops and verandas or the length of patriotic speeches, but by the pounds of hot dogs

consumed, beer lapped up, and above all, the record of people killed driving under the influence. Even if there is a concert in the commons, it is likely to be an imitation Beach Boys (“cruising with a girl...”), Van Halen, or maybe Brahms. Fireworks still abound, but their colors are not necessarily red, white, and blue. While glimpses of the traditional Fourth can still be found on Main Street in small-town America and in working class neighborhoods, in many upscale communities it is a day friends hang around with each other, at home or at a private picnic.

The fact that the glorious Fourth has been recast in many parts of the country should not particularly faze us; it has been in flux from its inception, as Diana Karter Appelbaum details in her study, *The Glorious Fourth*. The early celebrations of Independence Day were religious, frequently ending with a communal dinner in a church, following John Adams’s dictum of commemorating the day with “solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty.” In the generations that followed, the Fourth was gradually secularized; military parades grew in prominence, only to be overtaken by car races and golf tournaments. In the 19th century the holiday often served to highlight the growing role of the United States as a technological and economic power. In 1817, the Fourth marked the beginning of the construction of the Erie Canal; nine years later, the Pennsylvania Grand Canal; and nine more years later, the inauguration of the Boston and Worcester Railroad. But more recently, as patriotism declined in the 1960s, and as concern with safety in public spaces rose and suburbanization gained, the patriotic Fourth waned.

How can we rejuvenate the spirit of the Fourth? There is some yearning to recapture the holiday as an expression of our shared values, to prevent Independence Day from becoming merely another R-and-R day. Flags fly more often than during the alienated days of the war in Vietnam, and marching bands are again in vogue—although they hint that a different type of Fourth may be in our future, a day of unity for the diverse America that we have become. These days, bands that differ greatly in their racial and ethnic composition often march in the same step, playing a rather similar mix of tunes. Marchers carry flags that display their particular ethnic heritage—whether they are Italian, Israeli, or Puerto Rican—as well as Old Glory, as if saying you can be proud of your origins and be a loyal American. Recent Fourth

of July parades have been led by multicolor honor guards carrying the colors, followed by fife-and-drum corps all wearing traditional American uniforms, faces as varied as the rainbow.

Once we put our minds to it, we are sure to find other ways of stating that one can be both a loyal American and proud of one's particular heritage. Imagine a group of Americans standing on the steps of a town hall, reading the Declaration of Independence, in one accent after another. Orators may embrace the theme that while we came in many ships we now ride in the same boat. The Fourth may become the day new immigrants are sworn in as American citizens. To point to community service as the new shared American frontier, those who newly volunteered to serve in the AmeriCorps might take their oath on this day, and high school students who completed their community service might march down Main Street, surely to thunderous applause.

Other communities may seek to emulate Ontario, California, which sets a two-mile-long picnic table on their main street around which all members of the community can feast. Suburbanites and city dwellers may close their side street for the day, to allow unfettered block parties. In one way or another, people would be drawn from their private yards and apartments back into shared public spaces, to be united, at least for the day. Nations do not have one birthday; they need to be continuously reborn.