

# American Pie

In the first days after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, attacks that claimed more lives than were lost at Pearl Harbor, President George W. Bush told Americans that it was important for them—that it was, in fact, patriotic of them—to resume the rhythms of their daily lives. Once, Bush urged his fellow citizens to drive to Disney World.<sup>1</sup> On three occasions, the President encouraged Americans, specifically, to go see a baseball game.

This was very much in Bush's character. Baseball, not politics, was his first love; and managing a major league baseball franchise, not serving as governor of Texas, was his first significant foray into civic life. But the President's ministrations conformed to the kind of advice being offered by other public officials and national leaders. National Football League teams sat idle for one game, and then resumed their season with a patriotic fervor.<sup>2</sup> NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue called the White House to make sure he understood the administration's wishes. He did, indeed, and the commissioner then publicly invoked the name and the example of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had personally interceded to keep major league baseball operational during World War II. "At a certain point, playing our games will contribute to the healing process," Tagliabue said. "Our players recognize that."

So did the nation's tens of millions of sports fans, who set aside their safety concerns and packed college and professional football stadiums in the aftermath of the attacks. "You have to have a life," explained Atlanta Falcons' fan Ginny Wehunt, who had the Falcons' black team logo spray-painted on one side of her face with a red, white, and blue "USA" on the other. "You can't just stay home and live in fear." Surveying a jammed stadium at one game, longtime announcer and television

personality John Madden said, “I’ve never been more proud to be an American. I’ve never been more proud of our people.”

David Letterman returned to the air on September 17 after a six-night hiatus to assure his colleagues that it was all right for them to cry. (“You’re a professional, but Christ, you’re a human being too,” Letterman told CBS anchorman Dan Rather, who had fought back his own tears while saying, on-air, the day of the attacks that “our alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears.”) More importantly, Letterman was there to show that it was all right to laugh. He made a joke at the expense of guest Regis Philbin, but only a small one, as Regis’ son was in the Pentagon when it was attacked. Regis, in turn, proffered a gentle gag about the ability of his former partner, tough-cookie Kathie Lee Gifford, to straighten out Afghanistan all by herself. Letterman’s most memorable remarks came when he praised New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani for his courage.

Giuliani was generally considered the single most inspiring of the nation’s elected officials, and he was also the one who made the most direct connection between Americans’ continuing pursuit of happiness as a practical and effective way of asserting their freedom. Partly, this was because Giuliani was fighting for the very economic survival of his city. But the events surrounding September 11 also revealed that the famously belligerent mayor had a heroic streak as well as a keen appreciation for the many facets of patriotism. What history will record is that he found time in-between officiating at hundreds of funerals to repeatedly urge New Yorkers and non-New Yorkers alike to keep coming to still-smoldering Manhattan—and to go shopping or attend the theater.

“Go ahead and go about the everyday activities,” Giuliani said. “If you go to a park and play with your children, do that. If you like to go out and spend money, I would encourage that. It’s always a good thing.” The mayor also emceed a series of light-hearted television advertisements featuring cameos by famous New Yorkers such as Robert De Niro and Billy Crystal. In one sense, the nation’s top elected officials were responding on a pragmatic level. During World War II, Roosevelt had asked Americans to make material sacrifices—in everything from giving up silk stockings to rationing gasoline—for the war effort. At the same time FDR believed that an awakening U.S. economy, based at that time on agriculture and manufacturing, would support the two-front military campaign while simultaneously leading America out of the Great Depression.

By contrast, George W. Bush and Rudy Giuliani held office in a post-Information Age America, in which a service economy that was the pride of the world had been shown to have a vulnerable underbelly: It could be crippled by business executives too fearful to get on airplanes and too worried about the future to make capital investments; or by consumers in no mood to travel, go on vacation, or dine out. But if the ostensible purpose of the New York advertising campaign was to lure customers to the city and to other U.S. tourist destinations, those commercials also served a larger and more fundamental purpose. They were subtle, but powerful reminders of the uniquely American notion that anybody can pursue any dream and that this knowledge is not a luxury, but a necessity. The ads conveyed the unspoken message that this ethic is the very source of American strength. To their artistic credit, the ad copywriters and the stars who produced them used a light touch, but their meaning was unmistakable and it was profound. In one of the skits, Barbara Walters is depicted auditioning, none too expertly, for a part in a Broadway show. In another, former Yankee great Yogi Berra conducts the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. The most humorous of the ads showed a portly Henry Kissinger running the bases at Yankee Stadium—in a business suit—and then sliding head first into home plate, *ala* glamorous Yankee shortstop Derek Jeter.

Kissinger then arises, dusts himself off, and, German accent and all, and indulges in some good-natured woofing.

“Derek Who?” asks the former Secretary of State with a sly smile.

Certainly, the hate-filled extremists who declared war on the United States, could

hardly fathom such a response to the horror of September 11, 2001. In Manhattan—or in Las Vegas, for that matter—a call on the citizenry to go shopping or attend a musical strikes a free people as a logical, if vaguely unsatisfying, way of demonstrating resolve. To an embittered holy warrior in the caves of Afghanistan or in the shadows of fringe mosques in neighborhoods from Karachi to Hamburg, such a response is further evidence of the decadence and vulnerability of a people characterized by frivolousness, materialism, and a national absorption with having a good time. Sleiman Abou-Gheith, an Al Qaeda spokesman who appeared on Osama bin Laden’s infamous October 9, 2001 videotape, gave voice to this alternate point of view: “There are thousands of our young people,” he said simply, “who look forward to death like the Americans look forward to living.” In late September, as the World

Trade Center still smoldered, a 35-year-old Afghan holy warrior named Maulana Inyadullah expressed that same sentiment in an interview with British journalist David Blair. “The Americans love Pepsi-cola,” he said from his stronghold in Peshawar, Pakistan. “But we love death.”

Such statements, with their implication that blind zealotry gives Muslim terrorists a tactical advantage in their global war, were designed to be chilling. And they were. But America’s sworn enemies were misreading both Americans’ historical resolve and the true significance of American materialism. They weren’t the first to make this mistake. Famed World War II correspondent John Hersey, who covered the war in the Pacific for *Life* magazine, once asked a group of U.S. Marines during a lull in a battle for control of Guadalcanal what motivated them while they were fighting. After a long silence, one of the Marines muttered, “Jesus, what I’d give for a piece of blueberry pie.”

For a second, Hersey thought the Marine was changing the subject—or making fun of him. Until a second Marine, said quietly, “Personally I prefer mince.” A third whispered, “Make mine apple with a few raisins in it and lots of cinnamon: you know, Southern style.” In a book he wrote later, *Into the Valley: Marines at Guadalcanal*, Hersey filled in the scene:

Fighting for pie. Of course that is not exactly what they meant. Here, in a place where they had lived for several weeks mostly on captured Japanese rice, then finally had gone on to such delicacies as canned corned beef and Navy beans, where they were usually hungry and never given a treat—here pie was their symbol of home.

In other places there are other symbols. For some men, in places where there is plenty of good food but no liquor, it is a good bottle of scotch whiskey. In other places, where there’s drink but no dames, they say they’d give their left arm for a blonde. For certain men, books are the thing; for others, music; for others, movies. But for all of them, these things are just badges of home. When they say they are fighting for these things, they mean that they are fighting for home—“to get the goddam thing over and get home.”

Perhaps this sounds selfish. It certainly sounds less dynamic than the Axis slogans. But home seems to most Marines a pretty good thing to be fighting for. Home is where the good things are—the generosity, the good pay, the comforts, the democracy, the pie.

Examining the same sentiment almost six decades later, financial writer and political commentator Robert J. Samuelson noted that Hershey understood American pie “as a metaphor not only for home comforts, but also for the assumed opportunities of a free society.” Writing in the context of September 11, Samuelson added. “What Americans extol are not the abstractions of liberty and democracy but the personal blessings they bring.”

In other words, *the pursuit of happiness* is not a celebration of materialism. It is, instead, the best working definition of freedom that has ever been devised. First Lady Laura Bush, in a November 8, 2001 speech at the National Press Club, said as much in a pointed rebuttal to the terrorists and their 7th century worldview.

“That’s one of the major differences between our country and the people we fight,” Mrs. Bush said. “We believe every person matters; that every individual is valuable and has a right to life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

That this happiness depends on a willingness to wage war—and war is never a happy occurrence—is one of life’s paradoxes. But, for Americans in the aftermath of September 11, it also became a truism. At a September 23, 2001 vigil at Yankee Stadium U.S. Navy Admiral Robert Natter, commander of the Atlantic fleet, vowed: “To our enemies we say: You picked the wrong city, and you picked the wrong country.”

Yes, Admiral Natter is a warrior, but a 73-year-old African-American poet renowned for her gentle ways said much the same thing: “I can see in the acorn the oak tree,” proclaimed Maya Angelou, who had seen the smoke billowing out of the World Trade Center from her New York apartment. “I see the growth, the rebuilding, the restoring. I see that is the American psyche. There is so much we can draw understanding from. One of the lessons is the development of courage. Because without courage, you can’t practice any of the other virtues consistently.”

Thus did a diverse cross-section of Americans spanning several generations and the entire political spectrum give rebuttal to the terrorists’ assumptions about the United States. The sentiments of a vast majority of Americans connected directly to the Declaration of Independence that Thomas Jefferson drafted in late June and early July of 1776, and which was signed by 56 patriots, most of them a month later, on August 2.

“All Americans can draw a straight line from the free lives we lead today to that one moment, when the world changed forever,” President

Bush said in Ripley, West Virginia, on July 4, 2002—the first Independence Day after September 11. “From that day in 1776, freedom has had a home, and freedom has had a defender.”

In such moments, American political and cultural leaders were giving expression to an idea that most Americans understand instinctively: namely, that chasing dreams, pursuing happiness, and even achieving material success, are not embarrassing by-products of American freedom, they are the *essence* of American freedom. The fierce Afghan holy warrior who invoked Pepsi-cola so disdainfully also predicted—inaccurately—that the vast technology and firepower superiority of the coming American troops would prove no more decisive in his country than it had for the Russians who had marched to Afghanistan in 1979—and marched out, in defeat, 10 years later. The Russians had technology and planes and tanks, too, he said, and the Russians soldiers were tough and they were fearless. But in the end, it availed them nothing, because “they had no purpose in life.” Americans would be even easier to defeat than the Russians, he envisioned: “The Americans lead lavish lives.”

Lavish is a relative term, of course, and it would not normally be applied inside the United States to the predominately working-class young men and women who serve in combat positions in the all-voluntary U.S. military. But the more salient point is that the desire to share in the rich material gifts of American society is not the same thing as lacking a purpose. Nor has the desire for a materially successful life ever been an argument in American history for succumbing to tyranny; rather, it has been an argument for resisting it. In a series of letters written in the 1760s and 1770s, George Washington, railed against the oppressive effects of the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts and other measures imposed on the colonists by the British crown. His objections, originally, were that they constituted financial hardship on the New World planters. But grievances about economic freedom gave way, seamlessly, to arguments in favor of a more general freedom. On April 5, 1769, Washington wrote to fellow Virginian George Mason:

“At a time when our lordly Masters in Great Britain will be satisfied with nothing less than the deprivation of American freedom, it seems highly necessary that something shou’d be done to avert the stroke and maintain the liberty which we have derived from our Ancestors; but the manner of doing it to answer the purpose effectually is the point in question.”<sup>3</sup>

George Washington, rarely, if ever, himself employed Jefferson’s

exact phrase *pursuit of happiness* in his writings, but by 1786, Washington was known to casually link American happiness to American prosperity. “I shall always be happy to give and receive communications on improvements in farming, and the various branches of agriculture,” Washington wrote. “This is in my opinion, an object of infinite importance to the country; I consider it to be the proper source of American wealth and happiness.”<sup>4</sup>

To this day, there are critics of American life who cannot reconcile Americans’ love of materialism with their love of freedom. One impulse seems to them to be base; the other noble. How can a moral person serve both masters? And isn’t the first of these concepts, the right to materialism, clearly subordinate in importance to freedom? These are not new questions. In 1774, Alexander Hamilton characterized the actual hardships of by the Townshend Act as trivial in comparison with the passions provoked by taxation without representation. Writing in *A Full Vindication of the Measures of the Congress*, Hamilton posited: “How ridiculous, then, is it to affirm that we are quarreling for the trifling sum of three pence a pound on tea, when it is evidently the principle against which we contend.”

But 170 years before the bombing of the World Trade Center, a Frenchman came to this country and concluded that American materialism and idealism are bolts of the same cloth. After observing the United States for nine months, less time than many of the September 11 suicide bombers from the deadly al-Qaeda cells spent here, Alexis de Tocqueville had the answer. When he left America, he not only understood the fundamental nature of what was then still thought of as the American “experiment,” but he believed he had also unraveled the great riddle inside Jefferson’s phrase. Ultimately, the French visitor reasoned, the high concepts of life and liberty are not actually at odds with the hedonistic-sounding “pursuit of happiness.” Instead, those concepts strengthen and compliment each other—Tocqueville actually suggests that one is hardly possible without the other. In a section in *Democracy in America* titled “How the Taste for Material Enjoyments Among Americans is United with Love of Freedom and Care for Public Affairs,” Tocqueville wrote:

An American occupies himself with his private interests as if he were alone in the world, and a moment later, he gives himself over to the public as if he had forgotten them. He sometimes appears animated by the most selfish cupidity and sometimes by the

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most lively patriotism. The human heart cannot be divided in this manner. The inhabitants of the United States alternately display so strong and so similar a passion for their own welfare and for their freedom that it may be supposed that these passions are united and mingled in some part of their character. And indeed, Americans believe their freedom to be the best instrument and surest safeguard of their welfare; they are attached to the one by the other.

This passage is found in Volume II, Part 2, Chapter 14 of Tocqueville's work. The first American writer to re-discover this passage in the wake of September 11 was Adam Gopnik. His piece appeared in the October 15, 2001 issue of *The New Yorker*. "In the end, Tocqueville had confidence in Americans' ability to defend their democracy, because he saw that they had something near at hand to love," Gopnik wrote. "He saw that the pursuit of happiness is still our most radical idea. The perpetual need to apologize for the 'material enjoyments' of the United States, or of the past decade, he would have recognized as a very American performance, but he would not have thought it much to the point. Instead of seeing America as a place that would be tempted by pleasure and need to be redeemed for it, he saw that the love of the good things of life was what gave Americans' love of liberty an object."

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the President of the United States, four of the living ex-presidents and almost all of the nation's political and cultural leaders—whether they were liberal movie actors or conservative Republican politicians—understood this truth intuitively. George W. Bush took his own advice about seeing a baseball game, making a celebrated appearance at Yankee Stadium during the 2001 World Series. Among other Americans who heeded the call to take in a major league game were former President Jimmy Carter (Atlanta Braves), former President George Bush (Houston Astros), and former President Bill Clinton (New York Yankees). These men had previously pulled together in the wake of the new war, assembling, along with their wives, for a service at National Cathedral on the Friday after the attacks. Sitting in the pews with their wives, the former presidents presented a united front to the nation and to the world, a simple gesture that somehow conveyed a sense not only of the America's unity at that moment, but of its power. Bush also invited Al Gore and his wife Tipper to attend, and they did so. The former presidents spoke to each other, quietly, before Bush's speech. When it was over, the former President Bush reached

forward and silently squeezed his son's hand. For his part, George W. Bush seemed to have his father—and his father's World War II generation—in mind during his address.

“In every generation, the world has produced enemies of human freedom,” Bush said. “They have attacked America because we are freedom's home and defender. And the commitment of our fathers is now the calling of our time.”

During the year that followed, Bush returned again and again to this theme. He had come to office with a reputation for mangling the English language, a domestic agenda largely limited to cutting taxes and improving education, and virtually no foreign policy agenda at all. Yet he found his voice as a wartime president, soaring to a 70 percent job approval rating, and staying there for a year—this is Eisenhower territory—even as his aides acknowledged publicly and privately that his popularity would inevitably decline. His approval rating did indeed decline prior to the war with Iraq, but the fall was not precipitous and did not occur until after the momentous 2002 congressional elections in which Bush led his party to unlikely midterm successes. But while certainly benefiting politically from the high poll numbers, Bush wasn't in much of a position to savor them. He knew his newfound stature came from the war against Islamic extremism. And he expressed concern that the attention of the media, the political community, and even everyday Americans' would move onto to other issues. But as commander-in-chief, Bush realized he did not have such a luxury—and he said as much. In an October 2001 interview with editors from Asian media outlets Bush said bluntly that although others would tire of the war on terrorism he would not. And Bush rarely made an appearance in public without discussing the war. On June 18, 2002, for example, Bush was scheduled by his White House handlers to speak at a boilerplate made-for-television event touting his commitment to increasing the percentage of homeowners in the United States. The concept of owning a home brought forth his inner Jefferson, however, and the president riffed easily from this subject to the war to the pursuit of happiness.

Let me first talk about how to make sure America is secure from a group of killers, people who hate—you know what they hate? They hate the idea that somebody can go buy a home. They hate freedom. That's what they hate. They hate the fact that we worship freely. They don't like the thought of Christian, Jew and Muslim living side by side in peace.

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They don't like that at all. And—and therefore, they—since they resent our freedoms, they feel like they should take out their resentment by destroying innocent lives in this country, we'll do everything we can possibly do to protect America . . . But the best way to secure the homeland is to hunt 'em down one by one—and I mean, hunt them down one by one and bring 'em to justice, which is precisely what America will do.

I want to thank the choir for coming, the youngsters for being here. I just want you to know that when we talk about war, we're really talking about peace . . . We're going to be steadfast toward a vision that rejects terror and killing and honors peace and hope. I also want the young to know that this country—we don't conquer people; we liberate people, because we hold true to our values of life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

This language foreshadowed war with Iraq—as well as Bush's rationale for it—but few people outside the White House seemed to notice at the time. The nation's attention, understandably, was still on 9/11, and on the resurgent patriotism engendered by the attacks. And invariably, that patriotism harked back to the Declaration.

On July 4, 2001 the Advertising Council of America produced a series of public service announcements reminding the citizenry just what that means. The Ad Council is a private, non-profit organization that, literally, pioneered the use of PSA during World War II. (It's first such add memorialized the phrase, "Loose Lips Sink Ships.") Sixty years later, the Ad Council had another important message to convey. It produced a host of full-page newspaper ads that featured an American flag above a headline "READ THIS AD." Then, below that, in smaller type, it added: "Or, don't. An exercise in freedom." The text of the ad then commemorated Independence Day by reminding Americans that the "smaller liberties" of everyday life are no less important or worthy of celebration than the big ones. In words Tocqueville would have understood—as would the pantheon of American presidents—the Ad Council pitch continued: "Your right to backyard barbeques, sleeping in on Sundays and listening to any darned music you please can be just as fulfilling as your right to vote for the president. Maybe even more so because you can enjoy these freedoms personally and often. So take a moment to celebrate all the little liberties you enjoy in America."

John Hersey's Marines fighting in the jungles of the South Pacific islands couldn't have said it any better. One wonders what the reaction

would have been from the holy warriors who were by then on the run from U.S. troops in the mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Or, better yet, what those who sneered dismissively at American prosperity in general and at Pepsi-Cola in particular, would have thought of Pepsi's recent ad campaign featuring the handsome countenance of a major league baseball player named Ichiro Suzuki. Six decades after the Japanese invaded Pearl Harbor, Ichiro—he's so good he only uses one name—constituted a peaceful, one-man invasion of what we now incongruously call the American Homelands. In 2001, Ichiro left his native Japan and his professional baseball team in Osaka to join the Seattle Mariners. He was the first Japanese position player—that is, a player who isn't a pitcher—to make this jump.<sup>5</sup> In an era of hype, Ichiro is a quiet man, who will only occasionally let loose with a Zen-inspired bromide. In an era of sluggers, he is a singles hitter with a throwback theory of batting ("Hit 'em where they ain't!"), and an aggressive, old-school approach to fielding that hasn't been seen regularly in the majors since the days of Roberto Clemente and Willie Mays. In his first year as a pilgrim to the promised land of U.S. baseball, Ichiro led the American League in hitting, winning the rookie-of-the-year and Most Valuable Player awards. In the process, he became the most popular baseball player on two continents—eclipsing even the great Derek Jeter (not to mention Henry Kissinger). More important, Ichiro became a symbol of freedom and of the unlimited possibilities that freedom implies.

The ad featuring his handsome face doesn't say, "Drink Pepsi." It says, "Change the World."

