

# An Alaska Native views the meaning of July 4th

by Pete Schaeffer  
for the Tundra Times

KOTZEBUE — The Fourth of July — an American celebration of independence!

Visions of replicas of militiamen, cannons and fireworks explode in an illuminating display of noise and color.

This is all for the remembrance of those who fought in times past for independence, and you'd better believe that this treasure will be fought for to the bitter end at any time freedom is threatened.

*Independence.* What a powerful word. Surely it must mean something if those who deem it precious enough are willing to die for it.

In Thorndike's definition, independence reads, "Freedom from the control, support or influence of others." A word well worth pondering by anyone, perhaps a Native American for a change?

*Independence.* What a powerful word! It brings remembrances of happy and carefree times, of a smiling grandmother and of past times of joy. It also brings to mind the fact that I found out much later these things were enjoyed in the midst of poverty.

I suppose that ignorance has its values. Surely the difference then was that it was ignorance by chance, not choice. Studying disciplines in the Western sense — in the most focused way — means all else is ignored.

After all, what you don't know cannot possibly hurt you. Unless something happens beyond your control.

I am a Native Inupiaq. But perhaps a more suitable description by State of Alaska circles would be "a rural resident." To the people here, lack of control has very serious implications in the context of independence.

If major transitions and transactions occur that affect Native people, such as territorial status, statehood, the Alaska Natives Claims Settlement Act, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act and offshoots and amendments of major legislation of this type, then it becomes a little bit clear as to what it is that I'm talking about.

Legislation may tackle major problems quickly, but attitudes are sometimes slow to change.

If Native people as subjects of proposed or mandated change resist, there are a lot of negative tags to stick on, including racism. Yet the very will to maintain one's culture and freedom is the definition of independence itself. You in the Western world do yours, and we Native people should have equal opportunity to do ours.

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