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July 5, 2011: Happy Fourth of July

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Title: Happy Fourth of July

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7/5/2011—This entry appears one day late because the dog is afraid of fireworks—and thunder--of which we had a lot yesterday. In the movie 1776, Thomas Jefferson is portrayed as being asked where the rights of the colonists come from? If they come from the King and Parliament or even from the British Constitution, what is the justification for revolution even if they are taken away? Jefferson replies that rights come nature. We are born with them. That is why they are both self-evident from our natures and unalienable. And the denial of these rights renders King George a tyrant, objectively speaking. The final language of the Declaration of Independence used a different formulation: endowed by their Creator. Undoubtedly, this shift was meant to capture the imagination of the Christian mind with the claim that our rights come from God. On the other hand, the word Creator is ambiguous in the sense that we all come from nature. The universe is our Creator, after all. The source is not clarified so that it can mean different things to different people. The source of rights was not the point of the Declaration. The point was that rights are real so that there denial is wrong. It is not a matter of opinion. Because we have a greater sense of our capacity to fool ourselves and act in mere self-interest when we pretend to be acting nobly and because we have a greater sense of change in history and because we have a greater sense of cultural diversity than did our founders, we are nervous about claims to objectivity. But I believe this is temporary and that humanity will reclaim its balance. We often fool ourselves, but not always. History clarifies and certain values endure. Cultures contain more commonality than difference. And we can appreciate what is valuable in each culture. So, let's not be quick to downplay the Declaration of Independence. It is our founding document and a monument to both liberty and democracy. Human beings are not things but citizens of the universe. We have dignity and rights that must be respected—as well as responsibilities that we are neglecting. We vote on these things but we do not ultimately decide them. Our rights and our responsibilities are objective.