A Letter to America on Her 250th Birthday



A draft card. A slide rule. A smartphone.

In seventy-two years, I have watched America move from the Cold War to the Information Age, from rotary phones to artificial intelligence, from calculations performed by hand to a computer carried in my pocket.

Dear America,

Next year you will celebrate your 250th birthday.

That is a remarkable achievement for any nation, but especially for one founded on an idea rather than a common ancestry, religion, or ethnicity. For 250 years, generation after generation has carried the American experiment forward.

As one citizen who has spent 72 years living in this country, I find myself reflecting on the America I have known.

I remember receiving the polio vaccine as a child. At the time, it seemed routine. Looking back, it was part of a medical breakthrough that freed millions of families from a disease that had once terrified the nation.

I remember the Cuban Missile Crisis. I was still a boy, but I remember the tension and uncertainty. I remember my uncle having his military uniform cleaned and ready, just in case. For a few days, the possibility of war felt very real.

I remember watching news of President Kennedy's assassination. Like millions of Americans, I learned that history was not something confined to textbooks. It could interrupt an ordinary day and change a nation forever.

I watched the Beatles on Ed Sullivan on a black-and-white television when there were only three channels and no remote controls. We used rotary phones and some people still had party lines. We rode our bikes miles from home and stayed out playing until dark.. Few, if any, people locked their doors in the evening.

I remember the Civil Rights Movement. I remember seeing people lined up to attend a Ku Klux Klan rally. As a young person, it frightened me. Looking back, I realize I was witnessing a country struggling to live up to its founding promise that all people are created equal.

I rode the bus to school from first grade through twelfth grade along with all my friends. We loved the smell of freshly mimeographed worksheets. We weren't allowed to wear blue jeans, the girls wore dresses, and shorts were not permitted for anyone.

I had to obtain a draft card during the Vietnam era when I turned 18. My draft number was in the 200s, and very few boys my age were drafted. However, I knew boys who were and never returned from Vietnam. For my generation, world events were not distant abstractions. They could become deeply personal.

When I entered NC State University to study engineering, I used a slide rule. Later I learned to program using keypunch cards. Today I carry a smartphone with more computing power than existed in entire buildings when I was a student. I can even have conversations with artificial intelligence. The distance from a slide rule to AI is difficult to comprehend, yet it occurred within a single lifetime.

I watched Americans walk on the Moon.

I watched the Berlin Wall fall.

I watched the Internet connect the world.

I witnessed the shock and sorrow of September 11.

I lived through the COVID pandemic, standing in line for a vaccine more than sixty years after receiving one for polio.

Along the way, America gave me opportunities beyond anything my grandparents could have imagined.

It gave me an education.

It gave me a career that lasted thirty-four years.

It gave me the opportunity to marry, raise a family, travel the world, and enjoy a rewarding retirement.

It even gave me the chance, late in life, to become an author.

America has never been perfect. No nation is. During my lifetime I have seen division, unrest, mistakes, and uncertainty. I have also seen courage, innovation, generosity, and resilience.

Most of all, I have seen a nation capable of renewal.

As I write this, I think less about the America I inherited and more about the America my grandchildren will inherit. Their America will be different from mine, just as mine was different from my parents'. That is the nature of a living Republic.

My hope for America's 250th birthday is not that we agree on everything. We never have.

My hope is that we remember that we are all temporary caretakers of something larger than ourselves.

The United States of America has endured for 250 years because each generation, despite its disagreements and imperfections, passed the Republic to the next.

Now it is our turn.

Happy Birthday, America.

May your next chapter be as remarkable as your first.

— G. Robert Jones

Caption:

A draft card. A slide rule. A smartphone.

In seventy-two years, I have watched America move from the Cold War to the Information Age, from rotary phones to artificial intelligence, from calculations performed by hand to a computer carried in my pocket.