

In Southern Missouri, we have tremendous Fourth of July traditions. We barbecue, we have great parades, and our towns coordinate fireworks displays to draw patriotic people from miles around. I just love the celebration of our great nation which takes place every year on Independence Day.

If you were to spend the Fourth on a U.S. military installation, however, you would note a ceremony I think is a wonderful reflection of the patriotic spirit of service. At noon on the Fourth of July at every U.S. military installation where it is possible to do so, there is a 50-rifle-shot salute to the union.

It's important to remember, on the 235th birthday of our nation, that our country's armed services are even older. The U.S. Army, Navy and Marines were each founded in 1775, the year before the Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Second Continental Congress. The tradition of the salute to the union is a way for these branches of service to honor the nation they serve and protect. They were present at its very birth.

So, too, is the tradition of service in our nation's military intertwined with the history of our American independence. For generations, sons and daughters have volunteered to serve the nation in uniform. From the Revolutionary War to today's conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places around the world, Americans have risked their lives for liberty and for the national union of states.

Because of their role in preserving our nation, our military branches pause to honor our union on Independence Day. Each shot representing a state is fired crisply into the air, and each is accorded the same measure of silent respect. On a special day, our soldiers stop and silently consider that the shots are distinct – only together do they form a salute.

In much the same spirit, our Fourth of July celebrations have a somber element. Whether it is at a military baseball game or a fireworks display, there is always a chance to quietly consider the birth of our union. When you look at the flag, put your hand over your heart, and pledge your allegiance, you're renewing your promise to safeguard the freedoms we have all been entrusted with. When you join the tune of our national anthem with the words of "The Star-Spangled Banner," you are recounting the early days of our great nation and remembering the hardship of our soldiers as they withstood the British assault on Fort McHenry during the

War of 1812.

Our national legacy is much broader than simple military history; we also have a history founded on democracy, on innovation, on creativity and on freedom. The care and keeping of these great elements of American life have now been entrusted to us. Just as each bullet in the salute to the union sails into the sky, we are each unique and individual citizens. And, just as all the shots added together make up a salute, we citizens all together make up a great nation.

I want to wish you a very happy Fourth of July. I hope you enjoy all those fun traditions which make celebrating our national independence so special, and I also urge you to remember the parallel history of the men and women on guard around the world to make sure – on this day and every day – we remain free, safe and 'united, one nation, under God.