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National Parks anchor America's history
By Tommy R. Franks

Of course Americans love the Fourth of July. We celebrate the birthday of our nation with family outings, parades, picnics, thunderous fireworks and the enthusiasm of a nation that has enjoyed tremendous good fortune in its history. The holiday is about pride and about people from all walks of life joining together in celebration of freedom, democracy, opportunity, heroism and everything it means to be American.

Although I have seen people make magnificent sacrifices on behalf of our country, I still am moved by the power of this simple national celebration, and I sometimes wish it could continue all summer long.

In fact, it can, and it does. There is no richer or more eloquent expression of America than our national parks, which were established so that we forever would have direct access to our history in the places where it actually happened. In a world that more readily celebrates the fleeting and the famous, these great places speak with quiet authority of eternal truths, of the triumph of human will, of patriotism and self-sacrifice, our worst moments and our finest.

We are as connected to our parks as we are to the stars and stripes because they preserve the core of what it means to be American. Today -- with many of us so deeply wired to the present that we grow more disconnected from the past and from the natural world -- it is time to reawaken our commitment to embrace and support America's enduring great places.

For many of us, the term "national parks" evokes glorious visions of Yosemite, Denali, Grand Teton and Yellowstone. Wild and natural America, the backdrop of our sprawling saga, is the stuff of myth and legend. To stand in South Dakota's Badlands or to take in the volcanic mountains rising out of the vast expanse of Chihuahuan desert at Big Bend in Texas is to understand that the truth of these places is grander than myth and the places themselves greater than legend. You begin to imagine what Americans must have felt upon seeing these places for the first time: a sense of awe, of majesty and even a sense of responsibility to protect the land as pristine.

But the significance of our national parks goes beyond the vistas of the Grand Canyon. It includes the iconic statue in New York harbor that appeared as a beacon to countless new citizens, the rolling Virginia countryside where a nation nearly tore itself apart in its darkest hours, the soaring stainless steel Arch in St. Louis that marks the gateway to exploration in the American West and even Little Rock's Central High School, scene of a pivotal battle in the fight for equal rights and desegregation.

Our 390 national parks, monuments and historic sites are as rich and diverse as America itself. They embody what we celebrate today: of the people, by the people and for the people. It was ordinary Americans who urged Congress to declare Yellowstone a national park to be preserved for "the betterment and enjoyment of the people." It was landowners in Maine who donated Acadia's rugged and striking wilderness -- over 80 percent of today's park -- with the intent that it be protected. Earlier this year, when the replica of Fort Clatsop burned to the ground six weeks shy of the 200th anniversary of Lewis and Clark's arrival on the West Coast, local citizens were there with funding and willing hands to rebuild not merely a replacement, but a far more accurate replica based on the latest historical research.

In the great tradition of service to country, Americans have organized, mobilized and generously given their time and resources to expanding and improving the park system for more than a century. Our country has been given a tremendous gift and an irreplaceable inheritance to share with all future generations so that they may learn from the past and help shape the future.

To celebrate America's birthday and honor our tradition of building on the past, I encourage you to become involved in the preservation of the American story through our national parks. Experience them with your family. Contribute through volunteer programs. Support the charitable organizations that keep the parks vital. What is required of us pales in comparison to the priceless treasure we will ensure for our children.

Gen. Tommy R. Franks, U.S. Army (Ret.), is a member of the board of the National Park Foundation and a former commander in chief of U.S. Central Command.