

Poignancy and Patriotism: How 4th of July Speeches Inspire

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With the planet on the verge of extermination by alien invaders, U.S. President Thomas Whitmore summons all his rhetorical talent to rally Americans for an epic 4th of July battle, the “largest aerial battle in the history of Mankind.” The Earth faces annihilation, he warns a rag-tag assembly of patriots: “But we will not go quietly into the night. We will not vanish without a fight. We are going to live on. We are going to survive. Today we celebrate our Independence Day!”

The speech works, as anyone knows who has seen the blockbuster 1996 movie *Independence Day*. Whitmore’s words have the psychological effect the leader intended, inspiring the volunteers to triumph over a technologically superior enemy. But how did his rhetoric work really? One idea is that it worked because of “what if” thinking. By speaking of annihilation and vanishing and survival, Whitmore’s rallying cry gets the beaten-down Americans wondering about a world in which they no longer exist. Imagining a future without humanity focuses the troops’ thinking on the precariousness of their existence—the planet’s existence—bolstering patriotism and inspiring heroism.

“What if” thinking is always a bit tricky. Too much focus on “what might have been” can mire us in regrets and feelings of powerlessness or keep us from savoring our good fortunes. But is it possible that a bit of such thinking might save us from complacency about our circumstances? Some scientists are beginning to think that imagining an alternative reality might have ironic and tonic effects, and indeed might be a practical tool for strengthening commitment to country, workplace and relationships.

Northwestern University psychological scientist Hal Ersner-Hershfield and his colleagues were interested in the “near loss” experience. When we feel we are losing something—that time is becoming scarce, for example—the bittersweet mix of happy and sad emotions can reinforce our appreciation of what we have. The scientists wondered if the same phenomenon might occur if we “imagine away” something we value. Here’s how they tested the idea in the lab.

The researchers had a group of American volunteers write “alternative universe” essays—stories about how the key events and players in early American history might have been completely different—no Paul Revere, no George Washington or Valley Forge, no signature by John Hancock. Others simply wrote down a brief history of the country’s origins—the version familiar to every American child. Then the scientists used a standard test to measure all the volunteers’ political attitudes, including patriotism.

Those who had reflected on an alternative history of the U.S. scored significantly higher on patriotism. That was clear, but the simple experiment raised a lot of questions. How did “what if” thinking bolster nationalism? What was the chain of cognitive events in between? They suspected that poignancy was the mediator, and ran another experiment to see. In this one, they had volunteers re-imagine not their homeland but their company—to think of all the possible reasons why the company might not be the company it is today. Others simply wrote about the company’s history. The scientists measured several traits of the volunteers: in addition to their commitment to the organization, they measured feelings of

poignancy on leaving the company, and also their vision of the company's future success.

Again, those who had imagined away their company were more committed to that company than those who merely recited history. As reported last year in the journal *Psychological Science*, these workers also had higher hopes for the company's continued success into the future. But most important, it appeared that it was indeed a strong sense of poignancy—that strange mix of happiness and sadness in the same moment—that linked “what if” thinking with loyalty. They also discovered—in a slightly different version of the study—that these “what if” thinkers felt their connection with the company was “meant to be”—inevitable, a matter of fate. Just as the heroic President Whitmore told us.