

# What it means to be an American



~ By Kenneth Quinn • Ambassador to Cambodia (ret.)

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As we observe the fourth of July and the very beginning of the revolutionary American experiment in democracy, the country seems perhaps more divided than almost anytime since the Civil War. With pundits describing our division into two political tribes, with the drums of war being beaten every evening on competing cable channels, and now the increasingly painful evidence of the bitter feelings of alienation and exclusion felt throughout the Black community, the American algorithm of *e pluribus unum* (one out of many) was never more challenged.

Are we in fact one people, linked together by some underlying fundamental bond that supersedes all of the differences that are now so exposed in such a raw fashion?

In my more than 50 years in foreign affairs, I have come to realize that some of most important insights about significant issues have come to me not here in our homeland, but when I am thousands of miles away in a remote place or a different country. And so, I am taken back, on this birthday of America, several decades to my service as the U.S. ambassador in Cambodia. There, more than 12,000 miles from home, I had an experience about the bond between our citizens and about what it means to be an American.

In 1997, Cambodia returned to violence and civil war. Fighting engulfed the capital city of Phnom Penh, forcing over a thousand American citizens to flee their homes. My ambassador's residence was struck by a rocket and surrounded by automatic weapons fire. My wife and I pulled our three children to the floor and covered them with our bodies.

With no Marine guards, our embassy was judged the most vulnerable in the world. With only a small staff of American Foreign Service officers available, to help protect our fellow citizens, we rented a hotel ballroom where all Americans could gather. From there, we would transport them to the airport to be evacuated. But not everyone could reach our safe location. At about 6 a.m., I received back-to-back phone calls. One was from Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, in the United States, alerting me to the plight of Mormon missionaries trapped in their house on the outskirts of the city. The next caller was a Cambodian-American named Lu Lay Sreng. He had returned to the country to become a minister in the newly formed democratic government, only now to be trapped in the middle of the fighting. Fearing his imminent death, he asked me to call his wife in the U.S. to say goodbye.



In this 2006 photo, Cambodian politician Lu Lay Sreng participates in a news conference in Phnom Penh, years after an encounter with U.S. Ambassador Kenneth Quinn.

*~ Heng Sinith/Associated Press File Photo ~*

With no armed force to send to rescue these fellow Americans, I did what that bond of citizenship compelled. Calling my Cambodian driver, I told him to unveil the American flag on my ambassadorial limo, a Chevrolet Impala, and we headed to the area where they all were located. When we reached the house with the Mormon missionaries, the leader came out to greet me. He said that “I have never been so glad to see the American flag.”

After taking steps to ensure their movement to our safe area, I got back in the car and began driving through the area in which active fighting was taking place. Amid the sound of gunfire and explosions, with the sight of tanks and ground troops moving ahead, I kept calling Lu Lay Sreng, imploring him to answer. I left messages for him urging him to come out from his hiding place and jump in my car. I would protect him, I emphasized. But he never answered or came out. I feared the worst.

Driving back to the center of the capital, I visited the hotel where American citizens were congregating. It was an amazing array of colors and ethnicities all bound together by their passports and citizenship. I felt so good that we had protected all of these people, but was despondent about the loss of Lu Lay Sreng. And then . . . as I walked down the main hallway, I looked up and there he was. Lu Lay Sreng. Incredulous, with my mouth open in disbelief, I blurted out: “You’re all right! I thought you were dead!”

Then I added, “I came looking for you and called you on the phone to come out.” He replied, “I know you did. I saw your car. I saw that you, the ambassador, had personally come to rescue me. But I did not dare come out because of the nearby hostile forces.”

People in Southeast Asian cultures are rarely given to any public expressions or personal interactions involving touching. So what happened next was as unexpected and startling as it is memorable. Without any warning,

Lu Lay Sreng stepped toward me, threw his arms around me and hugged me tightly, and he uttered the statement that is indelibly embedded in my memory: “**Now I know what it means to be an American.**”

The question we all should ask ourselves on this Fourth of July is whether you would drive down a dangerous road to rescue another American, no matter his or her race, religion or ethnicity, and even if you believed that person held political views diametrically opposed to your own. Only then will we know what in 2020 it means to be an American.

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Author **Kenneth Quinn** is former Ambassador to Cambodia, having spent more than 50 years in foreign service; and is also President Emeritus of the World Food Prize.

While with the State Department, Quinn served on a MACV Team in the Vietnam Delta, and for his combat participation, mostly on Hueys, he earned the U.S. Army Air Medal ~ and is still the only civilian ever to have earned this honor.

