

In the morning hours of the Fourth of July, the city held its breath. An oppressive swell of heat occupied the Capitol in those early days of July, taunting us.

As the sun scaled the East, my clothes gripped to my back with increasing integrity. A clammy film coated my hands, obstructed only occasionally by an irregular breeze or two. Complimenting the sun's expansion hung a heavy air, inducing undue depression on my lagging lungs. As the city held its breath, I struggled to catch mine.

And, my hands were sticky. I was shocked to find that living in Washington, D.C., all summer had done nothing to curtail my initial distrust of the region's natural humidity. After just two weeks, I had gotten the impression that the weather was something even lifelong residents of the Mid-Atlantic had not yet grown accustomed to. And maybe they never would.

As I passed by the National Mall, it seemed I had been correct in my earlier suspicions. Nothing about that city's climate felt natural, especially that day. A wired perimeter stretched from the Washington Monument to First Street, keeping presumptuous summer tourists and early-morning joggers like me from entering the public spaces prematurely. I would have liked to take my usual path around the Reflecting Pool, but the dozen or so police officers lining the fence deterred me. So, I picked up my feet and selected an alternate route.

In the morning hours of the Fourth of July, three national banners were draped against Union Station, looming over the entrance. Two summers ago, I may have felt inspired by such displays of patriotism. Now, the flags' distortions in the wind feel more like a warning.

The Administration's military parade, in a glaring demonstration of martial power, had marched through the streets just last month. For a 250th anniversary, for Flag Day, for a birthday party.

35 million dollars,

49 aircraft,

128 army tanks,

7,000 soldiers,

And 2,000 cities across the country saying "No Kings."

"The hottest country in the world right now," the President says.

Not that I witnessed the address, or much in general that day. I stayed in my apartment, turned off the news, and ordered in that weekend.

As I ate my pizza from Alfredo's, I filtered through my mind's natural wanderings, firmly suppressing its nagging tendency to dissect anything and everything. I consciously gutted thoughts at their conception to prevent them from fully forming into anything too substantial. If I had let them, I might have spent the whole evening in feverish contemplation of how this military stunt, along with countless other superfluous antics of late, has invariably disfigured traditional American principles, reforging liberty as privileged immunity and justice as Draconian regulation over a complacency-fueled furnace. Further marring our American Dream, overpromised and underdelivered once again.

Unwilling to grapple with the weight of the political climate, I focused on my pizza.

But this weekend, on the morning of the Fourth of July, I went for a run. Perhaps to outpace the ongoing track in my head that usually veers toward the distasteful subject of national politics. Perhaps to clear my muddled mind before I subject myself to a day of crowds and blistering, muggy weather.

As I crossed Massachusetts Avenue, passing familiar Beaux-Arts arches and weaving through the city's staple Greco-Roman columns, the sun steadily escalated. Pausing to catch my breath at Columbus Circle, I took a seat on the steps of the historic fountain, relaxing my back against the cool stone. Exhausted, panting, and wondering how much longer I had before the ardor of an unrelenting East Coast summer day took full effect, I reoriented my gaze from the sky and looked straight ahead. . .

As the sun rose on the Fourth of July, a homeless man slept under an American Flag. I focused on the picture before me, disbelieving of its irony: our country's classic emblem of hope and progress assumed a mocking presence, waving boldly above a figure who was evidently denied these guarantees.

With impossible costs of living 40% higher than the national average and skyrocketing housing prices more than double the national average, homelessness has been a problem in Washington, D.C., for decades. An issue continuously motivated by gentrification, low-income residents are relentlessly pushed out by new housing projects that only the wealthiest Americans can afford. Strange that the Capitol, a concentration point of such wealth and power, has allowed for such a crisis. Or maybe that's not strange at all. Countless lawmakers, lobbyists, and leaders walk through this city every day, ignoring the very issues they're tasked with

resolving and the people they're supposed to serve. To them, high crime rates are the result of "violent gangs, bloodthirsty criminals, roving mobs of wild youth, drugged out maniacs, and homeless people," not ineffective policy. Even so, the Administration will later use this rhetoric to rationalize the subversion of Washington, D.C., under federal control.

The Monday after I flew out of Reagan National Airport, I heard the news. Despite crime rates and homelessness resting at a relative low compared to recent years, the National Guard was deployed on August 11th in the place that I had grown to love all summer. The city made many impressions upon me, and I failed to recall the presence of "violent gangs, bloodthirsty criminals, roving mobs of wild youth, and drugged out maniacs" as one of them. In the name of establishing order and security, they came in droves to destroy homeless encampments, tossing people's personal belongings into garbage trucks. Cleaning up the city, they say. Restoring order, they say. Making America Great Again, they say.

. . . Are we great now?

After my morning run, I returned to my apartment to meet up with friends, one of whom had flown in from Utah for the weekend. I showed her my favorite spots, visiting the same sites and museums I had been so excited to see when I first arrived at the beginning of the summer. This time, my mind was somewhere else. The blazing heat of midday was insufferable, and so, of course, were my thoughts. As we entered the National Archives, I couldn't thwart the endless questions circulating in my mind, competing with my friends' conversation for my attention. Reality melted into cognition, indistinguishable. Peering through the crowd toward the panel

where the largely illegible original copy of the Declaration of Independence was held, I reflected on that first indelible sentence that most students learn in elementary school:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

On this Fourth of July, 249 years after the 13 colonies declared independence from intolerable acts of taxation and fruitless spending, the President, at around 5:00 pm E.T. on the lawn of the White House, signed a Big Beautiful birthday present for America’s wealthiest:

They received \$4.5 trillion in tax cuts.

The US military received \$150 billion, and

Immigration and Customs Enforcement received \$100 billion.

To enable this spending, the rest of America received cuts to food benefits, healthcare, and green energy tax credits. As Americans struggle to buy groceries, their taxes are apportioned to alleviate the financial burdens of the upper class, fuel senseless military operations abroad, and fund the salaries of unidentified enforcement agents who threaten the safety of our neighbors.

. . . Detaining firefighters as they work to contain the increasingly frequent wildfires spurred by a global climate catastrophe they didn’t cause. And so, our trees turn to ash, land is cleared to make room for those more welcome. As the earth erupts in flames, water is used to cool power plants, to water someone’s lawns. Forests are cut to make way for multinational technology companies, and the National Park Service is cut to make way for so-called

government efficiency. The same government efficiency that laid off hundreds of employees at the National Weather Service in the wake of growing threats of flash floods and rising temperatures.

We're supposed to be a melting pot, but they misunderstood. They melted the ice caps instead.

The hottest country in the world is getting hotter still. And as we burn, they tell us to fight over who started it. As we burn, we are asked to please burn quietly.

So, we avoided the White House that afternoon. After crossing several “must-see” attractions off our list, we took the Blue Line to the Wharf to watch the fireworks.

On the Fourth of July, the fireworks were red. A cacophony of vibrant explosions splattered across the sky, appearing in stark contrast to the night's deep blue backdrop. There were no blue fireworks.

On the Wharf in Washington, D.C., where I stood shoulder-to-shoulder with my friends and hundreds of other comers and goers, it was hot, despite the setting sun. I wondered how easy it would be to convince my friends that it was in our best interests to leave early to avoid the expected Independence Day stampede to the Metro just so I could get out of the heat.

I missed the desert. That beautiful wasteland two thousand miles away. There, my mind, too, was a desert. So clear, so expansive. Here, it's muggy and filled with far too many thoughts. I longed for that nothingness, that vast escape.

Then I remembered the recent headlines, warning of drought and arsenic. And more fires. The West was burning, too.

Another firework's red glare shattered against the sky. The smell of smoke, the hot wind, the loud *BOOM*, the cheers. A bomb bursting in air. Like the bombs that have preserved our democracy and independence, or the bombs that we send to the Middle East year after year.

I was overcome with it all. As everyone else drank, ate ice cream, and took photos, my psyche collapsed in on itself. I wanted to celebrate and enjoy the holiday, but once again, I was reading too much into anything and everything. And, still, it was so hot.

Another red firework flashed against the darkness, sizzling and melting in organized disarray. It was as if I could feel its red-hot, suffocating eminence. "*The hottest country in the world right now,*" *the President had said. And I agree. We are burning.*

Another *BOOM*.

Overwhelmed and disoriented, I stumbled through the throng of revellers to the end of the pier, finding refuge at a post near the edge. Looking out onto the Potomac, I caught my breath. Finally. My thoughts slipped into place, and I could think clearly again. As my attention relaxed on the calming blue of the River, I couldn't help but sense that the heat wouldn't have felt so vengeful, that the crowds wouldn't have felt so stifling, had the fireworks been blue, too. Like sprinklers, relieving the hottest country in the world, a city on fire.