A BETTER ANTHEM:

America should change its national anthem from the "Star Spangled Banner" to the equally familiar "America the Beautiful"; especially its first verse.

I realize that this will take some getting used to. But times have changed. The glorification of war -- of "rockets' red glare," and "bombs bursting in air" -- ensures that more American children will grow up to lose their lives prematurely.

I can think of only one good reason for keeping the old anthem. It's about homeland security, rather than the invasion of another country with "shock and awe."

What inspired Francis Scott Key to write our present national anthem was the sight of Old Glory flying proudly "at the dawn's early light" above Fort McHenry in Maryland, following a September night of cannon bombardment by British ships.

In addition to being a war song, the "Star Spangled Banner" is grammatically and musically complex.

Just look at the first sentence, which is really a question: "Oh, say can you see, by the dawn's early light, what so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?" The whole point of the song -- the stars and stripes as a symbol of resistance to tyranny -- comes late and indirectly. I suspect any recent immigrant citizen learning to speak English would have major trouble following its lyrics.

The Puerto Rican native Jose Feliciano apparently did not. Though criticized for his style, he sang my favorite rendition of all time.

Musically, it's hard to stand in an audience and listen to normal voices try to span the octaves without laughing. The next time you hear it sung before a baseball game, just listen carefully. For me, the applause I hear as the soloist completes the anthem isn't about the imminent first pitch: it's to congratulate the singer for holding the high note on the word "free" just before the final phrase "and the home of the brave." Being an umpire is easy by comparison.

"America the Beautiful" is a reverent, easy-to-sing hymn about the whole of America "from sea to shining sea." It celebrates the entire landscape on which our nation's story was written, not just one military fort in what is now an urbanized Eastern waterfront. I also like the fact that the hymn suggests a "brotherhood" consisting of everyone who lives in America, rather than an established majority. Finally, I like the idea of giving thanks for the natural elements of the American landscape, for example "purple mountain majesties."

I can't help thinking that if "America the Beautiful" were our national anthem, Congress would find it easier to authorize money for environmental protection and energy conservation than for wars being fought overseas.

If I haven't convinced you that a change in national anthem is appropriate, then I ask you to think for a moment about what we celebrate on the Fourth of July. The War of Independence was certainly a just war. And, indeed, forts were bombed, flags unfurled and lives lost in the pursuit of the freedom I now treasure.

But war is not what happened on July 4, 1776. This special date in American history celebrates a congressional vote to endorse the Declaration of Independence, a document declaring freedom from
a colonial power. The day was about democracy, good writing, human equality, religious freedom and individual rights. These are the things that make America beautiful, beyond its extraordinary landscape.

What if the British had read the declaration, assessed our resolve, measured the odds and made the wise choice to let us fend for ourselves? Would we still celebrate the Fourth of July? I think so. This means it's not about war.

I like the fireworks. But these are fake bombs bursting in air, not real ones blowing fellow humans to smithereens.