'Truths' not so self-evident to Brit

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People who grow up in America begin hearing about the Declaration of Independence soon after learning how to speak. By the time they are adults its phrases about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness have become so familiar that they seem unremarkable.

But if you grow up abroad and look at the Declaration for the first time as an adult, its language and its assertions both seem odd. As a visitor from England I read it for the first time at the age of 22 and found plenty to disagree with. Not regarding it as a sacred text, I didn’t feel inhibited in pointing out its eccentricities to my American friends.

Look again at its most famous sentence: “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.”

“Self-evident” implies that these are statements with which it is impossible to disagree. I would nod in agreement if someone said to me: “It is a self-evident truth that Equatorial Guinea is hotter than Greenland,” or “It is a self-evident truth that sufficient food for everyone is better than famine.”

Those really are self-evident truths.

Thomas Jefferson, deputed by the Continental Congress to draft the declaration, on the other hand, was making assertions with which it is easy to disagree.

Even if you do believe that God made all men, and that he made them all equal, and that he endowed them with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, you have to admit that these are claims reasonable people could challenge.

Perhaps that’s why the sentence begins with “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” Jefferson is saying, in effect, whether they are self-evident or not, we are going to regard them as self-evident for the sake of this declaration. I have always thought that “we hold” is really an admission of weakness.

That’s not just me as a Brit objecting, incidentally. Most distinguished people in American colonial history, men like John Smith, William Bradford, and Cotton Mather, would never have written that sentence, and would have denied that it embodied truths of any kind. Their God was the stern and vengeful deity of the Old Testament, who never mentions liberty and isn’t the least bit interested in activities like the pursuit of happiness. Neither did they believe in human equality.
There are other problems with the Declaration too. Jefferson admits, a few lines later, that you need a serious provocation before you can throw off one government and create another. Then he says that the Britain of George III has become a despotism that intends to establish an “absolute tyranny” over the new states. But in saying that he was wrong.

America’s best and most unswervingly patriotic historians for more than a century now, including Charles Beard, Edmund Morgan, Gordon Wood and Garry Wills, have all concluded that the American colonists lived a far easier life than most other colonial peoples in the 18th century.

What’s more, they were less heavily taxed and were left much more to their own devices than their cousins back in England, even after the confrontations of the 1760s and early 1770s.

It’s true that the Americans faced the prospect of taxation without representation, but so did most Britons, only a tiny minority of whom were able to vote. Nobody then believed that democracy was the default system of government.

It’s true that the tax burden was rising, but for the best of all possible reasons. After years of grinding anxiety for the colonists, Britain had finally defeated the French in Canada, bringing to an end decades of frontier fighting, French and Indian raids and fears of invasion.

No one benefited more from the French and Indian War than the Americans; the government simply wanted them to join in defraying the debt they had incurred in winning a great victory.

We cannot undo the past, and I’m certainly not pleading for the restoration of America to British Empire. I like it here. Every July 4, I enjoy the fireworks as much as anyone, but I still think the Declaration, symbolic centerpiece of America’s revolutionary tradition, is rickety as philosophy and downright wrong as history.

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