



Washington would've ordered vaccines

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Fathers defined a vision of American liberty for future generations when they officially adopted the Declaration of Independence 245 years ago on July 4. As we emerge from the worst pandemic in a century – a public health crisis during which the word "freedom" was weaponized for political gain – it is important to remember how our Founders viewed public health in the context of freedom.

While some anti-vaccination groups use the term "medical freedom" to reject preventive measures against COVID-19, our nation's first leaders were strongly committed to public health, including vaccinations. George Washington ordered mass inoculation of his troops against smallpox to secure a victory against the British in the Revolutionary War. James Madison did the same during the War of 1812 and went a step further, signing into law a statute to promote wider vaccination of the general public – one of the nation's first public health bills.

Or consider Benjamin Franklin, who made the case for establishing public hospitals in 1751, writing that "the Good particular Men may do separately, in relieving the Sick, is small, compared with what they may do collectively, or by a joint Endeavour and Interest."

Franklin, who wrote a guide to home remedies called "Every Man his own Doctor," advocated for quarantine measures during a particularly virulent

typhus epidemic. In doing so, Franklin was reflecting "his recognition that the state had an important role to play in fostering public health and protecting citizens from contagious epidemics," writes Jeanne E. Abrams in "Revolutionary Medicine: The Founding Fathers and Mothers in Sickness and in Health."

Many Americans don't realize that the United States was founded by statesmen who believed in science, vaccines and tough public health measures. Our Founders understood actions to protect the public's health – even when they involved sacrifice of individual liberty – were on the highest order of patriotism.

This history bears remembering as we enter what President Joe Biden has hopefully called a "summer of freedom." While the pandemic remains a serious threat for unvaccinated Americans, and for many nations beyond our borders, we are beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel. For those in the United States who are now fully vaccinated, life is returning to some semblance of normal, and we can all take pride in the scientific achievements and public health measures that have allowed us to gain an upper hand on the virus. At the same time, we need to reflect on the challenges our country still faces, including the divisive politics provoked by the pandemic. While most Americans have supported public health measures, others have refused – in the name of freedom – to wear masks, respect the rules of social distancing and receive vaccines. Some states are passing shortsighted laws that will make it harder to control the next pandemic, such as measures banning the future use of masks or quarantines.

Americans pride themselves on our country's strong commitment to civil liberties – freedom of speech, religion, press and due process. But what good are those if we lack the capacity to exercise them? As anyone who has experienced serious illness knows, health allows us to make the most of our freedoms. When we are sick, or when our friends and family members are sick, we become less free.

Washington, Madison, Franklin and many other patriotic Americans throughout history have understood that the health of any one person is bound to the health of everyone else. Ironically, it is in part because of the success of their public health actions that we forget that those measures are sometimes essential.

As the foundation of every other liberty, public health should be sacred to all Americans. We can celebrate the sacrifices we collectively have made in the

past 16 months to preserve our nation's health, and we should not forget that those sacrifices may be necessary again in the future.

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