

Ironically, those who most trumpet their allegiance to the Founders often have least in common with their values.

The Founding Fathers were men of the Enlightenment. They shared a belief that reason, free inquiry, and science would better the human condition. They looked to reason as a guide. They sought, in Jefferson's words, to expunge "every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

Medicine was one area where the Enlightenment saw the potential for reason and science to improve life. As early as 1742, Voltaire trumpeted the benefits of smallpox inoculation, a practice that preceded Edward Jenner's invention of modern vaccination. Inoculation used small doses of the smallpox virus itself to create future immunity. Voltaire [wrote](#):

"Out of a hundred people in the world at least sixty have smallpox, and of these sixty, twenty die of it in the flower of their youth and twenty keep the unpleasant marks for ever. . . . Of all those inoculated in Turkey or England not one dies unless he is infirm and predisposed to die anyway, nobody is disfigured, nobody has smallpox a second time, assuming that the inoculation was properly done."

George Washington put Voltaire's view into practice. In 1777, he ordered a doctor to inoculate all soldiers in the Continental Army who came through Philadelphia. "Necessity not only authorizes but seems to require the measure," he [wrote](#), "for should the disorder infect the Army . . . we should have more to dread from it, than from the Sword of the Enemy." The following month, he wrote to the Continental Congress about his plan:

"The small pox has made such Head in every Quarter that I find it impossible to keep it from spreading thro' the whole Army in the natural way. I have therefore determined, not only to innoculate all the Troops now here, that have not had it, but shall order Docr Shippen to innoculate the Recuits [sic] as fast as they come in to Philadelphia."

Today's generals are more timid than General Washington, afraid to mandate COVID vaccination for the military. The irony is that smallpox inoculation was far more dangerous than any of today's vaccines, including those against the COVID-19 virus.

Thomas Jefferson was an enthusiastic promoter of the vaccination method discovered by Jenner, which substituted the harmless cowpox virus for the much more dangerous smallpox virus inoculation.

In the 1760s, Thomas Jefferson took a case as a lawyer representing a doctor who had been

attacked by his neighbors for using small pox inoculation. Around the same time as Washington's order, Jefferson served on a Virginia legislative committee that wrote a law safeguarding the ability of doctors to engage in the practice. As president, Jefferson promoted the use of Jenner's vaccination method. He [wrote](#) Jenner with generous praise:

“You have erased from the calendar of human afflictions one of its greatest. Yours is the comfortable reflection that mankind can never forget that you have lived. Future nations will know by history only that the loathsome small-pox has existed and by you has been extirpated.”

While James Madison was president, Congress passed — and Madison signed — the 1813 “Act to Encourage Vaccination.” The [law](#) authorized the president to appoint an agent to furnish free vaccination material upon request, and it also provided free use of the mail for vaccination material and communications to and from the agent.

Ironically, many of those who are most vocal in their defense of the Founding Fathers are most hostile to the Enlightenment values of the Founders. Belief in science as a way of improving the human condition was central to the Founders. The vaccination issue shows how far distant the Founders were from their would-be worshippers. Those anti-Enlightenment — and therefore anti-Founder — attitudes are also key to the rejection of climate science from the same political quarter. Some today may favor rejection of inconvenient truths, but the Founding Fathers knew better.