The Declaration of Independence is a document deeply rooted in the Enlightenment. The Declaration begins with a note of cosmopolitanism, referring to "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind." There is then the famous passage declaring "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." This is followed by an expression of the social compact theory, that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." And to prove their right to revolt, the Declaration says, "Let Facts be submitted to a candid world." Facts, not Bible passages or the views of authority figures, were the coin of the realm.

An encyclopedia of philosophy points to four recurring themes in Enlightenment thought: modernization, skepticism, reason and liberty. Modernization means that beliefs and institutions based on absolute moral, religious and political authority (such as the divine right of kings and the Ancien Régime) will become increasingly eclipsed by those based on science, rationality and religious pluralism." Among the tenets of the Enlightenment was a belief in scientific progress (and in the possibility of progress more generally). Such early American figures as John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison were in different ways adherents to the Enlightenment.

The scientific enterprise is an attempt to put into practice Enlightenment values, seeking truth through observation and experiment, analysis, and open discussion. Skepticism about this enterprise certainly exists among some on the Left, but it is among conservatives that it is strongest. For instance, a 2021 Pew poll found that:

> "There has been a steady decline in confidence in medical scientists among Republicans and Republican leaners since April 2020. In the latest survey, just 15% have a great deal of confidence in medical scientists, down from 31% who said this in April 2020 and 26% who said this in November 2020. . . .
>
> Republicans' views of scientists have followed a similar trajectory. Just 13% have a great deal of confidence in scientists, down from a high of 27% in January 2019 and April 2020. The share with negative views has doubled over this time period; 36% say they have not too much or no confidence at all in scientists in the latest survey."

Similarly, Gallup found that confidence in science had collapsed among Republicans, from 72% in 1975 to 45% in 2021.

We see the same division about climate change. In 2021, for instance, only 29% of Republicans believed that the effects of global warming have already begun, as opposed to 46% in 1997. Yet the effects and the supporting evidence had grown much stronger over this time period. And the percentage of Republicans believing that global warming is caused by human carbon emissions fell from 65% to 32% from 2003 to 2021 – an example of massive willed ignorance. For too many, climate skepticism has become an article of faith and a badge of collective identity. Evidence and analysis don't enter into it. Faith in authority – in this case, Donald Trump and Fox News– has replaced believe in science.

Enlightenment thinkers believed that scientific understanding would allow progress in addressing human suffering. A rejection of their values now threatens our chances of escaping a grim future for the planet. Surely, two centuries after the deaths of Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, and Madison, Americans can find it in themselves to do better than that.

PS If you missed it last Friday, my short video on the big Supreme Court climate change decision is here.