

How Trump insults the Declaration

BE OUR GUEST

BY DAVID ARMITAGE

The European Union's decision earlier this week to exclude American travelers from entering the bloc is the most recent, but also the most humiliating, sign of how distant the United States has become from its former allies and partners. This Fourth of July, the U.S. is now more estranged and more internationally isolated than at any time since 1776.

The coronavirus did not cause this rupture. The Trump administration's response to the virus, its latest among many failures, did. Another president and his advisers might have closed the country's borders earlier for health reasons, then set up a world-class system for tracing, tracking and isolating victims of COVID-19, and collaborated with Europeans and others on mitigating and ultimately eradicating the disease. They could also have done so without using a public health crisis as the cover for expanding a cruelly nativist immigration regime.

This administration has not only forgotten whatever American history it might have known, it has learned nothing from the Declaration of Independence. When that foundational document is read out across the country today, many of us will notice how timely are some of the grievances the British colonists complained about in their indictment of King George III. But will the president see that?

"He has endeavoured to prevent the Population of these States; for that Purpose obstructing our Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their Migration hither," runs one grievance. Thomas Jefferson and the Continental Congress knew nothing of H1-B visas or the DACA program, but they did know that an expanding population and an ethnically diverse citizenry were vital to prosperity. They were also aware that commercial restrictions — tariff wars, if you will — destroyed national wealth. That was why another of their charges was that the King had assented to laws from the British Parliament "cutting off our Trade with all Parts of the World."

These "Injuries and Usurpations," as the Declaration called them, are maybe not the most memorable of the accusations flung at the King. But they

surely resonate now with a rising sense among Americans that the country is on the wrong track under incompetent and even malevolent leadership as tens of thousands of people die while other parts of the world recover and even flourish again despite the global pandemic.

Donald Trump is no George III. The British King was cultivated, curious and a skilled administrator; an enlightened monarch who dabbled in art and architecture, history and science, and who spent a fifth of his income on books by the latter part of his reign. He implacably opposed the American rebels largely because he wanted to keep his country — as he saw the British Empire — together, rather than watch it disintegrate.

Of course, the authors of the Declaration did not see George III as the king saw himself. To them, he was a "Prince, whose Character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant" who was "unfit to be the Ruler of a Free People." By July 1776, assaulted, rebuffed and reviled, his opponents in the colonies believed they had no choice but to throw off their allegiance to "the present King of Great-Britain" and create instead "FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES."

Yet what they declared was independence, not isolation. Independence made it possible for the new United States to "contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all the other Acts and Things which INDEPENDENT STATES may of right do": in effect, to rejoin the world. In due course, the United States soon entered into a Treaty of Amity and Commerce with France, which helped to ensure victory in the War of Independence and prosperity in its aftermath.

The Declaration of Independence was above all a declaration of *interdependence*, of the new states among themselves and between the United States and others. That is the message a document from the country's first great crisis communicates loud and clear amid our current catastrophe.

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