

## Not so self-evident Fourth of July

In preparation for the Fourth of July, I like to watch the superb miniseries "John Adams." My favorite episode narrates the debate leading up to the Declaration of Independence. John Adams, in one scene, is shown with his tiny silver spectacles, peering over a draft of the Declaration that was just handwritten by Thomas Jefferson — who is seated with him and the cantankerous Benjamin Franklin.

Franklin reads aloud the opening words of the second paragraph of Jefferson's first draft: "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable."



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He pauses, purses his lips. "Hm-mm," he utters. Then, "Let us say 'self-evident' instead" — and with that he strikes out the phrase "sacred and undeniable."

In essence, this really happened. You can see the evidence for yourself at the National Archives Building in Washington, DC. The original phrase, "sacred and undeniable," is struck out by three emphatic backslashes by the pen of Franklin himself.

Andrew Sullivan, in the January 2008 edition of *The Atlantic* wrote that with this substitution, "Franklin forever clarified the divide between received and rational truth, and placed our political system firmly on the foundation of our common rationality rather than on sectarian faith (and all faiths, even the most popular, are by definition sectarian)."

Well, there are so many things wrong with Sullivan's paragraph that I ought to thank him for organizing my thoughts against this term, "self-evident."

Simply put: there are no truths that are self-evident.

Moreover: there is no divide between "received" and "rational" truth.

And: there is no such thing as a political system that is placed on a foundation of "common rationality."

And last: the deism of Franklin (and most of the Founding Fathers) is just as sectarian as any religion.

Franklin and a favorite philosopher of his, David Hume (along with Jefferson's favorite philosopher John Locke, and Franklin's other hero, the scientific determinist Sir Isaac Newton) seem to fall nicely into the "deist" category, which, after a few centuries, has evolved into a more familiar "secular humanism."

Secular humanism is neither a religion nor a belief. It is a default opinion — or rather, a wish — that God shouldn't be present, or should be able to be stuffed into a closet, because God as Truth would get in the way of one's feelings and desires.

This is the majority opinion or "feeling" of the First World — America, Europe and the West. It is the majority and fastest-growing religious category that we like to call the "Nones" (as in "no religious affiliation"). Do not try to get your "None" neighbor or associate, or the person sitting across from you at Starbucks, to define their "None" beliefs. There is no consistent set of beliefs to define or to argue from. You cannot debate a vacuum. You will get hit with feelings and opinions, some of which can be very strong.

But going after a modern-day "secularist" sectarian who sets his heart on the "self-evidence" of Ben Franklin is like going after a greased pig: squeeze him and he shoots out of your arms. It is like trying to divide any number by zero (you can't, by the way, and the answer is not "infinity").

No truth is self-evident. The truth that "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" is certainly a truth. But it is not an idea that humans, unaided, can come up with on their own.

God is the Truth. Truth didn't happen all by itself. All things were made in God and for Him and are sustained by Him. All truth, then, and every real thought happens only in His active providence, in the here and now.

You cannot put two and two to make four by yourself. It is only because of the present agency of divinity that you can draw the "equals" sign.

You cannot discover that every human has the right to life and liberty — even the marginalized and oppressed, even the poor and inconvenient, even the wrongheaded — without the the wisdom and presence of God and His love.

Modern deism, or secular humanism, is something that poor Franklin would have winced at, especially if he figured out he was partly responsible for it. It defines freedom as an unlimited array of possible desires, even if those desires transgress traditional beliefs and morals. It — and right here our raccoon-haberdashed friend would have gotten nauseous — doesn't care that these rights have any philosophical or metaphysical support.

Franklin and his deistic friends, and all the Founding Fathers, may have believed in the "self-evidence" of truth. But "self-evidence" for them was a lot more disciplined and philosophical than the "self-evident" opinions of the deists of today. In the past, "self-evidence" meant, according to David Hume, the work of analysis and deductive reasoning.

Nowadays, "self-evidence" is usually prefaced by the nonsensical phrase, "I feel that ..." Or, "it's obvious that ..." Knowledge, nowadays, is thought to be easy and as frothy as mood and emotion. Numbers and scientific fact are useful because money can be made, but what good is the discipline of logic? More to the point, the culture of "self-evidence" has finally gotten around to saying, "What good is the invisible? What good is the not-so-obvious?"

"If it isn't important to me right now, then what good is it to me ever?"

But what we should really do, for America's sake, is to re-edit the Declaration of Independence, if only in our own minds. We can go back to Jefferson's original phrase: "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable, that God created all men equal."

We can help America remember that she exists not because of self-invention or self-evidence, but because of Providence. Our nation, our beautiful land, is a Gift ... or it is meaningless.

We are not independent, or self-sufficient.

We are very, very dependent. Upon God Who is Truth, and Giver of all things.

And that is the only reason why we are free.

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## Freedom's song heard at benefit

Who leaves an air-conditioned home at 4 p.m. on a warm June Sunday? Edentonians do!

"Sweet Freedom's Song" resonated with scores of locals gathered June 30 to fund the children's summer supplemental nutrition program.

Amanda Howell, Edenton-Chowan Food Pantry volunteer coordinator, thanked musicians, supportive spouses and miscellaneous neighbors for a good turnout. The pantry's address is P.O. Box 643, Edenton, NC 27932.

A lively auction of two gift baskets plus a boat-ride for six on the Liber-Tea boat followed. You have to bring your own Dramamine and bug spray for wavy waters of Edenton Bay!

Bids mounted until at least \$450 in greenbacks were pledged.

This is in addition to the generous "tip jar" from Edenton Bay Trading Company collected Saturday night of more than \$200.

Albemarle Sounds — 16 strong — saluted our Coast Guard, Marines, Navy, Army and Air Force with music prior to the July 4th holiday. Commencing with a well-sung national anthem, these gentlemen reminded us to "Follow the Flag," a tune which should be better known than it is.

Next, a vigorous version of GBA, better known as "God Bless America," sounded across the room. A melodious summation of our history it is.

"From the mountains ... to the prairies ... to the ocean ... white with foam... God Bless America..." evoked vivid memories.

Recollections include Jamestown in 1619, Daniel Boone (1734-1820) of NC crossing the Appalachians to

lands beyond the Smokies, the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the increase of slavery and the bitter strife of Civil War (1861-1865) decimating the country and affecting migration west beyond the Mississippi. Soon Conestoga wagons on the Oregon trail, the advance of the railroads from the east and the rumors of gold "in them thar hills" of California stimulated thousands to trudge west though native Americans vehemently resisted "the pale faces."

The Mighty Termitees — three ladies and three gentlemen — paid musical tribute to John White, a London boy who sailed the Atlantic and attempted to start a colony on Roanoke Island (1585-1587). He was unsuccessful thanks to the Spanish Armada pressuring Queen Elizabeth of England.

Another musical selection saluted the Edenton Tea Party gathering of 1774. "Edenton women are very strong, their men very weak" per some commentators of that day. Others advised Penelope and the girls "to stop this madness, pay your taxes" on English tea. They rejected such advice. They persisted in resisting King George of England.

This six-person chorale also saluted James Iredell. He relocated to Edenton at age 17. Hannah Johnston, Samuel's daughter, found favor in Iredell's eyes. So did the cause of "the rights of man" which helped his rise to the nation's first Supreme Court.

Let us not forget Hugh Williamson a perceptive physician who healed friend and foe on the bat-

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JOHN  
MITCHENER

tlefield en route to representing North Carolina at the Constitutional Convention of 1787. His mercantile business in the Caribbean was headquartered in Edenton for 10 years.

In a final musical selection the Mighty Termitees saluted the Cupola House and Gardens plus Frances Inglis. "Come on through the garden gates" was the musical refrain of tribute.

The Albemarle Chorale, of 17 vigorous musicians

plus an excellent pianist, shared four selections. "Moon River" (1961) was a crowd-pleaser as was Gershwin's jazz number "I Got Rhythm" (1930). Catchy words such as "I got, I got my man who could ask for anything more" echo in our minds.

Changing moods, the Chorale sounded off with "Somewhere over the Rainbow" (1930).

"I wish upon a star" soon leads to "blue birds fly ... why oh why can't I?"

The 1945 play "Carrousel" by Rodgers and Hammerstein had us humming. Words such as "When you walk through a storm ... hold your head up high ..." come to mind. Moments later we walk with "hope in our eyes ..." concluding finally that "... You never walk alone."

Applause follows ... again and again.

People break up to sip lemonade and greet a new friend as all exit.

On Thursday, the Fourth of July, may we embrace "Sweet Freedom's Song" again.

John Mitchener is a native of Chowan County and former business leader. He also served as a county commissioner and school board member.

## Looking at 'pursuit of happiness'

Happy July 4th! I would like to share some interesting facts about July 4, some of which are not that widely known, along with some historical happenings related to it.

Many in this area and beyond are in a celebratory spirit, with cook-outs, fireworks, patriotic gatherings, etc., and it is fitting that we enthusiastically celebrate this occasion. Here are some facts about this momentous day:

(1) Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence on a writing desk. He changed the wording of the Declaration from "The pursuit of property" to the "pursuit of happiness."

(2) Congress declared July 4th as an official holiday in 1870 as part of a bill to officially recognize other holidays, Christmas being one of them;

(3) The Declaration was a justification for a revolt against the British;

(4) Several countries, among them France, Greece, and Poland, have used the Declaration of Independence as a beacon of their own struggles for freedom;

(5) "Yankee Doodle," a popular American patriotic song, was originally sung by British military officers in mockery of what they considered the unorganized and buckskin-wearing "Yankees;"

(6) The "Star Spangled Banner" was written by Francis Scott Key and was originally a poem stemming from his observation in 1814 concerning the British attack on Baltimore's Fort McHenry during

the War of 1812. It was later put to music and was decreed the official National Anthem in 1932;

(7) Three U.S. presidents have died on July 4 — Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and James Monroe — and America's 30th president, Calvin Coolidge, was born on July 4, 1872;

(8) The average age of those who signed the Declaration of Independence was 45. The youngest, Thomas Lynch, Jr., of South Carolina, was 27, and the oldest was Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, age 70;

(9) In 1954 the words "Under God" were added to the Pledge of Allegiance;

(10) The oldest continuous Independence Day celebration in the United States is the 4th of July parade in Bristol, Rhode Island. It began in 1785.

These are just a few of the historical "happenings" that have occurred in The United States, starting in 1776 and continuing to this day. I think the message here for all of us is that the freedom we enjoy in this country was brought about by great service and sacrifice on the part of many, and that it is essential that all of us be vigilant in its protection.

Motivation obviously played a large part in the hearts and minds of those heroes of the past who were determined, often against fierce odds, to obtain and retain a government which is "of, for, and by THE

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PEOPLE."

I will now close with a little humorous example of the power of motivation: A man was walking home late one night and decided to take a shortcut across a grave yard. He had no idea that a grave had been dug that afternoon in preparation for a funeral the following morning, and he fell into the grave.

Immediately he began tugging at the sides of the grave, which didn't help, and then he began screaming, "Get me out of here! Please get me out of here!" Finally he resigned himself to the fact that no one was likely to hear him, and that he would just have to wait until morning to get relief, so he just sat down in a corner of the grave.

Shortly thereafter a young man was coming home from a date and he decided to take a shortcut across the grave yard. He too fell into the grave, and immediately started shouting for someone to help him. Now he had no idea that the man was seated in the corner of the grave.

As he paused from shouting, the man in the corner said, rather eerily, "You can't get out." But he did! He did! Because he was motivated!

Reece Gardner is the host of *The Reece Gardner Hour* television show which airs on Mondays, 5 p.m.; Tuesdays, 8 p.m.; Thursdays, 6 p.m.; and Sundays, 7 p.m., on Suddenlink Channels 17 and 117, and simultaneously on various other TruTV Media Group channels throughout Eastern NC. Reece can be reached at rbge@aol.com