

## Remembering The Constitution

Most Americans may not recall September 17, 1787, as the date the US Constitution was adopted in Philadelphia. It is a day that deserves commemoration and thanksgiving.

When the Constitutional Convention opened in 1787, the United States had won the Revolutionary War four years before, and was operating under Articles of Confederation which gave states significant authority over the new nation's affairs. Fearful of a return to a strong central government like England's -- from which they had declared independence -- the Founders took great care to craft a new governing document to provide cohesion and unity among the 13 original states, yet allow for maximum state and individual freedom. Suffering through a humid summer in Philadelphia, the state delegates (and some of our country's most prominent leaders in history, such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton) labored to craft a compromise document that could satisfy regional differences and centralized government fears.

The result: the US Constitution, consisting of 4543 words, seven Articles, and 40 signatories. It would be the shortest--but longest lasting--national constitution in history. The first to sign was George Washington, who accepted the "summons" by his country to serve as its first president, on his condition that it be without "pecuniary compensation."



Throughout US history, 35 of America's 44 presidents mention the Constitution in their inaugural addresses, recognizing it as the nation's most important governing document. After honorably serving two terms as president, Washington leaves office, declaring his hope in his Farewell Address that the "free Constitution" may be sacredly maintained, its administration stamped with wisdom and virtue, and that "the love of liberty will be interwoven on every ligament of the people's hearts." A century later, in 1897, President William McKinley, facing difficult economic times, stresses economy in government and affirms the nation's Divine calling in his inaugural speech. He pledges to faithfully execute the office of President and calls on his countrymen to observe their obligation, like his, of preserving, protecting and defending the Constitution of the United States. A century after that, in 1997, President Bill Clinton fails to specifically mention the importance of the Constitution, instead speaking to the need for a "new vision of Government, a new sense of responsibility, a new spirit of community," representing a trend in recent presidents to deemphasize the Constitution's modern significance.

Americans today are not deeply schooled in constitutional history and generally do not recognize the Constitution's application to current public policy decisions. Until the 1960's, some public schools distributed a copy of the US Constitution to graduating seniors to keep as a lifelong reference to the law of our land. As those days have passed, too many American students today, as bright as they are, have neither an understanding of basic constitutional principles nor the ability to recognize public policies of questionable constitutional authority. And such ignorance is not limited to students. Organizations as diverse as the Pew Center and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute document the general public's lack of constitutional knowledge, understanding of government and awareness of current events. Try watching re-runs of the "Jaywalking" segments of "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" -- the public's ignorance about our country's history will make you shake your head in disbelief--and dismay.

September 17, 2009, can be the time to start devoting more public attention to citizen knowledge of America's dramatic story. Studying the US Constitution would be a good first-step for all Americans. Reviewing the Declaration of Independence gives citizens a flavor for why our great country was created in the first place. Reading presidential Inaugural Addresses would give Americans an instructive look at over two centuries of American history, and what our nation's leaders had to say about the Constitution's role during each era, as they, and the heroes of yesteryear, helped America grow. Immigrants choosing the United States as their country of allegiance are required to study our national history, learn the Constitution and actually pass a written test about America before taking the oath of citizenship. That's a good model for those of us born into citizenship. And who knows, maybe a movement would develop to elevate civics education and responsible citizenship to important national significance and engender greater citizen appreciation for our constitutional system.

Read the Constitution on the anniversary of its creation. There is no better way to honor the sacrifices of the Founders and all the brave souls in American history who fought and died defending the Constitution, so that we could remain free.

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