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# *Happy Constitution Day, if You Can Keep It*

The long-term survival of the Founders' design depends on people, not parchment.

By Don Willett  
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Howard Chandler Christy, *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States* (1940). PHOTO: GRAPHICAARTIS/GETTY IMAGES

Like most Philly crowds, the one surrounding Independence Hall 231 years ago Monday was amped.

The infant nation was floundering. The United States were anything but. America's first governing document, the Articles of Confederation, had created a "league of friendship" among states, but the former colonies hadn't coalesced into a country. A constitutional reboot was crucial.

For four sweltering months, delegates to the Constitutional Convention huddled behind closed doors. Those outside were wary of those inside.

On the final day of deliberations, Benjamin Franklin delivered the last great speech of his life, urging delegates to adopt the new Constitution "with all its faults." It worked. As James Madison scribbled understatedly in his notes, "The members then proceeded to sign the instrument."

Triumphant, Franklin exited the hall, and a woman shouted, "Well, Doctor, what have we got—a republic or a monarchy?" Franklin's notoriously sharp-witted reply: "A republic, if you can keep it."

Franklin's zinger was heartening—no more royal absolutism!—and ominous, because it suggested the survival of freedom depends on people, not parchment.

The Framers were not tinkerers. They upended things. The Constitution inaugurated a revolutionary design. Madisonian architecture infused with Newtonian genius: three separate, coequal branches locked in synchronous orbit by competing interests. Ambition counteracting ambition.

But the truly extraordinary element? These three rival branches derived their power from three unrivaled words, inscribed on the page in supersize script: "We the People." In an era of kings and sultans, nothing was more radical than the idea that ultimate sovereignty resides not in the government but in the governed.

Popular sovereignty isn't just a theory; it is a duty. "Wherever the people are well informed," Thomas Jefferson wrote from Paris in 1789, "they can be trusted with their own government." This prognosis underscored what the Constitution presupposes: An enlightened citizenry is indispensable to American self-government.

Fast-forward more than two centuries, and We the People's civic illiteracy is staggering.

Seventy-one percent of Americans can't identify the Constitution as the supreme law of the land, according to a 2012 Xavier University study.

Ten percent of U.S. college graduates think Judith Sheindlin (a.k.a. "Judge Judy") sits on the Supreme Court, according to a 2015 American Council of Trustees and Alumni poll.

Only 32% can name all three branches of government—and 33% can't name a single one, according to this year's Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey.

The legendarily good-humored Franklin would be dismayed that the generation of Americans with access to the most information is also the least informed. Madison—Father of the Constitution—warned of this expressly: "A popular Government, without popular information . . . is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy, or perhaps both."

But even a well-informed populace cannot guarantee good governance. Franklin cautioned, "if you can keep it," because he knew that an engaged citizenry with its sleeves rolled up was the secret sauce. We the People—not We the Government, We the Judges or We the Subjects.

Citizenship is not a spectator sport. "The only title in our democracy superior to that of president is the title of citizen," said Justice Louis Brandeis. Our Constitution is an exquisite charter of freedom, but freedom requires patriots, not passersby. It demands fierce defenders, not feeble bystanders.

Let me introduce you to a tenacious Texan with a Mensa-level civics IQ named Gregory Watson.

In 1982 Mr. Watson wrote a paper as a University of Texas sophomore arguing that one of Madison's proposed amendments to the Constitution was still eligible for ratification. The proposal barred Congress from raising its salary midterm; it set no ratification deadline. Unconvinced, Mr. Watson's professor awarded him a C.

Fueled by righteous indignation, Mr. Watson spent the next decade writing letters, bending ears and twisting arms in state capitals from sea to shining sea. And in 1992 the 27th Amendment was ratified—203 years after Congress proposed it.

Gregory Watson got a bad grade. So he amended the Constitution. All it took was aptitude and attitude. (In 2017 the university officially changed Mr. Watson's grade from C to A-plus.)

At Disney World recently, my children were mortified when I yelled, "WHOO-HOO!" for animatronic Calvin Coolidge in the Hall of Presidents. But Silent Cal understood the ineffable genius of what happened 231 years ago: "To live under the American Constitution is the greatest political privilege that was ever accorded to the human race."

That privilege must never be taken for granted. We the People are—and will remain—the world's oldest constitutional republic. If we can keep it.

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