

National Constitution Center

Perspectives on the Constitution: A Republic, If You Can Keep It By Richard R. Beeman

While today we marvel at the extraordinary accomplishment of our Founding Fathers, their own reaction to the US Constitution when it was presented to them for their signatures was considerably less enthusiastic. Benjamin Franklin, ever the optimist even at the age of 81, gave what was for him a remarkably restrained assessment in his final speech before the Constitutional Convention: "...when you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men, all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views." He thought it impossible to expect a "perfect production" from such a gathering, but he believed that the Constitution they had just drafted, "with all its faults," was better than any alternative that was likely to emerge.

Nearly all of the delegates harbored objections, but persuaded by Franklin's logic, they put aside their misgivings and affixed their signatures to it. Their over-riding concern was the tendency in nearly all parts of the young country toward disorder and disintegration. Americans had used the doctrine of popular sovereignty--"democracy"--as the rationale for their successful rebellion against English authority in 1776. But they had not yet worked out fully the question that has plagued all nations aspiring to democratic government ever since: how to implement principles of popular majority rule while at the same time preserving stable governments that protect the rights and liberties of all citizens.

Few believed that a new federal constitution alone would be sufficient to create a unified nation out of a collection of independent republics spread out over a vast physical space, extraordinarily diverse in their economic interests, regional loyalties, and ethnic and religious attachments. And there would be new signs of disorder after 1787 that would remind Americans what an incomplete and unstable national structure they had created: settlers in western Pennsylvania rebelled in 1794 because of taxes on their locally distilled whiskey; in western North Carolina there were abortive attempts to create an independent republic of "Franklin" which would ally itself with Spain to insure its independence from the United States; there was continued conflict with Indians across the whole western frontier and increased fear of slave unrest, particularly when news of the slave-led revolution in Haiti reached American shores.

But as fragile as America's federal edifice was at the time of the founding, there was much in the culture and environment that contributed to a national consensus and cohesion: a common language; a solid belief in the principles of English common law and

constitutionalism; a widespread commitment (albeit in diverse forms) to the Protestant religion; a shared revolutionary experience; and, perhaps most important, an economic environment which promised most free, white Americans if not great wealth, at least an independent sufficiency.

The American statesmen who succeeded those of the founding generation served their country with a self-conscious sense that the challenges of maintaining a democratic union were every bit as great after 1787 as they were before. Some aspects of their nation-building program--their continuing toleration of slavery and genocidal policies toward American Indians--are fit objects of national shame, not honor. But statesmen of succeeding generations--Lincoln foremost among them--would continue the quest for a "more perfect union."

Such has been our success in building a powerful and cohesive democratic nation-state in post-Civil War America that most Americans today assume that principles of democracy and national harmony somehow naturally go hand-in-hand. But as we look around the rest of the world in the post-Soviet era, we find ample evidence that democratic revolutions do not inevitably lead to national harmony or universal justice. We see that the expression of the "popular will" can create a cacophony of discordant voices, leaving many baffled about the true meaning of majority rule. In far too many places around the world today, the expression of the "popular will" is nothing more than the unleashing of primordial forces of tribal and religious identity which further confound the goal of building stable and consensual governments.

As we look at the state of our federal union 211 years after the Founders completed their work, there is cause for satisfaction that we have avoided many of the plagues afflicting so many other societies, but this is hardly cause for complacency. To be sure, the US Constitution itself has not only survived the crises confronting it in the past, but in so doing, it has in itself become our nation's most powerful symbol of unity--a far preferable alternative to a monarch or a national religion, the institutions on which most nations around the world have relied. Moreover, our Constitution is a stronger, better document than it was when it initially emerged from the Philadelphia Convention. Through the amendment process (in particular, through the 13th, 14th, 15th and 19th Amendments), it has become the protector of the rights of all the people, not just some of the people.

On the other hand, the challenges to national unity under our Constitution are, if anything, far greater than those confronting the infant nation in 1787. Although the new nation was a pluralistic one by the standards of the 18th century, the face of America in 1998 looks very different from the original: we are no longer a people united by a common language, religion or culture; and while our overall level of material prosperity is staggering by the standards of any age, the widening gulf between rich and poor is

perhaps the most serious threat to a common definition of the "pursuit of happiness."

The conditions that threaten to undermine our sense of nationhood, bound up in the debate over slavery and manifested in intense sectional conflict during the pre-Civil War era, are today both more complex and diffuse. Some of today's conditions are part of the tragic legacy of slavery--a racial climate marked too often by mutual mistrust and misunderstanding and a condition of desperate poverty within our inner cities that has left many young people so alienated that any standard definition of citizenship becomes meaningless. More commonly, but in the long run perhaps just as alarming, tens of millions of Americans have been turned-off by the corrupting effects of money on the political system. Bombarded with negative advertising about their candidates, they express their feelings of alienation by staying home on election day.

If there is a lesson in all of this it is that our Constitution is neither a self-actuating nor a self-correcting document. It requires the constant attention and devotion of all citizens. There is a story, often told, that upon exiting the Constitutional Convention Benjamin Franklin was approached by a group of citizens asking what sort of government the delegates had created. His answer was: "A republic, if you can keep it." The brevity of that response should not cause us to under-value its essential meaning: democratic republics are not merely founded upon the consent of the people, they are also absolutely dependent upon the active and informed involvement of the people for their continued good health.

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