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Why Constitution Day Matters More Than Ever This Year

by

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This week, [America](#) again celebrates Constitution Day, the date in 1787 on which 39 delegates signed the [U.S. Constitution](#).

The Sept. 17 holiday presents an occasion for reflection every year. Now, as we mark our 250th anniversary year, it is especially appropriate to consider the Constitution's place in our American experiment in democracy, alongside the [Declaration of Independence](#).

The celebration of [America's](#) semiquincentennial birthday is marked from the Declaration's proclamation in 1776, not from the Constitution's signing in 1787 or ratification in 1788. So it makes sense to consider the Declaration first and then the Constitution.

One aim of the Declaration was to justify the 13 Colonies' decision to separate from Great Britain and to institute a new government. To that end, the Declaration contains a long list of what it calls "Abuses and Usurpations," all of which the Declaration asserts were intended to subject the Colonies to "absolute Despotism."

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Yet the Declaration's more enduring and transcendent objective was to proclaim a vision for what Thomas Jefferson and the other Founders hoped the new nation would become, what President Reagan called a "shining city on a hill."

This moral vision was announced through what the Declaration pronounced self-evident "Truths": 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. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

The philosophical principles that the Declaration proclaims in this short statement compose the core of [America's](#) ideals. As a matter of natural right – not by grant of the government – all persons are created equal. None is superior to another, and each has a right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

As the Declaration makes explicit, the Founders understood that once the Revolution was won, a government would be needed to secure the self-evident truths proclaimed on the parchment.

Establishing a proper, practical form of government was necessary for the Declaration's revolutionary ideals to endure beyond stirring aspirations.

[James Madison](#) – often called the "Father of the Constitution" for his pivotal role in drafting the document and promoting its ratification – understood that humans are by nature self-interested.

As he put it in "Federalist No. 10," individuals, or groups of individuals banded together composing a "faction," given their "ambition," "mutual animosities" and "unfriendly passions," are naturally prone "to vex and oppress each other."

Thus, he needed to devise a plan of government in which "ambition" would counteract "ambition" – or, as Madison explained in "Federalist No. 51," a plan "of supplying by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives."

Madison put the constitutional challenge this way: "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

The framers set out to meet this "great difficulty" by designing a limited government, restricted to the exercise of enumerated powers and having three separate branches: the legislative, executive and judicial. Each would exercise only the powers delegated to it by the Constitution.

The plan further diffused power through federalism, dividing authority between the national government and the states. It required regular elections for the officials who would serve in Congress and as president.

By virtue of its structural design, checks and balances and requirement for regular elections, the Constitution is intended to ensure that the Declaration's ideals are safeguarded – that our unalienable right to liberty and a government deriving its just powers from the consent of the governed endures.

Yet such endurance is not foreordained, despite the brilliance of the Constitution's plan of government. Recall Benjamin Franklin's response to Elizabeth Willing Powel about what the Constitution's drafters had produced: "A republic, if you can keep it."

Not for the first time in our history, Americans are deeply divided along many fault lines, and political passions run high. Conciliation and compromise are increasingly out of fashion, if not out of mind.

Yet consider this: The first sentence of the Declaration assumes that the Colonists of the yet-to-be-born nation are "one People." The Constitution's Preamble begins with these seven words: "We the People of the United States."

This week – as we mark 239 years since the Constitution's signing and continue to celebrate [America's](#) 250th year – should be an occasion for reflection. Let that reflection unite us in the common purpose of preserving the Declaration's ideals and safeguarding our liberties.

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