



Three Cheers for Washington: Remembering the Nation's First Chief on Constitution Day

by John R. Hendrickson

“The Constitution is the guide which I never will abandon.”
George Washington, 1795¹

On Monday September 17, 2007 the nation will remember the events that took place in the summer of 1787. September 17th is Constitution Day, and Americans will have an opportunity whether in school houses, institutions of higher education, or other events to remember what President Herbert Hoover referred to as the “greatest of all charters of government.”² In remembering and thinking about the Constitution we not only remember the document, but the events and individuals that shaped that historic and divine epoch in Western civilization. The names are sacred: James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, James Wilson, Gouverneur Morris, among others. They were all notable figures, representing some of the best minds in political philosophy, but one individual stands out for his leadership, prudence, character, and for holding the Republic together — George Washington “was the indispensable man of the epoch.”³

“We can all see the brilliant flourishes of Jefferson’s pen, Madison’s constitutional handiwork or the success of Hamilton’s economic policies, and that can cause us to overlook or underestimate the magnitude of Washington’s achievement,” wrote Matthew Spalding, a Washington Scholar and Director of the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at The Heritage Foundation.⁴ As Dr. Spalding stated “[Washington] really was, as Washington’s greatest biographer James Flexner, put it, the ‘indispensable man’ of the American founding.”⁵

Washington’s leadership was the capstone of the new Republic, including his service as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, his role as President of the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, and his election as the first President of the United States under the newly ratified Constitution. It was Washington who quelled rebellions, such as the Newburgh Conspiracy and Whisky Rebellion against the new government, and mediated the often fierce political and policy disagreements between the Federalist and Anti-Federalist factions. Washington was the “cooler head” who dealt with the competing policy ideas of Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. He rejected calls to establish him as a King; in fact he willingly resigned his commission as Commander-in-Chief and later established the precedent of the two-term presidency, which demonstrated a peaceful exchange of power when John Adams was elected president in 1797.

Washington in his *Farewell Address*, which has been characterized as one of the most eloquent statements of American political philosophy, directed the young Republic to faithfully uphold and follow the Constitution. As Washington stated:

This government, the offspring of our own choice, uninfluenced and unawed, adopted upon full investigation and mature deliberation, completely free in its principles, in its distribution of its powers, uniting security with energy, and containing within itself a provision for its own amendment, has a just claim to your confidence and your support. Respect for its authority, compliance with its Laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true Liberty. The basis of our political systems is the right of the people to make and to alter their Constitutions of Government. But the Constitution which at any time exists, ‘till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole People, is very sacredly obligatory upon all. The very idea

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of the power and the right of the People to establish Government presupposes the duty of every Individual to obey the established Government.⁶

Washington, who held the Philadelphia Convention together, fully understood the pressures, factions, and trials the Constitution would face, but with that said, he advised the nation to follow the Constitution and not simply use it for a flexible set of guidelines. The Constitution not only represented the rule of law, but national unity.

Washington understood the importance of a written Constitution — a document that limits government to specific powers and truly holds the beacon of liberty. This was a new conception in Western Civilization. It is quite fitting that inscribed on the Liberty Bell is a verse from Leviticus 25:10: “Proclaim liberty throughout all of the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.”

The United States, in 1787, was the first nation to have a written Constitution. The British Constitution was not written and therefore did not specify the role of government within society. As constitutional scholar Keith Whittington wrote: “From the perspective of the American Founders, no ‘such thing as a constitution’, properly so called, is known in Great Britain. It was a ‘creature’ of the government. It did not recognize ‘the supreme power of the people.’”⁷ The Constitution, on the other hand, was written to limit government and protect civil liberties, while at the same time allowing enough power to the central government to govern effectively where the Articles of Confederation had failed.

“As a fixed and written text, the supreme law of the Constitution can be self-consciously considered and properly ratified and can have the specificity to provide judicial instruction,” wrote Whittington.⁸ Hence, the importance of the debate between those who support “originalism” and those who support the “living” constitutional theories of interpretation. Originalism follows in the counsel of George Washington, which means that lawyers, judges, and politicians should follow the original intent of the Founders.

In reflecting on the Constitution, Calvin Coolidge stated: “The more I study it, the more I have come to admire it, realizing that no other document devised by the hand of man ever brought so much progress and happiness to humanity. The good it has wrought can never be measured.”⁹

This Constitution Day each citizen should not only spend time in serious reflection and prayerful thanksgiving over the Constitution, but also on the greatness of leaders and thinkers such as Washington and the many individuals who certainly built a shining city upon a hill. In honor of Constitution Day and the Founders, such as George Washington, Public Interest Institute is offering free pocket-sized copies of the Constitution. If interested please call our offices at (319) 385-3462 or send us an e-mail at public.interest.institute@limitedgovernment.org.

(Endnotes)

¹Matthew Spalding (ed). *The Founder's Almanac: A Practical Guide to the Notable Events, Greatest Leaders & Most Eloquent Words of the American Founding*, The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., 2002, p. 139.

²Herbert Hoover, letter to Gurney E. Newlin, September 12, 1929.

³Forrest McDonald, “Today’s Indispensable Man,” in Gary L. Gregg II and Matthew Spalding (eds.), *Patriot Sage: George Washington and the American Political Tradition*, ISI Books, Wilmington, Delaware, 1999, p. 24.

⁴Matthew Spalding, “The Man Who Would Not Be King,” The Heritage Foundation, February 5, 2007.

⁵Ibid.

⁶George Washington, *Writings*, The Library of America, New York, 1997, p. 968.

⁷Keith E. Whittington, *How to Read the Constitution: Self-Government and the Jurisprudence of Originalism, First Principle Series, No. 5*, The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., p. 4.

⁸Ibid., p. 6.

⁹Peter Hannaford (ed), *The Quotable Calvin Coolidge: Sensible Words for a New Century*, Images from the Past, Bennington, Vermont, 2001, p. 50.

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