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College Speech Script

When people talk about the success of the Constitution, the conversation usually turns into a discussion of the framework of the Constitution, especially those items within that have been pointed to as hallmarks of democracy: things like separation of powers, which distributes the powers of government among the three branches, checks and balances, which provides each branch with oversight over the others, and a system for amending the constitution, which allows people on the state and federal level to alter the Constitution if necessary. These are undoubtedly important. Constitutions without these provisions will be fundamentally unstable and have been shown time and time again to descend into chaos and tyranny. These hallmarks are essential for the success of any would-be democracy. But to point to these as the reason America's Constitution has succeeded while others have failed is a great oversimplification of something much more complicated. In order to answer the question of why the U.S. Constitution has succeeded while others have not, I think there's another question that should be asked. Suppose the United States Constitution was given to another country to use as their governing document. Would this work? The answer is no, at least not necessarily. There are external factors that have contributed and continue to contribute to the success of our Constitution. These factors, in short, are that in order for a Constitution to succeed, the people must want it, accept it, and internalize it.

To understand these factors, the Constitution's timeline must be understood. So often the story we're told starts with the Constitutional Convention and ends with the founding fathers signing the document they created there. But the history of the Constitution starts long before the constitutional convention and is still being written today.

In the 1700s, many scholars were marrying politics with philosophy in a new way, which marked the Enlightenment era. It was during this era that people began to think of themselves as sovereign-This was an enormous shift in political ideology. Prior to this, the word sovereign was synonymous with a king, or a ruler of sorts. The idea that the people themselves weren't beholden to the whims of a central authority was a revolution marked a revolution in itself. Instead of following the rules of a monarch, people began to believe that they had an inherent right in determining how they were governed. The founding fathers were profoundly influenced by this school of thought, and by drawing from the works

of Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Thomas Paine, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, they began to craft a plan to create a new government in accordance with these ideals of self-determination and individual sovereignty. The people were ready for this kind of government. They were willing to pay for it with their lives and many of them did. It was this sentiment of do or die that led Patrick Henry to utter his famous words- "Give me liberty, or give me death." He definitely wasn't the only one who felt this way. The American people, with the exception of some British loyalists, wanted this form of government. They wanted democracy. And this is the first prerequisite for the Constitution's success- this wasn't a document imposed on its people. It wasn't a document given to the people by foreign powers. It was a document crafted of, by and for the American people-a document that they fought to have the right to create. And that's a huge factor in the Constitution's success. In order for a Constitution to work, its people have to want it.

This prerequisite seems easy enough to fulfill. It's hard to imagine people who wouldn't want the freedoms and rights the colonists were fighting for. But it's important to mention because in history this hasn't always been the case. Simon Bolivar, a famous conquistador who conquered much of South America, was quoted as saying "There is no good faith in America, nor among the nations of America. Treaties are scraps of paper; constitutions, printed matter; elections, battles; freedom, anarchy; and life, a torment." As the electorate didn't share Bolivar's values, the Constitutions he spearheaded in these countries didn't last long.

But what about countries like Egypt? Where after days of civil unrest and violence, their movement to replace their government was successful, and they won the opportunity to create a new Constitution. However, that didn't exactly work out for them as they might have hoped. So what went wrong? Clearly they wanted democracy. What happened? That actually leads to the next point-the people have to accept the Constitution. After the revolution was successful, and the American colonists had the ability to carry out their plans, they drafted the Articles of Confederation. This first constitution of the United States failed-this was an important moment, because it allowed the colonists to realize there was in fact a need for some sort of central authority. In order for the new country to function, it needed to become the *United States*, not just a loosely strung together confederation. Which is why, when the colonists gathered in Pennsylvania in 1787, they realized the articles weren't going to work, and they decided to start from scratch. This is when the Constitution we have today, more or less, came into being.

Then comes the part of the story everyone knows. One hot summer, a bunch of wise men got together and after long deliberation, wrote our Constitution. After signing, the founders gathered together in a circle and swaying back and forth sang kumbayah, knowing that they had created a strong government for the new nation. The Constitution was adopted right away and everyone was happy. The end.

Not quite. In fact, that's simply inaccurate. The convention is certainly important, and it should be noted that the men who wrote this document were extremely well-respected and trusted, something that isn't necessarily a common theme in the constitutional conventions of other countries in the modern era. Having a group of men such as these in charge of creating the constitution was a step in the right direction toward creating working government. But to end the Constitution's story at the constitutional convention is kind of like watching a movie and stopping before the last scenes. A lot can happen in those last couple of scenes. And a lot did happen. After the Constitutional Convention, the founders realized they had only completed one leg of an extremely long journey to a functional constitution. They were elated, they probably even went to the local bar to celebrate, but then the real work began. Because the founders realized that this new document they had just labored intensively over for days on end would mean absolutely nothing if they couldn't get the American people behind it. In fact, even at the convention, a rift was created by the lack of a Bill of Rights, among other issues. And sure enough, although five states immediately hopped on the ratification bandwagon, many had reservations.

We can learn two important lessons from the ratification process-the first is the importance of the process in general. The founding fathers knew they needed the support of the public, so to ratify the constitution, they assembled not the elected officials to vote on it, but the people themselves. At every step of this process, the founding fathers knew it was essential to have the people on their side. But the second lesson that comes out of this period of ratification has to do with a set of documents called the antifederalist papers, which prompted the drafting of the more well-known federalist papers. These papers sprung out of the debate that had already begun at the constitution about the bill of rights, but covered all sorts of issues. In 1787, antifederalists began to write to a New York newspaper about the reasons why the Constitution should not be ratified. In response, John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison wrote the federalist essays under the pseudonym "Publius" in order to, as Hamilton wrote in Federalist 1 "endeavor to give a satisfactory answer to all the objections which shall have made their appearance." The essays go on to explain the reasons behind certain parts of the Constitution, such

as why certain controversial provisions are necessary, and what the constitution means for the American people. Federalist 51 describes the system of checks and balances. 15-20 explain why the articles had failed and why starting over was necessary. There are sets of essays outlining the functions of the legislative, executive, and judicial branch. This written justification for all of the aspects of the Constitution was instrumental in persuading people to ratify it. But it also proved that this government was designed to have a responsibility to justify itself to the people. In fact, after contentious debates in different states regarding the lack of a Bill of Rights, it was eventually conceded by the federalists that a Bill of Rights would in fact be included as the first set of amendments to the Constitution—thus demonstrating to the people that they did have the ultimate say in this new government. This isn't to say that agreeing to include a Bill of Rights solved all of the problems that the founding fathers were running into with ratification—in fact it was only under the threat of treating the states that wouldn't ratify the constitution as foreign that those states finally agreed to join the union—but it did allow the American people to understand the reasoning behind the constitution and showed that the founding fathers recognized where the constitution got its power—from the just consent of the governed.

At this point the American people wanted their Constitution, they accepted it—and then came the real test—whether they would continue to act as if it was legitimate.

As with any government, the US ran into snags along the way. But, the main reason why our Constitution has withstood these trials is because the people still viewed the government as legitimate. Our Constitution is something that we have, as a nation, internalized. When we pledge allegiance to the flag, we pledge allegiance “to the republic for which it stands.” This “republic” was given to us in our Constitution. In fact, Benjamin Franklin, after the convention, was famously quoted as having said the constitution creates “a republic, if they can keep it.” Our constitution has become a part of our identity, a part of who we are as a people, a part of our culture. Politicians attempt to appeal to voters by using Constitutional arguments. When people complain about our government, they usually complain about a specific person or organization who isn't upholding the Constitution or is interpreting it undesirably. It's very rare to find criticisms about the Constitution itself. Which isn't to say that those criticisms are not out there, but even among those criticisms, the majority call for amending the Constitution, not a complete overhaul of the Constitution.

So let's go back to the Egyptian question. These people fought for their freedom. But the Constitution they drafted in 2012 lasted only two years, and the government collapsed into a military

state. A new constitution was drafted in 2014, and only time will tell if that one will hold. But what went wrong in the first place?

It's important to remember that this whole ordeal of creating a Constitution spanned years. It took ten months for the Constitution to get ratified by nine states, the minimum required for it to take effect. And it took Rhode Island, the last state to ratify the Constitution, three years. Even after this, the Constitution had a lot of weak spots. The gaps and lack of a concrete plan regarding slavery in the states would end up causing the Civil War, the greatest test of American democracy. But in the years following the Constitution's adoption, the American people were patient. Transitioning between forms of government is certainly not an easy task. One reason Egypt's transition may have initially been less than successful is that they expected too much, too soon. Another reason is distrust of public officials. America had great minds and respected men to guide it through its rocky transition to democracy. The same cannot be said about Egypt. But the main reason is the last reason why our constitution has succeeded while others have failed, and that is in our internalizing the document as part of our culture. The Egyptian people certainly didn't view the 2012 Constitution as part of culture. It's unlikely they view the 2014 Constitution as part of their culture. That isn't to say it will never happen. It could. It takes time. But it is only through that adoption into a nation's culture that a Constitution achieves the permanence the American Constitution has.

As long as the Constitution remains a part of American culture, it will continue to succeed. It's when we begin to lose that part of our culture that we start running into dangerous territory. When we start questioning not our interpretations of the document, but its validity as a whole. When we stop holding our public officials to it. When we lose sight of everything it stands for. When we forget what it's been through to get this point. When this happens, the Constitution will fail. Fortunately, we the people have the power to make sure that never happens.