

Look on the Works

On September 18, 1787, the architects of the Great American Experiment replaced the Articles of Confederation with a new frame of government: The Constitution. At the end of the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin was approached by a concerned citizen with a simple question: “What have we got, a republic or a monarchy?” Franklin responded, “A republic, if you can keep it.” The United States, as envisioned by our Founding Fathers, is a constitutional republic. And our republic has gone through revolution, invasion, and even civil war. Throughout it all, we’ve sustained our republic on a constitution that both promotes democracy and discourages despotism. A constitution that Abraham Lincoln reasoned enabled the formation of a strong government that was also “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” But what role do “the people” truly play in our government, and how does the constitution encourage the people and government to keep each other in check?

Of course, the people play a significant role in the government. Every year, the people bravely fight in political and psychological warfare commonly referred to as Thanksgiving dinner. The Great Thanksgiving Theater is a beautiful expression of the rights enumerated by the Constitution. As explained by Vice President Hubert Humphrey, “Freedom is hammered out on the anvil of discussion, dissent, and debate.” Naturally, some people don’t like to talk about politics at the dinner table. However, it is our civic duty to engage in discussion about the role of government. But this dilemma is nothing new. As a matter of fact, political discussions, dissents, and debates regarding the role of government are the very reason we have amendments. And in a beautiful way, the amendments of the Constitution all have provisions for the people to maintain their rights in the face of government tyranny. As “the people”, it is our duty to exercise these constitutional rights and increase awareness of them.

The passage of the Bill of Rights in 1791 reflected the importance of understanding our constitutional rights. Our First Amendment rights to the freedom of religion, expression, and petition. Our Fourth Amendment protections from unreasonable searches. Our Sixth Amendment guarantees to a fair trial by jury. And our Tenth Amendment promises that powers not explicitly delegated to the government are possessed by the people instead.

Throughout the constitution, there is one clear obligation delegated to the people: the necessity of keeping the government in check. And historically, the people have had to exercise that obligation. In the 1963 case of *Edwards v. South Carolina*, a group of students were arrested for organizing a civil rights protest. Justice Potter Stewart argued that the constitution prohibits the government from “criminalizing the peaceful expression of unpopular views.” The constitution is a wonderful duality of allowing citizens to control the fate of their republic while also serving as a barrier to the pernicious possibility of despotism. And amazingly, the constitution has measures to have the government keep itself in check, namely through the

system of checks and balances. In 1803, the landmark case of *Marbury v. Madison* established the legal precedent of judicial review. This precedent has allowed American courts to strike down executive acts and legislative measures that violate the Constitution. With this constitutional balancing act of empowering the people while also maintaining government strength, the Founding Fathers secured the continued stability of our republic.

Throughout the constitution, there is one clear obligation delegated to the government: the necessity of preventing a tyranny of the majority. In the words of James Madison, “The purpose of the Constitution is to restrict the majority’s ability to harm a minority.” There is no greater minority than the individual. The Founding Fathers understood that the American individual could become victim to the whims and fancies of populism. They were fully aware that a democratic America may not be permanent. It was John Adams that said, “Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself.” Fears regarding a tyranny of the majority led to the adoption of the electoral college. In *Federalist Paper 39*, James Madison reasoned that the Constitution promoted the formation of a balanced federal government that was both state-based and population-based. In *Federalist Paper 68*, Alexander Hamilton advocated for an educated, adaptable republican form of government.

The brilliance of the Constitution lies in its adaptability. The Constitution of 1789 was a compromise. But the Founding Fathers brilliantly recognized that the unsolvable issues of their time could be amended in the future. By including the mechanism for the incorporation of amendments, our Founding Fathers ensured that our democratic framework would remain subject to the evolving needs of our society. At its inception, the Constitution may not have been perfect, but it has since been made complete. It has been made complete by the most patriotic thing an American can do: challenging the government. The challenges of Frederick Douglass, whose arguments regarding the immeasurable distance between black Americans and their white counterparts fueled the adoptions of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. He may not have always been regarded as a citizen, but he was always an American. This is the unique American truth: an American is not just a citizenship status. An American is someone who is an architect of their own destiny, building bridges between dreams and reality. An American is someone who adds their voice to the angelic symphony of democracy. An American is someone who drives an effort to challenge the status quo in order to pave a better road for their posterity.

It’s clear that the constitution ensures the freedom of its citizens, and it is the duty of the citizens to ensure that the constitution is enforced. If we the people don’t fulfill that duty, then our nation will join all of the empires past that were lost to the unforgiving seas of history. In his poem *Ozymandias*, Percy Shelly explored the inevitable decay of once-powerful civilizations. Fittingly, the so-called “King of Kings” namesake of the poem was an alternate title for Ramses II, the pharaoh of the ancient Egyptian Empire. In the poem, a traveler of an antique land recalls

the statue of a supposedly consequential warrior. The inscription of the conquerors statue read, "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair." But when the traveler searched for these magnificent works, they discovered that nothing beside remained. Only a long, desolate stretch of sand. As citizens of the United States, it is our duty to ensure that our works remain. So that our future generations will be able to look on our works. It is our duty to ensure that we remain mighty. If we don't, then our powerful civilization will be all but forgotten.

How do we prevent our democracy from "wasting, exhausting, and murdering itself?" We have to recognize Benjamin Franklin's principle: that the success of our republic is dependent on our ability to maintain it. The wonderful rights that we all possess today were the result of patriotic Americans doing their duty and participating in political change. Now, it is our duty to honor the wisdom and sacrifices of our Founding Fathers and exercise our constitutional rights to their fullest extent, whether it be through a civil rights movement that breaks the chains of discrimination and links the nation together, or a simple debate at Thanksgiving. There is only one thing separating our fortunate nation from Percy Shelly's fallen empire of Ozymandias: action.