



## Celebrate the enduring value of our Constitution

By Wilfred M. McClay

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Americans love to celebrate, and we do it for all kinds of reasons. We celebrate our great presidents; but we also we celebrate our common laborers. We pay homage to lovers on [Valentine's Day](#), and parents on [Mother's Day](#) and [Father's Day](#). We pause to consider our good fortune on [Thanksgiving Day](#), to remember and mourn our honored dead on [Memorial Day](#) and [Veterans Day](#), and of course we whoop it up on the [Fourth of July](#), our great day of national independence.



But where, amid the wing-dings and solemn observances, is the U.S. Constitution? Why don't we celebrate it just as vigorously as we celebrate the Fourth, with parades, speeches, and fireworks? After all, every nation has leaders, heroes and independence days. But only one nation on earth has ever had a 224-year-old written Constitution at the center of its national life, a charter of its liberties and arbiter of its conflicts, the sovereign expression of "we the people."

The French have lived under many different constitutions and regimes over the centuries, so that for them the nation and the government are two distinct things. No so for Americans. Yet we fail to grasp the importance of this difference. We revere our Constitution, but we do so blandly and automatically, without troubling ourselves to know very much about it.

### A languishing day

It was precisely a concern about our pervasive ignorance that impelled the late senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, who kept a well-thumbed copy of the Constitution in his pocket, to establish [Constitution Day](#). Unfortunately, he did it by senatorial fiat, attaching an amendment to the omnibus spending bill of 2004 stipulating that all educational institutions receiving federal funding would henceforth be required to hold an educational program pertaining to the [United States Constitution](#), on or near September 17 of each year. (On that date in 1787, the writers of the Constitution met for the last time to sign the completed document.) A worthy and well-meaning act by Byrd; but fiats are not self-executing, particularly when they do not reflect a broader political movement or educational consensus.

As a consequence, Constitution Day has languished. A great many colleges and universities observe Constitution Day, but do it in a perfunctory way, such as a mounting a small and temporary rare-document exhibit at the campus library. That's not enough. There is a great missed opportunity here.

Several good organizations, such as the [National Constitution Center](#), the [Bill of Rights Institute](#), [ConstitutionFacts.com](#), and [ConstitutionDay.com](#) have sought to fill the breach and help make Constitution Day into a more substantial holiday. This year, the Philadelphia-based Jack Miller Center for Teaching America's Founding Principles and History (with which I am affiliated) [has gone a step further](#), launching a Constitution Day Initiative to support well-designed Constitution Day programs on college campuses. This has resulted in first-rate Constitution Day programs on 30 campuses all over the country, with distinguished speakers ranging from Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer to historian Pauline Maier, to Lt. Gen Josiah Bunting III, to Justice Antonin Scalia, and featuring debates over issues such as the status of the Tenth Amendment and the constitutionality of health-care reform. If this year's crop of programs is any indication, Constitution Day may be seeing its time come at last.

### **Taking it for granted**

If so, it will be addressing a real and enduring need. The great American historian [Gordon Wood](#) ended his recent book *The Idea of America* with a moving account of a lecture on the [American Revolution](#) that he delivered in Warsaw in 1976, during the bicentennial of the American Revolution — four years before the emergence of the Solidarity movement, at a time when Poland was firmly in the hands of Communist tyranny. At the end of his lecture, a courageous young woman stood up and challenged Wood, asserting that he "had left out the most important part." He had, she pointed out, omitted any mention of the Bill of Rights, "the constitutional protection of individual liberties against the government." And, Wood confessed, she was right. "I had taken the Bill of Rights for granted," he admitted. "But this young Polish woman living under a communist regime could not take individual rights for granted."

It was an electric moment, and its lesson for us is clear. "We forget — we take for granted — the important things," Wood rightly concludes. That is why we so badly need such historians, and monuments, and days of remembrance. Long live Constitution Day.

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