

Understanding the Constitution by Karen Moran

Have you ever picked up a copy of the U.S. Constitution and began to read it, only to discover that the language and words that were used were not what we commonly use today? I found myself looking up words in the dictionary to understand their meaning.

Should you decide to plow through the study of the original U.S. Constitution, I would recommend using the 1828 Dictionary written by Noah Webster. He was a contemporary of our founding fathers and was extremely familiar with the language of the day. In fact, he was the first person to develop a written language for the United States. People in the states at that time wrote words phonetically and so he wanted to write the language so that it would be uniform in spelling and unique to the United States.

So, as you begin your journey to clearly understand the Constitution, you must realize that The Declaration of Independence is the document that came before the U.S. Constitution. The Declaration of Independence helps you realize why the Founding Fathers of The United States wrote the Constitution.

The Declaration of Independence was written to declare the biggest break-up in history between the colonies and the British Empire. They had 27 grievances, many of them very serious, that caused them to declare their independence. Among the 27 grievances, the most taught idea today is that grievance #17 was the reason for their Declaration of Independence from England. The seventeen-grievance revealed that they were being taxed without representation in their government. That is why you hear the phrase, "No taxation, without representation!" Although that was a serious problem for them financially, it was by no means the only cause for their deciding to sever their relationship with England.

The following grievances were the reason for the break-up:

1. The King wouldn't pass necessary laws
2. The King would not let the Governors of each state pass laws.
3. The people were told they had to give up their right to representation in their government in order for laws to be passed.
4. Parliament was only held in England, which caused a great deal of hardship and discouragement to have to travel months by ship to England.
5. The King dissolved the colonies' government that was in existence at the time.
6. Once the King dissolved the government, no new government or laws were put in place.
7. The King raised property taxes and restricted new people from moving into the colonies.
8. The King dissolved the colonial court system.
9. The judges that the King put in place were hired and paid by the King and the King could fire them at any time.
10. Soldiers were sent to harass the colonists and force them to provide food for the soldiers at the colonists' expense.
11. These armies sent by England were without the consent of the colonists.
12. Soldiers were allowed to operate above the law and system of justice.
13. The King and Parliament only pretended to represent the colonists, but in truth, only represented their own interests.
14. The colonists were required to quarter (lodge) soldiers.
15. There were mock trials of soldiers accused of murder.

16. The King cut off all foreign trade with other countries from the colonies and they could only trade with England.

17. Taxation without representation

18. Trials by a jury of your peers, to prove your guilt or innocence of a crime, were not allowed.

19. Colonists, accused of a crime, had to travel all the way to England to be tried.

20. The King encouraged Canada to attack the colonies.

21. The King abolished the colonial charters of government for the colonies.

22. The King and the Parliament in England made laws over the colonies without their representation or consent.

23. The King waged war on the colonies.

24. The King authorized the destruction of colonial land and property.

25. The King sent cruel German Hessian soldiers to cause death, desolation and tyranny among the colonists.

26. Colonists captured on the high seas, were forced to kill their own family and friends so that their own lives might be spared.

27. The King armed merciless Indians, known for their cruel warfare, to attack and kill men, women and children of all ages, sexes and conditions.

You can see by the above grievances, that the colonists had good cause to separate from England. They had tried over many years to resolve the differences with the British Empire, but their concerns were repeatedly ignored.

The following is a quote from the Declaration of Independence:

"...Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly, all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security. (emphasis mine) Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former System of Government..."

You can see that after a long train of abuses, the colonists decided to throw off their existing tyrannical form of government and to establish a new government with better laws and rules to protect the rights of the people.

The U.S. Constitution was written with a mindset looking back to the abuses mentioned in the Declaration of Independence. If you were to go line by line through the U.S. Constitution, you could see the grievances that were being addressed from the Declaration of Independence.

There was a founding father that was so concerned about all the issues being addressed, that he refused to sign the original draft of the U.S. Constitution until it was made clear to him that all the issues would be addressed. His name was George Mason and because of his stance, he is said to be the Father of the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights are known today as the first 10 Amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

Because of the meticulous attention to detail, our government today is the longest standing Constitution in history. The average Constitution in

the nations of the world lasts an average of 17 years. No other Constitution in the world has lasted as long as ours has. No other Constitution has so clearly defined that the people are the "boss" of the government. As a matter of fact, the first three words of the U.S. Constitution, written larger than any words, are WE THE PEOPLE. The only higher power in the United States of America is God, who has delegated that authority to men. (Emphasis by underlining to show references to God throughout are mine.)

Many other forms of government have tried and failed. Our Founding Fathers studied other forms of government and they realized that previous forms of government were doomed to failure. Many people today say that The United States of America is a democracy. Nowhere in any of our founding documents does it say that we are a democracy. In fact, here is what some of our Founding Fathers had to say about a democracy:

"Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide." **John Adams**, 2nd President of the United States of America. (Endnote #1)

"A simple democracy is one of the greatest of evils. A democracy is a mobocracy." **Benjamin Rush**, Signer of the Declaration of Independence (Endnote #2)

(In case you would need to look up the word, "mobocracy", I have saved you the trouble. I looked it up in Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary and it means, "Anarchy, disarray, disorder, lawlessness, and pandemonium.")

"Pure democracy cannot subsist long nor be carried far into the departments of state-it is very subject to caprice and the madness of

popular rage." **John Witherspoon**, Signer of the Declaration of Independence (also Endnote #1)

(The word caprice carries with it the reference to sudden and unaccountable change of mood or behavior. It is based on "feelings" and as you may know, "feelings" can change from week to week or day to day).

So, where in our Founding documents does it say what kind of government we are? It is in Article 4, Section 4 of our U.S. Constitution that says we are a republic. That is why, in the Pledge of Allegiance to our country, Americans repeat the phrase, "and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all".

The above paragraph brings us to the subject of God. You may not know the truth that our Founding Fathers all knew and believed in God, the Creator, although different ones would have had varying degrees of devotion to God.

Official government documents were signed, in the year of our Lord...and then they would indicate the year. Oaths were taken on a Bible and often end with the words, "so help me God". In the Declaration of Independence, the second paragraph says: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". The Declaration of Independence ends with the last sentence saying, "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

When the Constitution was doomed for failure because of so many different agendas by the different delegates, **Benjamin Franklin** stood up and gave the following speech on June 28, 1787:

"Mr. President, the small progress we have made after four or five weeks close attendance and continual reasonings with each other-our different sentiments on almost every question, several of the last producing as many noes and ayes, methinks is a melancholy proof of the imperfection of the Human Understanding. We indeed seem to feel our own want of political wisdom, since we have been running about in search of it. We have gone back to ancient history for models of Governments, and examined the forms of those Republics which having been formed, with the seeds of their own dissolution now no longer exist. And we have viewed Modern States all around Europe but find none of their Constitutions suitable to our circumstances.

In this situation of this Assembly, groping as it were in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of lights to illuminate our understandings?

In the beginning of the contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible to danger, we had daily prayer in this room for Divine protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending Providence in our favor...Have we now forgotten that powerful Friend? Or do we now imagine that we no longer need His assistance? I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth-that God Governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?

We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writing, that "except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it". I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without His concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel...

I therefore beg leave to move-that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessing on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business..."

Benjamin Franklin, Declaration and Constitution signer (Endnote #3)

There were some concerns by our Founding Fathers about the ability to "keep" our Republic. They felt that for the Republic to remain strong, there had to be elected officials with high moral character and virtue that would rightly represent the people who elected them. Without high moral character, people could be motivated by greed, power or other motives. They could begin to vote in a way that was not in the best interests of the people and did not represent the greater good of the country. The Congress is no better than the people elected to it!

Gouverneur Morris, a signer of the Constitution said, "Religion is the only solid basis of good morals. Therefore, education should teach the precepts of religion and the duties of man toward God." (Endnote #4)

In his farewell address, President George Washington, our first president, offered wise advice for the nation to follow. (The following are excerpts from George Washington's farewell address. (Endnote #5)

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism who should labour to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally the pious man ought to respect and to cherish them...And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion...reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle...Cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and

morality enjoin this conduct;"(For other sage advice, including his warning about a "party spirit" by George Washington, it is recommended that George Washington Farewell Address of September 19, 1796 be read in its entirety.)

As you can see, our founding fathers believed that morally religious people were needed for the country to succeed. But where are the people of high moral character that will come to the forefront and lead this nation and even the nations of the world? You will only have a good government when you have people of high moral character in offices to represent you.

And so, in understanding the U.S. Constitution you were able to see how the Declaration of Independence was a necessary catalyst and reason for this new Republican form of government with better laws and rules. You were able to see that great care was given to protect the God-given rights of mankind. You also saw the sentiments of some of the Founding Fathers in their gratitude to Almighty God for giving us this form of government "of the people, by the people and for the people". You were also able to see that God is the only reason that the United States of America has the longest standing Constitution on the face of the earth.

As we read it, know it and share it, we will be a stronger nation, of the people, by the people and for the people, with liberty and justice for all. May we never lose the great liberties found in the U.S. Constitution.

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