

On the 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence

[Donna L. Cohen, MLIS, MEd, teaches an adult civics workshop called Representation, Our Federal Government and the Constitution. After discussing the creation of the Constitution, we contemplate what is working and what isn't for our federal system from the standpoint of some basic Constitutional frameworks. There is a comprehensive Resource List on this topic at <https://www.civictinker.info/resources> . For more information about Civics for Adults workshops, check out www.civictinker.info .

[From the Declaration of Independence] "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 these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men..."

[Preamble of the U.S. Constitution] "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

We are 250 years from the words which first announced our separation from the colonial power that held almost 4 million people captive in 1776 and which proclaimed thirteen colonies as one independent nation. Not that the states saw themselves as much connected; that would take another 13 years until the ratification of the Constitution.

I have come to a personal approach to our two most important founding documents which satisfies my appreciation for what was created as well as my view that the most *essential* ideas put forth were the values – specifically, the principles in the two paragraphs at the start of this article. These values remain solid to me – lodestars which 250 years from their promulgation remain worthy of our efforts to achieve.

The phrases I have underlined above from both documents are followed by the notion that what then is presented, it is hoped, will allow us to achieve the aspirational principles listed. "to secure these rights", "in order to form" – now, they tell us, we will form a government, and in the Constitution, they give us their best recipe for a government that would hopefully fulfill these ideals.

I tell my workshop participants that MY approach to the Constitution is to judge the government the Framers *invented* - our government was an experiment – a mixture of philosophies, concepts, and beliefs, ground together in a cauldron of compromises in the heat of a Philadelphia summer – by the degree to which it achieved the aspirations defined in the Preamble.

55 delegates came and went that summer – the Framers who wrote the Constitution. [The Founders were the broader group of people who were instrumental in founding the country.] 39 men signed the document. Rhode Island never participated. They had ONE and only one goal shared among them – to solidify, through a stronger central/federal government, the states of the United States. If they didn't, there was a pretty fair chance the whole enterprise would fall apart. We were weak.

We were weak because we owed lots of money to countries that had helped us – but the federal government had no authority to force states to pay the debt. We were fragile because states acted like separate nations, through actions like imposing tariffs on each other, which incurred ire. One state actually threatened to go to war with another! Other countries took note of our difficulties and waited to see – might we be vulnerable enough that they could come here and break us apart, divide us up into parts to distribute among themselves?

I like to say the only thing the delegates at the Constitutional convention agreed on was to compromise! And, compromise they did. No one walked out of that convention and thought, gee, we have the perfect Constitution! No, they thought they had done a pretty decent job [They had.] but that it would be improved as we the people saw fit [We haven't done enough of that.].

The aspirations of "insuring domestic Tranquility", "promoting the common Welfare", etc. are wonderful! But I also know that we have to judge the government that was set up by how well it has achieved those ideals. And,

frankly, in many ways it hasn't. And, those ways that it has failed have been largely because the Framers couldn't even imagine what the future held, and how the Constitution might not be able to tackle societal changes we would see. And, that was totally understandable!

We've gone from 4 million people to 340 million! We went from a population that was 95% rural to one that is 95% urban. We went from living one's whole life within 30 miles from where one was born to many who have traveled the world. From a newspaper that told you what was happening in your *county*, perhaps a week or a month later – to almost instantaneous global information. From primarily small businesses to wage work. From concepts of personhood that excluded most to a much more expansive understanding of humanity.

How could they possibly have written a Constitution for all time.

So, this year, at a time when people know so little about what our Constitution actually says, let alone contemplating what critical changes may be needed...

Let's learn more about that era, and, let's step back and ponder over what we, as individuals and as a society, consider to be our most important democratic values; are they the ones we started with, even if they were mostly aspirational then? Let's consider how far we've come [very, far] and how far we would like to go, and, how might we get there. After all, if it's "We the People", we all have to be part of the discussion.

And, by all means, libraries should be among those institutions in the forefront of encouraging this dialog!

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