

Truth and Liberty

L. TOM PERRY

A Memorable Event

At two o'clock this afternoon, throughout all of the United States, bells of all shapes, sizes, and sounds will ring. Two hundred years ago today, at approximately two o'clock our time, delegates to the Grand Convention in Philadelphia started queuing up to sign their proposed constitution of the United States. It would still require nine months before it could really be called a constitution. This happened on 21 June 1788, when New Hampshire, the ninth state, ratified it.

During that hot and humid summer of 1787, the delegates labored nearly four months in a stuffy building with windows closed most of the time to prevent their words from being heard by the outside world during their deliberations. You from the East Coast know what it is like even with air-conditioning. I can't imagine what it would be like with windows closed in a small, stuffy room. Tempers would flare, some delegates would go home early—compromise and crisis would take place. Yet on 17 September 1787 they signed the document that is now the oldest written constitution of its kind in the world. It has served nearly 457

million Americans to date—247 million of whom are alive today.

How was it possible that these delegates, living in an eighteenth-century rural society, could write a constitution that would effectively serve 247 million people living in the twentieth-century space age? What did they know that writers of hundreds of other constitutions since have not known? Was there something unique about its creation or the men who wrote it? Many of the delegates realized the importance of what they were doing. Benjamin Franklin had said that if the convention failed, "mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance despair of establishing governments by human wisdom and leave it to chance, war and conquest" (Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia* [Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966], p. 126). Possibly this is the reason, in spite of ill health and personal suffering, that he attended the convention.

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Another delegate, Rufus King, said that his fears were more agitated for his country than he could express, that he conceived this to be the last opportunity of providing for liberty and happiness for the people. Madison had also said at the beginning of the convention that the delegates “were now digesting a plan which in its operation would decide forever the fate of Republican Government” (26 June 1787, *Records of the Federal Convention*, vol. 1 [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911], 423).

Hamilton had written in the *Federalist Papers*:

It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force. [The Federalist, No. 1]

Certainly, their recent experience with the British and with the Articles of Confederation would have led to this concern, but it still doesn't answer the question of how they were able to write our Constitution. I believe our beloved prophet, Ezra Taft Benson, put his finger on the answer when he said:

It would be erroneous for us, however, to conclude that the document was the sole genius of the Founding Fathers. Theirs was a combined wisdom derived from heavenly inspiration, knowledge of political government from ages past, and the crucible of their own experience. [The Constitution: A Heavenly Banner (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1986), p. 1]

The Assembly

For our purpose today, let's start by looking at some of the delegates. Who were they? What was their background, experience, knowledge? Thomas Jefferson had said of the Convention,

after he heard who the delegates were, that it was “an assembly of demigods” (Jefferson to John Adams, 30 August 1787, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, vol. 2, ed. Lester J. Cappon [Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1959], 196).

John Adams said:

The deliberate union of so great and various a people in such a place is, without all partiality or prejudice, if not the greatest exertion of human understanding, the greatest single effort of national deliberation that the world has ever seen. [John Adams, 26 December 1787, quoted in Clinton Rossiter, ed., 1787: The Grand Convention (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 11]

And Albert J. Beveridge, quoted by Everett Wilson in his book about the Constitution, stated:

*The American system was devised by the ablest group of men who ever appeared at the same time in the same country throughout the history of the world. Just as former times produced masterpieces of literature, philosophy, and art, just as our own period is producing masterpieces in science and commercial organization, so the architects of the American plan of self-disciplined liberty produced a masterpiece of free government. [Quoted by Everett P. Wilson, *The Constitution of the United States of America, a Bulwark of Liberty* (Chadron, Nebraska: Caxton Printers, 1955), pp. 59–60]*

The U.S. Constitution Sesquicentennial Commission asked the question:

Who were the fifty-five men who, in varying degrees, were the framers of our National Constitution? The knowledge concerning some of them is indefinite, but the following facts are substantially correct.

All of them except eight were natives of the colonies. Franklin, the oldest, was 81; Dayton, the youngest, was 26; fourteen were 50 or over; -

twenty-one were less than 40. Twenty-five were college men. . . .

These men were almost without exception acquainted with public affairs: forty-six had been members of one or both of the houses of the colonial or state legislatures; ten attended state constitutional conventions; sixteen had been or were to be governors or presidents of states. In national affairs forty-two were delegates to the Continental Congress, eight were signers of the Declaration of Independence, six signers of the draft of the Articles of Confederation, seven had attended the Annapolis Convention, and three had been executive officers under the Congress. . . . Two future Presidents of the United States took a prominent part in the proceedings of the convention and one future Vice President. Two others were to be candidates for the highest office in the land and these and one other, candidates for the Vice Presidency. The positions which these men had occupied or were later to fill are indicative of the regard in which they were held by their fellow citizens, and of their character and worth.

The most important man in the convention was George Washington; indeed, his acceptance of the deputyship, made reluctantly and after long consideration, was the initial triumph of the movement and a foreshadowing of success, so great was his prestige. Madison and Randolph, his fellow deputies from Virginia, were very active in the work of the convention. . . . Madison's great knowledge of political science, the fact that to him more than to any other deputy public life was a profession, and his grasp of the essential problems before the convention and the means by which they could be solved, enabled him to become the principal architect of the Constitution.

Franklin was the seer of the convention. His great age and infirmities forbade very active participation, and he was probably responsible for little of the detailed results; but his very presence gave the gathering importance and dignity and his advice must have been eagerly sought and carefully considered. He and Washington were the two great harmonizers. Washington presided over the formal

sessions, taking little part in the debate, but in committee of the whole and in the private conferences which were such an important underpinning of the formal structure as it arose, he was in constant consultation with his colleagues. Also, as the character of the plan developed, there was a general recognition of the fact that he must be a leading man in the early operation of the new government, and this of necessity influenced its shape. [History of the Formation of the Union Under the Constitution, Sol Bloom, U.S. Constitution Sesquicentennial Commission (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941), pp. 16–17]

Years after the convention, James Madison had written:

I feel it a duty to express my profound and solemn conviction, derived from my intimate opportunity of observing and appreciating the views of the Convention, collectively and individually, that there never was an assembly of men, charged with a great and arduous trust, who were more pure in their motives, or more exclusively or anxiously devoted to the object committed to them, than were the members of the Federal Convention of 1787. [Debates on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution, arr. Jonathan Elliot, vol. 5 (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1901), p. 122]

They were extremely knowledgeable of government and had gained considerable experience as a result of serving in their various states. Some twenty-three of the signers had served in the War for Independence and were intimately familiar with deprivation and suffering caused by a weak central government and the lack of a strong union. George Washington had served eight years as their commander and understood, better than most, this need. Even those who hadn't felt the direct effects of a weak and inefficient government at Valley Forge, Morristown, New York, and other battle sites had witnessed the deteriorating state of their republic after the war:

commerce problems, rebellion, inflation caused by the printing of money. This was enough to convince even the most ardent supporters of the Articles of Confederation that something had to be done to render the Articles effective to the needs of the day.

Their individual and collective experience gained from the war and their involvement in state and national government would help. Some had helped write their state constitutions; but they needed more—an understanding of what had been tried in the past and what other ideas and opinions and options were available to them. Most of the delegates were ardent students of government and had read extensively on the subject. In fact, during the previous two decades, America had been awash with political tracts and writings on government and liberty. It was of deep interest to me to find their major source of ideas for the Constitution:

Two professors, Donald S. Lutz and Charles S. Hyneman, have reviewed an estimated 15,000 items, and closely read 2,200 books, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and monographs with explicitly political content printed between 1760 and 1805. . . .

*From these items, [they] identified 3,154 references to other sources. The source most often cited by the founding fathers was the Bible, which accounted for 34 percent of all citations. The fifth book of the Bible, Deuteronomy, because of its heavy emphasis on biblical law, was referred to frequently. The most cited thinkers were not deists and philosophers, but conservative legal and political thinkers who often were also Christians. [John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987), pp. 51–52]*

The Hand of Providence

Now we have so far reviewed two elements mentioned by President Benson—experience and knowledge. What about heavenly inspiration? Did any of the delegates attribute the writing of the Constitution to inspiration?

The challenge before the delegates at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 was how to protect the individual's basic rights and, at the same time, provide for a union. Before the convention started, George Washington, who was elected president of the convention, said:

*It is probable that no plan we propose will be adopted. Perhaps another dreadful conflict is to be sustained. If to please the people we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterwards defend our work? Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair. The event is in the hand of God. [Frank Donovan, *Mr. Madison's Constitution* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1965), p. 39]*

A year later, the day after Massachusetts ratified the Constitution, Washington wrote to another friend, Lafayette, of the miraculous nature of their efforts:

*It appears to me, then, little short of a miracle, that the Delegates from so many different States (which States you know are also different from each other in their manners, circumstances and prejudices) should unite in forming a system of national government. [Letter of 7 February 1788, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings of George Washington* (1788), vol. 29 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931–1944), p. 409]*

As president of the convention, George Washington also said:

*The hand of Providence has been conspicuous in all this, that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations. [Washington to Brigadier-General Nelson, 20 August 1778; quoted by William J. Johnson, *George Washington the Christian* (Milford, Michigan: Mott Media, 1919, 1976), pp. 119–20]*

Many of the other delegates also recognized divine inspiration in their work. Writing in *The Federalist* (No. 37), James Madison, often referred to as the Father of the Constitution, wrote:

It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it a finger of that Almighty hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution.

Alexander Hamilton, famous as the originator of *The Federalist* and author of 51 of the papers, said:

For my own part, I sincerely esteem it a system, which, without the finger of God, never could have been suggested and agreed upon by such a diversity of interests. [Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *Essays on the Constitution of the United States* (Brooklyn, New York: Historical Printing Club, 1892), p. 288]

In a letter to the editor of the *Federal Gazette* in 1755, Benjamin Franklin said:

I have so much Faith in the general Government of the world by Providence, that I can hardly conceive a Transaction of such momentous Importance to the Welfare of Millions now existing, and to exist in the Posterity of a great Nation, should be suffered to pass without being in some degree influenc'd, guided, and governed by that omnipotent, omnipresent, and beneficent Ruler, in whom all inferior spirits live, and move, and have their Being. [Albert H. Smyth, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 9 (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1970), p. 702]

Such comments were not limited to delegates themselves, but came from others who had studied the events concerned as well. Daniel Webster, a noted defender of the Constitution, although not a delegate, said in 1847:

I regard it (the Constitution) as the work of the purest patriots and the wisest statesmen that ever existed, aided by the smiles of a benignant Providence; . . . it almost appears a Divine interposition in our behalf. . . . [T]he hand that destroys the Constitution rends our Union asunder for ever. [*The Works of Daniel Webster*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1851), p. 404]

And we can look today for great students of the Constitution, one being my fellow apostle, Elder Dallin H. Oaks. He recently spoke here in Provo, while most of you students were away during the summer, and cited five inspired fundamentals of that document:

1. *The separation of powers in the three branches of govt;*
2. *The division of powers between the states and federal government;*
3. *The Bill of Rights;*
4. *The principle of popular sovereignty;*
5. *There is divine inspiration in the fundamental underlying premise of our whole constitutional order, the rule of law and not of men.*

All the blessings we enjoy under the United States Constitution are dependent upon the rule of law. That is why President J. Reuben Clark said, "Our allegiance run[s] to the Constitution and to the principles which it embodies, and not to individuals." The rule of law is the basis of liberty. [*The Divinely Inspired Constitution*, speech given 5 July 1987 at the Freedom Festival Religious Service, Provo, Utah, pp. 11–12]

Concerning the fourth of these great truly divine principles inspired by the fundamentals, that of the sovereignty of the people, Elder Oaks also said:

Perhaps the most important of the great fundamentals of our inspired Constitution is the principle of popular sovereignty: The people are the source of government power. Along with many religious people, Latter-day Saints affirm that God gave the

power to the people, and the people consented to a constitution that delegated certain powers to the government. Sovereignty is not inherent in a state or nation just because it has the power that comes from force of arms. Sovereignty does not come from the divine right of a king, who grants his subjects such power as he pleases or is forced to concede, as in Magna Charta. The sovereign power is in the people. I believe this is one of the great meanings in the revelation which tells us that God established the Constitution of the United States.

“That every man may act . . . according to the moral agency which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment.

“Therefore, it is not right that any man should be in bondage one to another.

“And for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land.” [D&C 101:78–80]

In other words, the most desirable condition for the effective exercise of God-given moral agency is a condition of maximum freedom and responsibility. In this condition men are accountable for their own sins and cannot blame their political conditions on their bondage to a king or a tyrant. This condition is achieved when the people are sovereign, as they are under the Constitution God established in our nation. From this it follows that the most important words in the United States Constitution are the words in the preamble: “We, the people of the United States . . . , do ordain and establish this Constitution.”

President Ezra Taft Benson expressed the fundamental principle of popular sovereignty when he said, “We [the people] are superior to government and should remain master over it, not the other way around” (The Constitution: A Heavenly Banner [Salt Lake City, Utah; Deseret book, 1986], p. 7). The Book of Mormon explains that principle in these words:

“An unrighteous king doth pervert the ways of all righteousness

“Therefore, choose you by the voice of this people, judges, that ye may be judged according to the laws. . . .

“Now it is not common that the voice of the people desireth anything contrary to that which is right; but it is common for the lesser part of the people to desire that which is not right; therefore this shall ye observe and make it your law—to do your business by the voice of the people.” [Mosiah 29:23–26]

*Popular sovereignty necessarily implies popular responsibility. Instead of blaming their troubles on a king or other sovereign, all citizens must share the burdens and responsibilities of governing. As the Book of Mormon teaches, “the burden should come upon all the people, that every man might bear his part” (Mosiah 29:34). [Oaks, *The Divinely Inspired Constitution*, pp. 9–10]*

Taking on the Responsibility

As a nation, we’ve been showered with numerous blessings that have been a direct result of our Constitution. Unfortunately, many of us have forgotten that with the receipt of such blessings also comes responsibility. Probably our most important responsibility is to ensure the continuance of freedoms that we have received for our children and for our grandchildren. Patriotism is not a spectator sport. We must become involved in the process of freedom.

Wherefore, honest men and wise men should be sought for diligently, and good men and wise men ye should observe to uphold. [D&C 98:10]

Further, we need to understand the great principles of the founding documents. How can we “befriend . . . that law which is the constitutional law of the land” if we are not familiar with it and its genesis? We need to drink deeply at the wellspring of this great document.

We must also recognize that, as President John Adams said, “We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions, unbridled by morality and religion.” We are facing this situation to a

degree in the world today. Therefore, we have the responsibility to remain unspotted from the world, to be upright and honest in all of our dealings, and to *set the example* for that which we have been given. Francis Grund wrote:

The American Constitution is remarkable for its simplicity; but it can only suffice a people habitually correct in their actions, and would be utterly inadequate to the wants of a different nation. Change the domestic habits of the Americans, their religious devotion, and their high respect for morality, and it will not be necessary to change a single letter of the Constitution in order to vary the whole form of their government. [Francis J. Grund, *The Americans, in Their Moral, Social, and Political Relations* (Boston: Marsh, Capen and Lyon, 1837), p. 171]

As Latter-day Saints we should take to heart what the late President David O. McKay counseled: “Next to being one in worshipping God there is nothing in this world upon which this Church should be more united than in upholding . . . the Constitution of the United States” (CR, October 1939, p. 105).

We, as a people, have been the recipients of some of God’s most choice blessings, and I believe they came only as a result of the dedication and sacrifice of our forefathers. We need, at this time and in this place, to follow the counsel of yet another great American, Abraham Lincoln, who said:

Let every American, every level of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity [support the Constitution.] Let . . . it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in primers, spelling-books, and in almanacs; let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; [and in particular, establish a reverence

for the Constitution.] [Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln, ed. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, vol. 1 (New York: Francis D. Tandy Co., 1905), p. 43]

I love this great land of the free. I always feel a great feeling of pride within my very soul whenever the flag passes by. I was taught this as a young child when Dad would always make us get out of the car when the American flag passed by in a parade. These feelings have only increased over the years as I stood as a young Boy Scout in early-morning flag-raising ceremonies and pledged allegiance to the flag each day throughout the years I attended school.

Yes, and there have been times on foreign soil when after a battle I stood and, in dirty dungarees and with a rifle in hand, saluted our flag as it was raised to the top of a handmade flagpole.

*Oh, thus be it ever, when free men shall stand
Between their loved homes and the war’s desolation!
Blest with vict’ry and peace, may the heav’n-
rescued land
Praise the Pow’r that hath made and preserved us a
nation!
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto: “In God is our Trust!”
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall
wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave!*
[Hymns, 1985, no. 340]

May God bless each of us with a desire to gain a real understanding of the blessings granted to us under this great Constitution of the United States of America. And may we have the strength and the courage to defend and uphold it for our generation and for all who follow after us. This is my humble prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.