



The Constitution—Based on Need and Compromise, Not Perfection

“The Constitution that is submitted, is not free from imperfections[sic]; but there are as few radical defects in it as could well be expected, considering the heterogeneous[sic] mass of which the Convention was composed--and the diversity of interests which were to be reconciled. A Constitutional door being opened, for future alterations and amendments, I think it would be wise in the People to adopt what is offered to them...”

—**George Washington** (Letter to David Humphrey, October 10, 1787)

“In questions of power...let no more be heard of confidence in men, but bind him down from mischief by the chains of the Constitution.”

—**Thomas Jefferson** (Resolutions, 1803)

“Constitutions should consist only of general provisions; the reason is that they must necessarily be permanent, and that they cannot calculate for the possible changes of things.”

—**Alexander Hamilton**

“‘We, the People of the United States.’ Which, ‘We, the People?’ The women were not included.”

—**Lucy Stone**, American suffragist (New York Tribune, April 1853)

“But the provisions of the Constitution are not mathematical formulas having their essence in the form; they are organic living institutions transplanted from English soil. Their significance is vital, not formal...”

—**Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.** (Gompers v. United States, 1914)

“We believe... that when the men who met in 1787 to make a Constitution and make the best political document ever made, they did it very largely because they were great compromisers.”

—**Judge Learned Hand** (in Irving Dillard, The Spirit of Liberty, 1960)

“...I do not believe that the meaning of the Constitution was forever ‘fixed’ at the Philadelphia Convention. Nor do I find the wisdom, foresight, and sense of justice exhibited by the Framers particularly profound. To the contrary, the government they devised was defective from the start, requiring several amendments, a civil war, and momentous social transformation to attain the system of constitutional government, and its respect for the individual freedoms and human rights we hold fundamental today. When contemporary Americans cite ‘The Constitution,’ they invoke a concept that is vastly different from what the Framers barely began to construct two centuries ago.”

—**Thurgood Marshall** (“Race and the Constitution,” Social Policy, 1987)

“One who belongs to the most vilified and persecuted minority in history is not likely to be insensible to the freedom guaranteed in the Constitution.”

—**Felix Frankfurter** (West Virginia v. Barnette, 1943)

“It is doubtful whether a man is enough of a political animal to produce a good, sensible, serious and efficient constitution. All evidence is against it.”

—**George Bernard Shaw** (1933)

“It is the genius of our Constitution that under its shelter of enduring institutions and rooted principles there is ample room for the rich fertility of American political invention.”

—**Lyndon Baines Johnson** (Message to Congress, Jan. 12, 1966)