



Citizenship Day and Constitution Week, 1989

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

Two hundred years ago, the great experiment in free and democratic government launched by our Nation's Founding Fathers was just beginning. Our Constitution—the oldest written national constitution still extant today—had been carefully drafted by 55 men gathered in Philadelphia during the long, hot summer of 1787. Today, we rejoice because the system of government it established has not only endured, but prospered. Indeed, the great document we celebrate this week changed forever the course of human history.

In 1787, the future of the United States was still uncertain. However, it was very clear that the Articles of Confederation—which had loosely assembled the 13 States in a "league of friendship"—needed to be revised. After our country's independence was formally recognized by the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the cause that once united the 13 colonies had been won—and they fell to contentiousness and discord.

The Congress of the Confederation, then the central government of the United States, was nearly bankrupt. It had no authority to impose taxes and no power to collect them. The States were printing their own money, which was often worth little inside their borders and nothing beyond them. Engaged in disputes over territorial boundaries and the use of each other's ports and roadways, the former colonies were on the verge of splitting into 13 separate, wholly sovereign—perhaps even hostile—nations. Their lack of unity left the young country highly vulnerable to the threats of European powers.

A number of American leaders at the time, including Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, called for a convention of the States to reform the Articles of Confederation. George Washington, frustrated by the Congress' inability to provide for the Continental Army, echoed their concerns when he sharply noted that "Influence is no government." Once relations between several of the States reached a crisis point, the Congress of the Confederation finally agreed to a Federal Convention.

Through months of intense debate and skillful compromise, the delegates to the Federal Convention carefully shaped our Constitution. Knowing the danger of relying upon human wisdom alone in forming a free and just government, they often prayed for Divine guidance as they defined the powers of the Congress and the President; established the manner in which legislators and the President would be elected; outlined the Judicial system; and asserted States' rights. The Founding Fathers also provided for amendment, as well as ratification, of the Constitution.

More than 200 years after it was written, our Constitution is a glorious testament to the wisdom and foresight of its Framers. Today, we celebrate the success of their labors. The Constitution, and the Bill of Rights later added to it, has been a blessing to every American citizen and a light to the world.

All Americans have an obligation to ensure that this shining experiment in self-government continues to succeed. As citizens of a free Nation, each of us has both the right and the responsibility to become educated and informed; to vote for those who represent us; and to participate at all levels of government. This week, let us give thanks for the freedom we so enjoy, and let us pause to learn more about our rights and duties as American citizens. For, as President Washington stated in his first Annual Message to the Congress:

Knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness. . . . To the security of a free Constitution it contributes in various ways—by convincing those who are intrusted with the public administration that every valuable end of government is best answered by the enlightened confidence of the people, and by teaching the people themselves to know and value their own rights . . . to distinguish between oppression and the necessary exercise of authority . . . to discriminate the spirit of liberty from that of licentiousness—cherishing the first, avoiding the last—and uniting a speedy but temperate vigilance against encroachments, with an inviolable respect to the laws.

The Congress, by joint resolution of February 29, 1952 (36 U.S.C. 153), designated September 17 as "Citizenship Day" in commemoration of the signing of the Constitution and in recognition of all who, by birth or by naturalization, have attained the status of citizenship, and authorized the President to issue annually a proclamation calling upon officials of the government to display the flag on all government buildings on that day. Also, by joint resolution of August 2, 1956 (36 U.S.C. 159), the Congress designated the week beginning September 17 and ending September 23 of each year as "Constitution Week" in recognition of the historic importance of the Constitution and the significant role it plays in our lives today.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, GEORGE BUSH, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim September 17, 1989, as Citizenship Day and call upon appropriate government officials to display the flag of the United States on all government buildings. I urge Federal, State, and local officials, as well as leaders of civic, social, and educational organizations, to conduct ceremonies and programs to commemorate the occasion.

Furthermore, I proclaim the week beginning September 17 and ending September 23, 1989, as Constitution Week, and I urge all Americans to observe that week with appropriate ceremonies and activities.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this fifteenth day of September, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-nine, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and fourteenth.

