

B A C K T O CIVICS

*Helping Your Students Celebrate—
And Understand—the Constitution*

By Gary M. Ross

For more than a century, Adventist colleges have declared that they prepare students for redemption, employment, and citizenship. Let us take a look at the third of these desirables.

It is so much a “given,” Mortimer Adler says, that we rarely verbalize *why* civics should matter to educated people. The answer is both surprising and compelling. Conventional wisdom suggests that people who owe allegiance to government and receive protection from government should know much about their civil rights and obligations. Naturally, but incorrectly, we tend to regard ourselves as mere subjects of government—rather than as the government itself.

But in the American scheme of things, *the people are the government*. Citizens constitute the ruling class—the permanent, principal rulers—as contrasted with government officials who are transient, temporary, instrumental.

Because this republican feature of the American government attracts people to consider and debate its operations, the origins of America’s constitutional experiment acquire enormous signifi-

cance. Non-Americans find the subject equally valuable for a different reason: through comparative study they gain a richer, fuller appreciation of their own system of government.

Looking Back

During the present year, the story of constitutional origins easily catches the attention—especially the historic moment in 1787 when a relatively small group of men in Philadelphia bequeathed to Americans (some would say bequeathed to the world) the Federal Constitution. This document erased a false start at nation-building, the Articles of Confederation. It also guaranteed that, having won the war, America would survive the peace as a unified and respected entity.

Why this obsession with Philadelphia? Partly because the federal budget deficit has invited talk of a constitutional convention in order to draft a balanced-budget amendment. This directs attention back to the first and only national constitutional convention ever held in our nation—the one in Philadelphia.

A Reason to Celebrate

A shift in the American spirit also explains the celebration—citizens once despairing over Vietnam, Watergate, and the Iranian hostages, are now proud and boastful of being Americans. Americans like

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to celebrate, and they are in the celebrating mode again. Such commemoration causes us to resurrect the images of the Founding Fathers with patriotic zeal.

And of course, this year—1987—conjures up 1787, the Bicentennial of the Philadelphia Convention, offering a long-term civics lesson

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that few people will escape.

Rarely is it as timely as now to talk of who we are, and what we are, as a nation; and to do so in the captivating historical context of the grand, stellar, august Philadelphia Convention. Rarely, in other words, does studying the past have such relevance, which is exactly what today's student demands of it.

Seizing the Moment

Teachers must imaginatively exploit this situation. Wherever appropriate, they should emphasize late-18th century America. Guest lecturers, carefully chosen readings and films, and role-playing exercises are only some of the ways they may focus such empha-

sis. By whatever method, provocative questions of the kind mentioned later in this article should be explored.

Is the foregoing too obvious to mention? Is the return to civics so natural and automatic that teachers need little prompting in this regard? Unfortunately not. Powerful arguments arise for *not* celebrating the Constitution and its origins. These must be surmounted or a grand opportunity will be lost.

Commercialization

Some say it is hazardous or even counterproductive to visit the shrine of the original document. Celebration will lead to commer-

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cialization. It will encourage too much flag-waving for a document that subsequently changed and evolved. It will popularize constitutional conventions, so much good having come from the first one. It will dampen the use of civic knowledge gained—for if the document is so laudable, then it must be self-operating—not dependent on citizens' exercising their responsibilities.

Prophetic Interpretation

Others allow Scripture to sidetrack them from civic concerns. Forgetting that Romans 13 extols government as divinely instituted, they invoke the vintage Adventist interpretation of Revelation 13 as a veiled and very uncomplimentary description of America: a nation that eventually betrays her enlightened foundations. Even if no one quite says so, many Adventists regard the Constitution as a scrap of paper soon to be nullified by end-time events. Such a document would surely lack the resilience that prompts admiration and celebration.

Lack of a Bill of Rights

The greatest deterrent to the Bicentennial festivities is an argument first used by the Anti-Federalists in the ratification battle of 1788: the unamended Constitution is flawed because it lacks a bill of rights. This was tantamount to accusing the founders of betraying the Revolution, consolidating the Union at the expense of liberty, and inadequately considering the potential of centralized government.

Whereas the Declaration of Independence itemized some inalienable rights that had nevertheless to be secured, people looked in vain for evidence that the Federal Constitution "secured" their liberties. To this day, therefore, some loathe the thought of celebrating the unamended Constitution, preferring to await 1991, the anniversary of the First Congress and its amendments to the Constitution.

Answers to Objectives

Can we find ways around these deterrents? Consider just the last of the three. A time-lag did in fact occur between the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. When confronted with their alleged oversight, the Philadelphia delegates emphasized the redundancy of a rights guarantee. That is, they claimed that *the unamended Constitution itself protected individual liberty*.

Was this true? The Federalists made a strong case. They noted, first, the inclusion in the Constitution of certain carryovers from the English legal tradition such as jury trials and restraints on illegal imprisonment.

Then they pointed to the prohibition of religious tests for office holding, which of course anticipated religious liberty in both its free exercise and no-establishment forms.

Finally, they demonstrated how the power configurations under the Constitution, especially the new federalism and the separation of powers, assured liberty and averted tyranny.

Accordingly, liberty-oriented Seventh-day Adventists have powerful reasons to celebrate the Constitution of 1787 and to encounter government anew. Adventists—along with other citizens—must understand government because each of us ultimately is the government. Each citizen is a part of "We the people" upon whom the government rests.

How to Celebrate

But beyond displaying the Constitution and offering vague platitudes about liberty and freedom, how can teachers help their students to celebrate the Bicentennial of the Constitution and to become informed citizens? They can start by asking questions.

Presumptuous as it would be to list all the "right" questions, here are a dozen starters:

1. What were the intellectual currents that the Framers of the Constitution imbibed and distilled from the respected thought of their age?

2. What is meant by such basic governmental terms as *federalism*,

Helpful Resource Materials

I. The Writing of the Constitution

- Adler, Mortimer J. *We Hold These Truths: Understanding the Ideas and Ideals of the Constitution*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987.
- Barbash, Fred. *Founding: A Dramatic Account of the Writing of the Constitution*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.
- Berstein, Richard B. *Are We to Be a Nation? The Making of the Constitution*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Bowen, Catherine Drinker. *Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1966.
- Collier, Christopher, and James. *Decision at Philadelphia: The Constitutional Convention of 1787*. New York: Random House, 1986.
- McDonald, Forrest. *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985.
- Rossiter, Clinton. *1787: The Grand Convention*. New York: New American Library, 1985.

II. Church-State Relations

- Alley, Robert S., editor. *James Madison of Religious Liberty*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1985.
- Buckley, Thomas. *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776-1787*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977.
- Levy, Leonard W. *The Establishment Clause: Religion and the First Amendment*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1986.
- Miller, William Lee. *The First Liberty: Religion and the American Republic*. New York: Knopf, 1986.
- Swomley, John M. *Religious Liberty and the Secular State: The Constitutional Context*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1987.

democracy, republicanism, and the separation of powers?

3. Was the United States ever a "Christian nation" of the kind ultra-conservatives today say they wish to recreate?

4. Is it possible to determine the "original intent" of the authors of the Constitution, and if so, how?

5. What view of man inspired the principal author, James Madison?

6. What is the relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution?

7. What is the significance of having a *written* Constitution?

8. How might one relate to the relative youth of our nation as compared with other western and eastern countries?

9. What makes the Constitution a "living" document that changes through time?

10. What useful insights may be gained by comparing the U.S. Constitution with other written or unwritten codes of government?

11. Does it matter that the Philadelphia Convention violated its mandate and replaced what it was simply asked to revise?

12. Why does the well-being of the republic depend on its citizens' commitment to civic virtue?

As we struggle with these and other questions, the Bicentennial can lead us back to civics. To the extent that this happens, John Adams' lament that "more people love liberty than understand it" need not apply to SDA students. □

PART-TIME COLLEGE STUDENT

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25 students) to encourage networking and maximum involvement.

In my work with nontraditional college students, I have been able to make some comparisons between a small American Adventist college and a large Australian state institution. Essentially the difference is one of basic philosophy and statement of purpose. Whereas the state educates for the tangible, natural world, Adventist higher education seeks to go beyond—to educate for the supernatural domain. The Adventist college must confront every student with the story of a God who is Creator, Saviour, and soon-coming King. In so doing, Adventist schools help

A Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching study found that part-time students report a slightly higher grade-point average than full-time students.

their students understand how Christian ethics relate to their whole life.

Achieving Integration

But this integration, this confrontation often occurs outside class time—in worships, church services, weeks of prayer, and student missionary projects. How can the Adventist college share this message with its entire student body when some of its students do not participate in traditional religious activities?

To answer this question, we need to look at other positive characteristics of an Adventist college. Adventist institutions of higher learning possess two unique qualities that work for any student category: smallness and a pervading principle of caring concern. This is demonstrated by the instructor who provides a home telephone number along with the office number. It is shown by the director of continuing education who remembers the names and problems of enrollees in his or her program. It is seen by the students when they are treated as individuals by the accounting department, the records office, the bookstore, and the library.

Non-Adventist part-time students repeatedly talk about a positive and renewed religious experience as a direct result of the influence by faculty and departmental staff. I have witnessed the delight on students' faces when the president stops by unexpectedly at their class for a few minutes. I have observed the calm that pervades a class as the instructor offers prayer before an examination.

Inherent Dangers

Yet there is inherent danger in Adventist colleges and universities' catering to the part-time nontraditional student. This risk centers on the danger of compromise. Many public and private institutions have seen part-time students as the solution to their current enrollment and financial predicaments. Indeed, many colleges have survived only because they have entered this new educational market.

Adventist higher education must avoid the temptation to view part-time students simply as a budgetary windfall. Unless nontraditional students can be integrated into the total evangelistic mission of the school, then such programs have no place in the Adventist system of education. To view part-time students in terms of their contribution to balancing the budget is to eventually jeopardize all programs on campus.

Nevertheless, the part-time student phenomenon offers more positives than negatives. At a time of dwindling full-time, traditional enrollments, such students are the wave of the future. If Adventist colleges plan wisely, analyzing the needs of potential students and integrating the Christian dimension into every area of the curriculum, they will have seized an opportunity that is too good to miss. □

REFERENCES

¹ "Part-timers Myths and Realities," The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Change* (July-August 1986), p. 50.

² "Participation in Adult Education, May 1984," U.S. Department of Education, Office of Education Research and Improvement, Center for Statistics, Washington, D.C., October 1984, in *OALS Network News*, Office of Adult Learning Services, The College Board (April 1987), p. 3.

³ "Continuing Education and the American Workforce—Report of the National Advisory Council on Continuing Education," *American Education* (April 1984), p. 6.

⁴ "Participation in Adult Education, May 1984," p. 3.

⁵ "Part-timers Myths and Realities," p. 49.

⁶ Julie M. Backus, "Adult Student Needs and University Instructional Practices," *Journal of Teacher Education* (May-June 1984), p. 14.

⁷ J. W. Apps, *The Adult Learner on Campus* (Chicago: Follett, 1981), pp. 49-51.