

# Introduction

*Every member of the State ought diligently to read and to study the constitution of his country, and teach the rising generation to be free. By knowing their rights, they will sooner perceive when they are violated, and be the better prepared to defend and assert them.<sup>1</sup>*

Like many of you, I am a product of the public schools, in my case mostly through the 1970s. It speaks poorly of our education system, but I learned more about our Constitution from School House Rock than I did in all the social studies classes in 12 years of government-run schooling. Little did I realize how far we had drifted from the supreme law of the land! I didn't know because I didn't care. Like many of you, I thought the Constitution was for lawyers and judges. Then I stumbled across a gentleman by the name of David Barton and his organization WallBuilders.

We often hear 'what you don't know won't hurt you', but experience tells me that it's what you know which isn't true that gets you in real trouble. It was through David Barton and the WallBuilders podcast that I started to learn how much I didn't know about how our form of government is supposed to work. More importantly, I began to learn how much of what I had been taught just wasn't true. And it wasn't just their opinion: WallBuilders has one of the largest private collections

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<sup>1</sup> John Jay's Charge to the Grand Jury of Ulster County (1777) and Charge to the Grand Juries (1790).

of original documents from the early years of our nation. Using these original documents David Barton and WallBuilders showed what our Founding Fathers had set up, why they did it the way they did, and how our country operated for the first century and a half of its existence.

The more I learned the more frustrated I got, not only with how our government operates, but what we expect from our legislators. The John Jay quote beginning this Introduction encouraged me to read and study more. I read the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Federalist and Anti-Federalist papers. I sought out other teachers and podcasters, always comparing them to the original documents to see if what they were saying was true. During this time, I not only learned how much I didn't know, but how much most people didn't care.

Then one day I was at a family cook-out at my cousin's place. It had become routine during these cook-outs that I would sit down with my cousin's two oldest boys and discuss politics, the Constitution, and current events. Occasionally, one or two people would sit in for a while, but it was mostly just the three of us. This cook-out would turn out to be different.

As I got up from the picnic table where I had been sitting with my two cousins, a couple of family friends asked if they could discuss something with me. Always ready for a good discussion, I said "sure" and sat back down. The topic at hand happened to be capital punishment, but what is more important to this story is what happened during the discussion. As we discussed the topic from a Constitutional, Biblical, and moral point of view, I eventually noticed several people had stopped their conversations and either joined us at our table or turned their chairs to listen. Within 15 minutes I was "holding court" with about a dozen people listening to my point of view on the topic and the methods and reasons I had for that point of view. When we had finished, the family friends thanked me for helping them understand a complex and contentious topic using language they could easily understand.

This made me think: Could part of the problem with a lack of understanding of our Constitution be how it was taught? Could it be that a focus on names and dates was less effective than the stories and reasons

behind the document? Could a practical application of Constitutional ideas engage people better than a “history lesson”? More to the point, if I could keep a dozen friends and family engaged in a discussion on how to apply our understanding of the Constitution to a topic, could I engage more people as well?

If the family cook-out kindled the idea of teaching others about the Constitution, a friend’s Bible study really got the fire going. I was driving home from said Bible study one night listening to a WallBuilder’s podcast. In this episode, David Barton brought up the report “The State of the First Amendment: 2013” from the First Amendment Center. The report summarizes the findings from their 2013 survey of the attitudes of Americans about the First Amendment. In this report, they found that 36% of those surveyed could not name a single freedom protected by the First Amendment.

If this survey was representative of the nation as a whole, more than one-third of Americans had no idea what freedoms are protected by the First Amendment! I must admit, I didn’t hear much more of the episode as I fumed over the ignorance of my fellow Americans, the carelessness we use to teach our children, and the utter failure of the education system to teach the young. No wonder we see college students who don’t know when the Revolutionary War was fought or against whom. Even worse, this would explain why we see people clamor for government to do something when they have no clue what the federal government was designed to do in the first place.

Then a radical thought hit me. Why can’t we study the Constitution the same way I had just studied the Bible? Not with high-school teachers or college professors spouting dates and names from books that don’t even reference the historical documents they claim to be reviewing, and certainly not with long-winded dissertations how a passage means the exact opposite of what it plainly says. Could we go back and read the documents themselves, discuss them in small groups, express our opinions, and then compare them to the actual words on paper? If I could learn about the Constitution on my own, would others be interested in doing it themselves as well?

I discussed the idea with friends and family and many agreed it would be a good idea. One friend took the initiative and reached out to the local public library to see if we could have the studies there. We set a date and time, I put together an outline for our first meeting, and the Constitution Study was born.

I remember sitting in the library's meeting room with my daughter, wondering if anyone would come. Was this just a fool's errand? Would other people take time out of their busy days to discuss the Constitution? First one friend arrived, then another. Then a couple of people I didn't know but had heard of our study by word of mouth, then another who saw the sign we had put in front of the library. All totaled, 15 people came and looked to me to see what this Constitution Study was all about. I asked them to name the five freedoms listed in the First Amendment and got answers similar to the 2013 First Amendment report mentioned above. I then described how important it was for the people to understand how our government was designed to work and how this Constitution Study would work.

Studying the Constitution is not as hard as you may think. Over the years we have delegated the privilege of reading and understanding the Constitution to a high priesthood of nine people in black robes: The supreme Court of the United States and their acolytes: The judges, lawyers, and clerks of our legal system. However, this is not how the Constitution was written. (You may have noticed that I do not capitalize "supreme" when referring to the court. That is because in the Constitution supreme is an adjective describing the court, not a part of a proper noun.)

We sometimes act like reading the Constitution is some grand accomplishment. The U.S. Constitution is only approximately 8,000 words long, including all the amendments, and the Declaration of Independence only adds about 1,500 more. Compared to the King James Bible (approx. 780,000 words), War and Peace (approx. 585,000 words), or the first Harry Potter book (approx. 76,000 words), it's just not that large. In fact, the average reader should be able to get through the Constitution in about 20 minutes and the Declaration in another 5. I

try to read it through 2-3 times a year; it doesn't take much time and it reminds me how things are supposed to be.

Some people say only lawyers can understand it. In one word I say: HOGWASH! The Constitution was sent around the country for everyone to read before the states voted to ratify it. Newspapers carried essays for and against certain provisions of the Constitution. These essays were the Federalist Papers and Anti-Federalist Papers. They were also written so that the average 18<sup>th</sup> century farmer could read and understand them. Sure, some of the words are unfamiliar to us and some of the clauses may require us to think about them to understand, but are 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans not as literate as an 18<sup>th</sup> century farmer? Or have we been taught that it's too difficult, so just leave it to the professionals? Our Founding Fathers didn't think so. Remember John Jay's quote? "Every member of the State ought diligently to read and to study the constitution of his country ..."<sup>2</sup> Not "every lawyer and politician should read it" (though I wish they would) and not only the "trained should read it," but everyone should read it. This is our heritage and was created to guarantee our freedom! Don't you think it's worth 30 minutes to read? Don't you think it's worth some time to study with others?

*Now more than ever the people are responsible for the character of their Congress. If that body be ignorant, reckless, and corrupt, it is because the people tolerate ignorance, recklessness, and corruption. If it be intelligent, brave, and pure, it is because the people demand these high qualities to represent them in the national legislature. . . . [I]f the next centennial does not find us a great nation . . . it will be because those who*

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<sup>2</sup> John Jay's Charge to the Grand Jury of Ulster County (1777) and Charge to the Grand Juries (1790).

*represent the enterprise, the culture, and the morality of the nation do not aid in controlling the political forces.*<sup>3</sup>

I'm sure you've all heard the joke: "How can you tell when a politician is lying?" The answer, of course, is "When their lips are moving!" While this is a sad commentary on the state of politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it's an even sadder commentary on the state of our society. What does it say about us that we hire people to represent us who we know are lying to us? What does it say about Americans that those who lie the best keep their jobs the longest? If these people represent us, what does their character say about us as a nation? It seems to be a universal truth that, more often than not, our government represents the worst of our natures, not the best. It is ultimately our fault if there is a problem in Washington. If that is the bad news, the good news is that we can fix it, but it will take a long time and is probably not the path you expected.

In Colonial times, people would get together in taverns to discuss news, politics, and whatever was of interest at the time. In colleges and universities now, it is common for students to form study groups to help each other. I picture a Constitution Study as a merger of these two concepts. I want to see local and Internet communities get together to discuss the Constitution and the news of the day. Like a group of students, they should be there to read and study the material at hand, i.e., the Constitution. Someone should coordinate the meetings and plan a schedule, but it should be a free and open discussion of the document and how it applies to events of the day. The standard must be what the Constitution actually says and the original intent of those who wrote it and those who ratified it. The states ratified the Constitution and its amendments based on the words on the page and their common meaning at that time, not what some 21<sup>st</sup> century judge can twist the words to mean. Remember, the Declaration, the Constitution, and the Federalist

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<sup>3</sup> James A. Garfield, *The Works of James Abram Garfield*, Burke Hinsdale, editor (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1883), Vol. II, pp. 486, 489, "A Century of Congress," July, 1877.

and Anti-Federalist Papers were all written for, read, and discussed by 18<sup>th</sup> century farmers.

If we want to change Washington, we must first take responsibility for the state that it is in and for our lack of knowledge about how it should work. One look at the recent debate about the repeal and replacement of Obamacare should show that, once people get to Washington, they are probably already too far gone to make meaningful change. No, we need to look at this a different way. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. We only need to do three things to restore some semblance of sanity in Washington.

First, we must educate ourselves and those around us on how our government was designed to work. So much of what Washington does is blatantly unconstitutional, yet millions of people ignore this fact and, in many cases, asked the government to do it in the first place. Until we know and understand the different roles and responsibilities of the different governments that make up this nation, we will be sailing the open ocean with neither star nor compass to guide us.

Second, we must look for candidates in local and state elections who will uphold their oaths to support the constitutions of both the United States and their individual states. While it is extremely difficult to get a meeting with a U.S. Congressman or Senator, I've found sitting down with my state representatives quite easy. In fact, most of them seem to like getting information directly from their constituents.

Shortly after I moved to Tennessee, I reached out to my state senator and representative and asked for a meeting. I told them I was new to the area and wanted to learn what were the big issues that should have my attention. Not only did we have an excellent meeting and discussed many issues, but I found I was able later to email them about a variety of subjects and get responses. I now make it a habit to reach out and talk, if not meet, with both representatives after every session. I congratulate them on legislative actions I thought were good and ask their reasoning on those with which I disagree. I learn about issues and concerns they see coming and try to reply with positions and research that may help or at least reinforce my suggestions. While I cannot claim I've made a

*Paul Engel*

change at the state level, I have at least influenced the people who represent my neighbors and myself at the state capital. Maybe one day they will run for federal office, and hopefully I have made an impression they will take with them.

Third, we must hold our elected representatives accountable for their actions. Voting is important, but even more it is a solemn duty, one which too many of us shrug off, like getting out of jury duty. We need to be looking for men and woman who have demonstrated they will support the Constitution with their deeds and not just their words. Too often we wait until the second Tuesday in November and choose the lesser of two evils. Do you know what you get when you choose the lesser of two evils? You still get evil! Don't wait until the week before the election to decide who to vote for, and please do not vote that party line. Start learning about the candidates during the primaries, or even better, before then. Meet them, talk to them, ask them hard questions, and ask them to show you what they have done to support the Constitution. After all, that is what they are going to swear to do if they take office.

When my congressman voted for something that was plainly unconstitutional, I wrote and told him that he had violated his oath of office (which includes supporting the Constitution) and it was therefore my patriotic duty not only to vote against him, but to do all I could to find someone better to replace him.

*Freedom is never more than one generation away  
from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children  
in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected,  
and handed on for them to do the same, or one day  
we will spend our sunset years telling our children  
and our children's children what it was once like  
in the United States where men were free.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald Reagan Speech to the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce March 30, 1961.



Will you join me? Will you take the first step and begin learning what the Constitution really says and how our government was designed to work? Will you help me return our nation's liberty town by town?

To help you, I have compiled the notes from my original study along with some narration to help you apply it to your life today. I am also working on other resources to help you whether you plan to run a Constitution Study of your own or simply for your own family education. Either way, I hope you join me on this journey to diligently read and study our Constitution. Together we will learn what it means to “plead the fifth”, where you can actually find the much vaunted “Separation of Church and State” (which is NOT in the Constitution), and we’ll discuss the infamous case of yelling “FIRE” in a crowded theater. We’ll look at why we have both a House of Representative and a Senate and why the Constitution gives them the roles they have. We’ll even explore why we haven’t had a constitutional presidential election in the last 70 years, why the Electoral College is necessary to the republic (it may not be what you’ve heard in the past), and how the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Amendments helped destroy the republic. Oh, and you’ll also learn why I consistently refer to the “republic” rather than our “democracy.”

*I must study politics and war, that our sons may  
have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy.<sup>5</sup>*

I hope to find you as another patriot fighting to restore our nation to its proper order. John Adams said he studied politics and war so his children could study mathematics and philosophy. Let us study the Constitution so our children may study mathematics, philosophy, or whatever they want, in a country where men and women are still free!

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<sup>5</sup> John Adams, Letters of John Adams, Addressed to His Wife.