



The Humility of the Founders

How inserting Article V in the Constitution was an act of humility

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The Constitutional Convention that convened in Philadelphia in 1787 was an eloquent demonstration of democracy at work. There were a number of leading citizens among the delegates, but if the group had entrusted the job of writing the new Constitution to one or more of their impressive intellects, it is likely that a United States would not have emerged from the conclave. They perceived that they must, as a group, listen to the ideas suggested by each and every delegate and arrive at a consensus on all of the issues presented. They knew that they would need to compromise on some strongly-held beliefs if they were to be successful in creating a new republic. And compromise they did. They showed the world that democracy can work.

Was the ultimate product of their labors perfect? Of course not, but it was a significant step forward in mankind's quest for freedom from the tyrannical forms of government that had dominated peoples around the world throughout recorded history. The experience of the founders brings to mind the old adage that "perfection is the enemy of the good." They knew this to be true, and produced a serviceable, good product that launched the American Experiment on the world stage. It embraced a fundamental conviction that mankind is capable of self-government in a system that provides substantial freedom for the individual. It introduced to the world two core values for a government: (1) maximum personal freedom for its citizens consistent with the observance of the equal rights of one's fellow citizens and of national security considerations, and (2) the natural, inherent worth of every individual in society. These perceptions had been slowly growing in human consciousness for hundreds of years; our founders seized the opportunity to act on them as they carved out a new society in the new world of North America. And, as the cliché goes, the rest is history.

But you, the reader, know all this . . . the purpose of this essay is to point to a small act of humility by the founders that was truly prescient: the eleventh-hour addition of Article V to the Constitution which provided for its amendment in the future. By this act, the founders were acknowledging that the document they labored so hard to create was the best they could do under the circumstances of the day, but that it was not perfect and there must be provision for its amendment.

With the ink on the new Constitution hardly dry, the wisdom of this was readily apparent as the states considered its ratification. It was quickly agreed that, while personal freedoms were implicit in the document it would be wise to set them out explicitly to make them abundantly clear. The first ten amendments (which we collectively refer to as our Bill of Rights) were quickly written and promptly ratified pursuant to Article V, and the Constitution had survived its first crisis. It emerged a significantly improved document.

Today, our republic is dysfunctional and in dire need of repair. But we face resistance to reform changes from two groups: those who fear that changes to address problems could result in a loss of personal power, and those patriots who idolize the founders and insist that the founders' work cannot be improved. But the founders themselves refuted this form of adulation and acknowledged their humility by giving us Article V, so we must overcome this opposition. First, we must recognize that the lust for power has a very destructive impact on the republic, and second we must help the patriots to see that their actions to block repairs are damaging to the very Constitution and republic they profess to love.

Were the founders insightful? Absolutely. Infallible? Of course not. Audacious? Yes, launching the American Experiment took great courage and trust in their fellow man. Humble? Most certainly, and we should be eternally grateful for that humility, which made the Experiment possible.

We must convince the patriots that, as a society, we are capable of rational self-government while protecting our precious freedoms; they must learn to trust the collective wisdom of the people but distrust the personal hubris that seems to drive many of our political elites. These elites believe that their intellect should be recognized as superior to the collective wisdom of the people, so they should be entrusted with the authority to direct the national political dialogue. But the founders had fought a war to free our country from the elite who ruled the British colonies in America and did not trust them to govern fairly. Instead, they included Article V because they trusted the wisdom of the People when they launched the American Experiment in democracy, and we need to prove that their confidence

was not misplaced. We have the power; we must exercise that power and act now!

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