

REFLECTION

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If you can keep it

October 31, 2025

As Benjamin Franklin is reputed to have responded to Mrs. Elizabeth Willing Powers’ inquiry about the type of government created by the Constitutional Convention of 1787: “A republic, if you can keep it” (Miller, 2022)

The question of whether we can keep our democratic republic is not prone to a quick or short answer. To preserve a republic requires constant vigilance and participation by the people. That means, of course, that you and I must always protect the brave experiment in self-governance that our founders embarked upon. The opening words of the Constitution make that clear: “We the people.” As a reminder, here is the text of the Preamble to the Constitution:

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

That’s quite a mission undertaken by our founders in our name way back in 1787!

Mind you, I a not complaining. I feel honored by the confidence our founders placed in all of us, citizens of the great nation. I am somewhat amazed that they trusted us – their posterity – to carry on bravely with this daring experiment in human governance. I also feel humbled by the burden of responsibility that confidence places of each of us. In order to keep the mission clearly in mind, I have memorized the Preamble. I commend this to every one of my readers. It’s not hard. We all know the Pledge of Allegiance by heart, and, I dare say, most of us know the Lord’s Prayer. The Preamble isn’t any harder to memorize than those two.

Why is it worthwhile to commit the Preamble to memory? Because it keeps in front of us the knowledge that we are the ultimate power of this form of government. That’s right, we are the bosses. Those we elect are our employees. They are not our rulers. There is no higher rank in this country than that of citizen. Senators, Representatives, Mayors, Commissioners, Governors, and Presidents are all the employees of the citizens of the United States of America.

And so they will remain if we the people remember to fulfill our responsibility to oversee them. It takes bravery to stand up to an elected authority, but remembering that we

have temporarily delegated that authority to those we elect may help us to be brave.

It has occurred to me that we are not doing a good enough job of teaching ourselves about the structure of our form of government and that the ultimate authority rests with us. We need to put government back into our elementary and secondary educational curriculum, so that we will graduate knowledgeable and competent citizens. It is deeply troubling that we have allowed ourselves, as a nation, to become abysmally ignorant of what the Constitution, the Supreme Law of the Land, actually says. I am constantly amazed to learn that people I know somehow believe that the Constitution grants rights and that the only rights we have are those enumerated in the Constitution. What do they make of the Ninth Amendment?

Amendment Nine: The enumeration in the Constitution of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

When I am asked where in the Constitution I find the right to some action, I point that person to the Ninth Amendment. When someone says to me that the Constitution doesn’t list some particular behavior as a right, I so want to respond, “Correct and it doesn’t list a right to supper, either.” The guiding principle is found in the Declaration of Independence, which tells us that we are endowed with human rights by our Creator – not by our government.

As the Constitution says, we the people ordained and established it and made it the supreme law of the land. Guess what! That makes us ultimately the government. That’s right, the citizen is, indeed, part of the government. Our system was set up for us to actively participate in our own governance. It’s not supposed to be an “us vs them” situation. It’s supposed to be all of us together. So, when we decide to make lunches available to all school children, it’s all of us working together for the good of everybody. I love knowing that about us. Nobody can give all the funds needed to feed those kids, but all of us can put in a little bit. As with any huge project, “nobody can do everything but everybody can do something.”

As our democratic republic expanded, it became way too big for us to handle everything at the local level for the whole nation. So, we elect people to act on our behalf. We choose them with elections and we delegate certain authority to them to exercise while they are in

office. We do not crown them, we elect them. Elected office is a temporary position, that can be renewed at the will of the people.

Delegation is a wonderful tool for us to use, but it does have at least one weakness. When we have delegated a task or authority to someone else, it is way too easy to adopt the attitude of “Well, at least that’s off my plate.” The danger there is that we can begin to lose track of our own responsibility. It’s our job to oversee those to whom we have delegated authority. And that is sometimes more of a burden than we are willing to shoulder. When was the last time you attended a township board, planning commission, or zoning board of appeals meeting? Yes, I know, that is a burden.

For twenty-two years, I served on my township’s planning commission. Now, even I find it hard to get to one of the official township meetings. It’s my plan to make better use of the available remote meeting access, so that I can hold up my end of this self-governance project by supporting my local government. It’s part of my duty as a citizen.

It’s also true that not everybody can go to every meeting. If you’ve come home after working at your job all day, and you’ve bathed the kids, served dinner, washed the dishes, tidied up the living room, and put the kids to bed, you may simply not have enough gas left in the tank, so to speak, to also participate in a township government meeting. That’s why you may be relying on your neighbor, who did attend, to fill you in on what transpired. Another resource in many townships is the posting of meeting minutes on the township’s website. If we can’t make it to the meetings, we can follow up by reading the minutes to keep ourselves informed.

Keeping ourselves informed will make it ever so much easier for us to make wise choices when election time comes around. And that is maybe the biggest duty we have as citizens.

Well, that’s what I’ve been thinking about.

Shalom

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Reference

Miller, J. (2022) Library of Congress Blogs. Retrieved from: <https://blogs.loc.gov/manuscripts/2022/01/a-republic-if-you-can-keep-it-elizabeth-willing-powel-benjamin-franklin-and-the-james-mchenry-journal/>

Citizenship Corner

Answers to last issue’s questions

- 1) Where in the Constitution are the duties and powers of the presidency stated?
A. Article II, Sections 2 and 3.
- 2) Whose duty is it to “take care that the laws be faithfully executed”??
A. The President is assigned that duty in Article II, Section 3.
- 3) When does the President become the Commander in Chief of the Militia of the several states (now the National Guard)?
A. Per Article II, Section 1: “when called into the actual service of the United States.”
- 4) The President has wide authority of pardon. What are the limits to that authority?
A. The President’s authority pertains to “offenses against the United States,” and does not extend to violations of state law. Also, per Article II, Section 1, the President cannot pardon in “cases of impeachment.”

Citizenship Corner

These questions may require some research on your part. Thank you for making that effort. The answers will appear in the next edition of the Voice.

- 1) What does Amendment XXII do?
- 2) Before ratification of Amendment XXII, was there any legal limit o how many time a person could be elected President?
- 3) When was Amendment XXII passed by Congress and sent out to the states for ratification? And when was it ratified?
- 4) Can a person who has been twice elected President later be elected Vice President??

