CONSTITUTION DAY CELEBRATION

UCCU Center at Utah Valley University
Orem, Utah
September 17, 2012

President Matthew S. Holland
Utah Valley University

Good evening. What a marvelous sight to see all of you. How deeply, deeply moved my wife Paige and I both are that you have all joined us on this special day, September 17. It simply means more to us than I can say that the community has responded with such force and with such enthusiasm to publicly assemble in mass and celebrate the birthday of Jacob Christopher Holland who turns 15 today. Jake has asked me to note that if you forgot a gift, he is accepting cash.

Well, it is a special day for the Hollands, and not just because it is Jakes’s birthday. As you all know, it also the anniversary of the day my brother David was born. How much more special could this day be for us?

More seriously, let express my genuine appreciation for what is happening right now: a community coming together to celebrate the Constitution, a document that the famed British Prime Minister, Gladstone, called “the most wonderful work ever struck off by the brain and purpose of man.”

For us at UVU, this particular Constitution Day stands out for it is the day that we cut the ribbon of our new Center for Constitutional Studies—something we did just a little over an hour ago. And, what a distinct honor to have the illustrious David McCullough here to help us with the launch of this center which will be a dynamic new locus of academic excellence dedicated to the study and exploration of a document that has done nothing less than establish and perpetuate the governmental architecture central to the rise, prosperity, stability, and security of our great nation. In terms of chronicling the key stories of this nation, no one combines public reach and intellectual credibility like our honored guest, Mr. McCullough. For me, then, Mr. McCullough’s participation in tonight’s events reflects the seriousness of purpose and breadth of engagement we hope to achieve with all of our endeavors here at UVU. I thank him, deeply, for making great effort to be with us tonight, and lending us his outstanding name and characteristic thoughtfulness for this important new beginning at UVU.

You’ve come to hear him to speak, not me. But, I feel I must take this opportunity to say just a brief personal word about the nature and significance of what we celebrate tonight. In doing so, I turn to one of the greatest American students of the Constitution, Abraham Lincoln.

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After his death, there was found among Lincoln’s presidential papers an undated fragment that most scholars now assume he wrote sometime early in 1861 just before assuming office.

On the paper we read the following thoughts:

All this is not the result of accident. It has a philosophical cause. Without the Constitution and the Union, we could not have attained the result; but even these, are not the primary cause of our great prosperity. There is something back of these, entwining itself more closely about the human heart. That something, is the principle of "Liberty to all" ---the principle that clears the path for all---gives hope to all --- and, by consequence, enterprize, and industry to all.

The expression of that principle, in our Declaration of Independence, was most happy, and fortunate. Without this, as well as with it, we could have declared our independence of Great Britain; but without it, we could not, I think, have secured our free government, and consequent prosperity. No oppressed, people will fight, and endure, as our fathers did, without the promise of something better, than a mere change of masters.

The assertion of that principle, at that time, was the word, "fitly spoken" which has proved an "apple of gold" to us. The Union, and the Constitution, are the picture of silver, subsequently framed around it. The picture was made, not to conceal, or destroy the apple; but to adorn, and preserve it. The picture was made for the apple --- not the apple for the picture.

So let us act, that neither picture, nor apple shall ever be blurred, or bruised or broken.

That we may so act, we must study, and understand the points of danger.\(^2\)

There are at least three critical points of this statement I wish to underscore.

First, the success of the American republic was not an accident. As Lincoln began his fragment, whether he recognized it or not, he was offering an echo of the opening passage of Federalist 1, the first of a brilliant collection of essays written to persuade voters of New York and elsewhere to ratify the constitution. In this first essay, Alexander Hamilton wrote,

You are called upon to deliberate on a new Constitution for the United States of America. The subject speaks its own importance; comprehending in its consequences nothing less than the existence of the UNION, the safety and welfare of the parts of which it is composed, the fate of an empire in many respects the most interesting in the world. It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether

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societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.”

What Lincoln and Hamilton are each saying in their own way is that one of the truly unique things about the American republican is that it was a deliberately decided way of organizing in light of certain principles that went beyond immediate kinds of issues of self-interest and power-seeking that characterizes so much of human history.

Second, at the center of these governing principles stands one meta-principle that should guide and direct all others and that principle is the animating of principle of the Declaration of Independence, namely the notion of liberty for all. In doing so, Lincoln enshrines the Declaration as holding something higher and more fundamental than the Constitution. This is not to denigrate the Constitution but to be clear about its nature and purpose. To explain, I can do no better than repeat the brilliant metaphor Lincoln borrows from the Bible. I repeat it here slightly paraphrased: “The assertion of the [Declaration’s] principle [of liberty for all] was the word, “fitly spoken” which has proved an “apple of gold” to us. The Union, and the Constitution, are the picture of silver, subsequently framed around it. The picture was made, not to conceal, or destroy the apple; but to adorn, and preserve it. The picture was made for the apple --- not the apple for the picture.” The Constitution’s great power and purpose, then, is to implement, make real, and practically perpetuate the kind of human liberty the Declaration rightly claims belongs to all.

Third, the principles and practices of the Declaration and Constitution create a picture and vision of civil life together that is precious, even more so than the precious metals of Lincoln’s metaphor. As such, the picture they create should remain clear and be carefully preserved. To do so, Lincoln says, requires “study.”

Well, that is precisely what we intend to do here at Utah Valley University. Capitalizing on the wonderful generosity of community figures who see the need and share the vision, and under the leadership of an extremely well trained and energetic director, and in concert with the best and brightest thinkers and practitioners here and around the country, we will read and write, we will discuss and debate, and we will reason and reflect on the Constitution. And, we will do so to the very best of our ability for the sake of our students, our community and the United States of America.

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3 From the General Introduction of Federalist No. 1 by Alexander Hamilton (1878).