



BETTMANN ARCHIVE

A polity built from the ground up: 'George Washington Addressing the Constitutional Convention' by Junius Brutus Stearns (1856)

Back to a Basic

As its bicentennial birthday approaches, the Constitution is receiving renewed attention from students and scholars with various perspectives

Two hundred years ago this May 25, a group Thomas Jefferson called "an assembly of demigods" gathered in Philadelphia to repair the Articles of Confederation, the loose compact adopted in 1781 by 13 sovereign and squabbling states. Over a sweltering summer, the delegates hammered out something more than mere repair. For the first time in history, a polity was built from the ground up by consensus, not force. And on Sept. 17, 39 demigods signed the document that gave rise to what Jefferson in his first Inaugural described as "the text of civil instruction."

Of all the sacred texts of the American civil religion, the U.S. Constitution is at

once the least and the best known. It lacks the egalitarian eloquence of the Declaration of Independence. It has none of the somber poetry of the Gettysburg Address. As opinion polls show, Americans are ignorant of many of its most important specifics. And yet, as the late émigré political theorist Leo Strauss liked to say, the Constitution is "in the bones" of the American people. In such ordinary statements as "They can't do this to me," people express the essence of a constitution: rules that rulers have to follow. Constitutionalism is the belief that law governs government, not the other way around. Americans, however unwittingly, are constitutionalists.

Even so, the approaching bicentennial

has provoked grumbling in some quarters that constitutional education in America is not what it should be. What the grumblers mostly have in mind, of course, is civics. They want a reverential view of the Constitution—an approach that drives Prof. James David Barber of Duke University, a leading scholar of the presidency, to joke that "one might now say symbolically that the Constitution's going to be taught in the theology department, since we treat the Founding Fathers like saints."

In fact, colleges are offering a wide range of constitutional studies in this bicentennial year, providing both critical and worshipful analysis. New courses have been added at schools from William and Mary to the