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CELEBRATING CONSTITUTION DAY

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Today, we celebrate Constitution Day—a holiday that falls 227 years after our founding fathers George Washington, James Madison, and their colleagues signed the original Constitution and sent it to the states for ratification. We should all use this important holiday as an opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the Founding generation -- who wrote the most durable and successful charter of government in world history – but we should also remember that the Framers only wrote the opening chapter in a much longer constitutional story. And this is precisely what the Framers themselves intended—leaving it up to future generations to use the Article V amendment process to improve upon their handiwork and “form a more perfect Union.”

Perhaps the most important set of constitutional changes occurred after the Civil War, when President Lincoln and his generation ratified a series of transformational Amendments that many scholars have rightly described as our nation’s “Second Founding.” As we approach the 150th anniversaries of these key Second Founding Amendments—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth—it’s worth pausing for a moment on this Constitution Day to consider their centrality to America’s constitutional story.

The Thirteenth Amendment banned slavery and forced labor—redeeming us from the Founding generation’s original sin. Following his reelection in November 1864, President Lincoln worked furiously to convince members of Congress to support the Thirteenth Amendment, eventually securing congressional approval on January 31, 1865. The following day, Lincoln took the unusual step of signing the Thirteenth Amendment before sending it to the states for ratification, calling it a “King’s cure” for the evil of slavery.

The Fourteenth Amendment is arguably the most important constitutional provision ratified after the Bill of Rights, enshrining a host of new constitutional guarantees in our nation’s charter. It granted U.S. citizenship to everyone born on American soil—a guarantee worthy of special reflection on a day also set aside as Citizenship Day. It protected fundamental rights like free speech from state abuses and ensured due process of law for everyone. Finally, it wrote Jefferson’s famous Declaration into the Constitution and perfected it by changing “all men” to “any person.” This universal language guarantees equality for everyone—whether black or white, woman or man, gay or heterosexual.

Finally, the Fifteenth Amendment guaranteed the right to vote free of racial discrimination—beginning the most sustained project of constitutional improvement in American history. This project produced a total of six Voting Rights Amendments that established the right to vote as the most fundamental of all rights in our constitutional system.

Beginning this Constitution Day, we should use the 150th anniversary of the Second Founding to begin a national conversation about its enduring meaning and our nation’s unfinished project of living up to the constitutional principles enshrined in its transformational Amendments. While our country has made tremendous progress since that day 227 years ago, our nation’s story is not over and together we must continue building on our strong foundation to improve upon our more perfect union.