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THE CONSTITUTION AS MISSION STATEMENT
FOR PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

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A lot of people think of the Constitution simply as a collection of pretty **clauses**. Others just pick up some favored phrases and use them as **weapons** in their ideological battles. Or a list of “**thou shalt nots**” constraining maybe themselves but, more likely, their opponents. Some perceive it as a message of **legacy** from the “Fathers.” Still others check further and conclude that it looks like the **guidebook** for an elaborate game. Or that it is the **map** for a heretofore uncharted territory where human relations take on a transformed character. Few may apprehend the obvious: This Constitution is the **model** that makes a new world, a distinctive world of political time and possibility (history and future) whose contours are difficult to see now because we are *in it*.

How you *frame* the Constitution is as important as what it says. In this course, we will frame it by focusing on *constitutional thinking* as a distinctive style of political leadership — to make the promises we propose to ourselves in the Constitution more true. What did it mean, at the outset of this extraordinary human project by Americans, to deliberate about the order of things and to design a posterity for this People? And what might it mean for us again to embrace and continue this fundamental **way of thinking** about how to live together, and how to act with principle, purpose, and power to carry this constitutive model into full effect?

Public service in the United States is, therefore, *conditioned* — both *empowered* and *limited* — by the purposes and principles of the Constitution. This document was made to be used. It was not conceived by its Federalist founders primarily as a collection of words, but as the design for a *new system* that would bring an unprecedented political world into being. To begin with, the Constitution sets out the mission statement for the comprehensive enterprise that we call the United States of America. It is the mission statement personally for each leader in government as well, for the oath of attachment to the Constitution transforms their official character as a public servant, a user of this community's authority in service to the People. The first role of such *officers of the Constitution* is to bring its promises closer to fact, by interpreting the Preamble's purposes explicitly, using their duties and powers to make the performance of the government of the United States a true rendering of its constitutional vision. To be faithful to the Constitutional oath requires *constitutional thinking* — or “thinking through the Constitution” — which includes its animating values and the character of the relationships it establishes. In this part of the course, we will set out a model of the constitutional order and begin to develop this distinctive quality of reasoning, using selected texts from the Founding.

Sketch of the Presentation

1. What is the meaning and consequence of the Oath of Attachment to the Constitution that is the final prerequisite for anyone to be entrusted with authority at any level of government in the United States? What might it mean to preserve and defend the Constitution? To reflect on this question, one must consider what is the nature of the Constitution itself, and also what is the nature of one's own connection to the Constitution.

2. This inquiry leads to the need to cultivate *constitutional thinking* more systematically, as contrasted with more conventional preoccupations with *policy analysis*, or even *political leadership* more generally.

3. Constitutional Thinking involves not only a consideration of the values of the Founding Document (from the inside) but also an appraisal of a different sort of insight (from the outside). This is “Maker's Knowledge,” as contrasted with “User's Knowledge” — for the Constitution’s founders conceived of their fellow citizens as mutual and on-going makers of a new order of community. Thus, authentic citizenship in a constitutional system includes a capacity not only to use and take care of institutions, but also to understand how they might be reformed or re-made them when necessary to advance their underlying principles.

4. Crucially, however, Constitutional America has two sets of founders: Federalists and Antifederalists. Each has its own animating Nightmare and Noble Dream. These turn out to be matched pairs. And this combination of two negative and two affirmative visions of America continues to organize political debate in this country, providing a key to the deeper issues behind our vociferous controversies, and offering a legacy of resources for serious problem-solving.

5. The presentation will conclude with a reflection on the “book-end” relationship of the Oath to the “mission statement” set out in the Preamble, with the proposal of an “audit” that might be undertaken by leaders to assess their professional performance under the Constitution over the course of their careers.

Will Harris is completing a book entitled, The Constitutional Teacher, and continuing work on the project of the Website www.Constitutio.com called, “The Constitutional Theory of Colored Boxes.” A faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania, with a Ph.D. in public law and jurisprudence from Princeton, he was the founding director of the Center for the Constitution at James Madison’s Montpelier. He was also the chief outside consultant for the Center for Civic Education’s federally supported National Standards for Civics and Government and Res Publica: An International Framework for Education in Democracy.