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EDITORIAL: Liberal distaste for the Constitution

America won't survive severed from our founding principles

By [THE WASHINGTON TIMES](#)

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The Constitution was read at the opening of the new session of the [House of Representatives\(/topics/house-of-representatives/\)](#) yesterday. What was most remarkable about this was the almost hysterical opposition from congressional Democrats and left-wing commentators. In what should have been a united celebration of the nation's foundation document in a period of partisan rancor, liberals instead reinforced the view that they are profoundly uncomfortable with the essential truths underlying American freedom.

Some leftists smugly observed that the literal reading of the document does not convey its full meaning, which has been defined, redefined and sometimes misdefined by successive generations of courts. This argument fit neatly into liberal talking points about the new congressional majority being composed of naive bumpkins who know little of the sophisticated workings of government. Yet Washington's corrupting climate is the very basis of the conservative critique.

The country has strayed far from the artful simplicity of our original founding document. [Congress\(/topics/congress/\)](#), the executive and the courts all assume powers they never were intended to have. The most recent [Congress\(/topics/congress/\)](#) interpreted the Commerce Clause - which simply was supposed to prevent states from throwing up internal tariff barriers - to give government the right to compel Americans to spend private monies on health insurance. If this power stands, there truly are no limits to the power of the bureaucratic leviathan.

Liberals believe the Constitution is infinitely elastic, but it cannot be a blueprint for unlimited government. In *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), Chief [Justice John Marshall\(/topics/john-marshall/\)](#) noted that the very purpose of a constitution is to limit power, not to grant unlimited license. "Between these alternatives there is no middle ground," he wrote. "The Constitution is either a superior, paramount law, unchangeable by ordinary means, or it is on a level with ordinary legislative acts, and like other acts, is alterable when the legislature shall please to alter it." If [Congress\(/topics/congress/\)](#) may do as it pleases, "then written constitutions are absurd attempts, on the part of the people, to limit a power in its own nature illimitable."

Some left-wingers accused the Republican leadership of fetishism for having the Constitution read in [Congress\(/topics/congress/\)](#). Rep. Jerry Nadler, New York Democrat, called the "ritualistic reading" of the Constitution "propaganda" and lectured against reading the document like a "sacred text." His critique accurately expresses the crisis of legitimacy our government is facing.

Legislative and executive abuses of the past two years have generated a cynicism about government not seen since the days before the Civil War. In 1838, [Abraham Lincoln\(/topics/abraham-lincoln/\)](#) observed, in words that could apply today, that, "if the laws be continually despised and disregarded, if their rights to be secure in their persons and property, are held by no better tenure than the caprice of a mob, the alienation of their affections from the Government is the natural consequence." The solution to these ills was "simple," [Lincoln\(/topics/abraham-lincoln/\)](#) said. Let reverence for the laws "become the political religion of the nation" where all would "sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars."

Today, [Lincoln\(/topics/abraham-lincoln/\)](#)'s vision of reverence for the laws is needed more by the government than by the people. The point of reading the Constitution on the floor of [Congress\(/topics/congress/\)](#) is to remind those who tread the marbled halls of power that they are not philosopher kings sent to Washington to give life to their every pet theory, every caprice, every whim. If the United States is to survive as a free nation, the government must return to first principles.

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