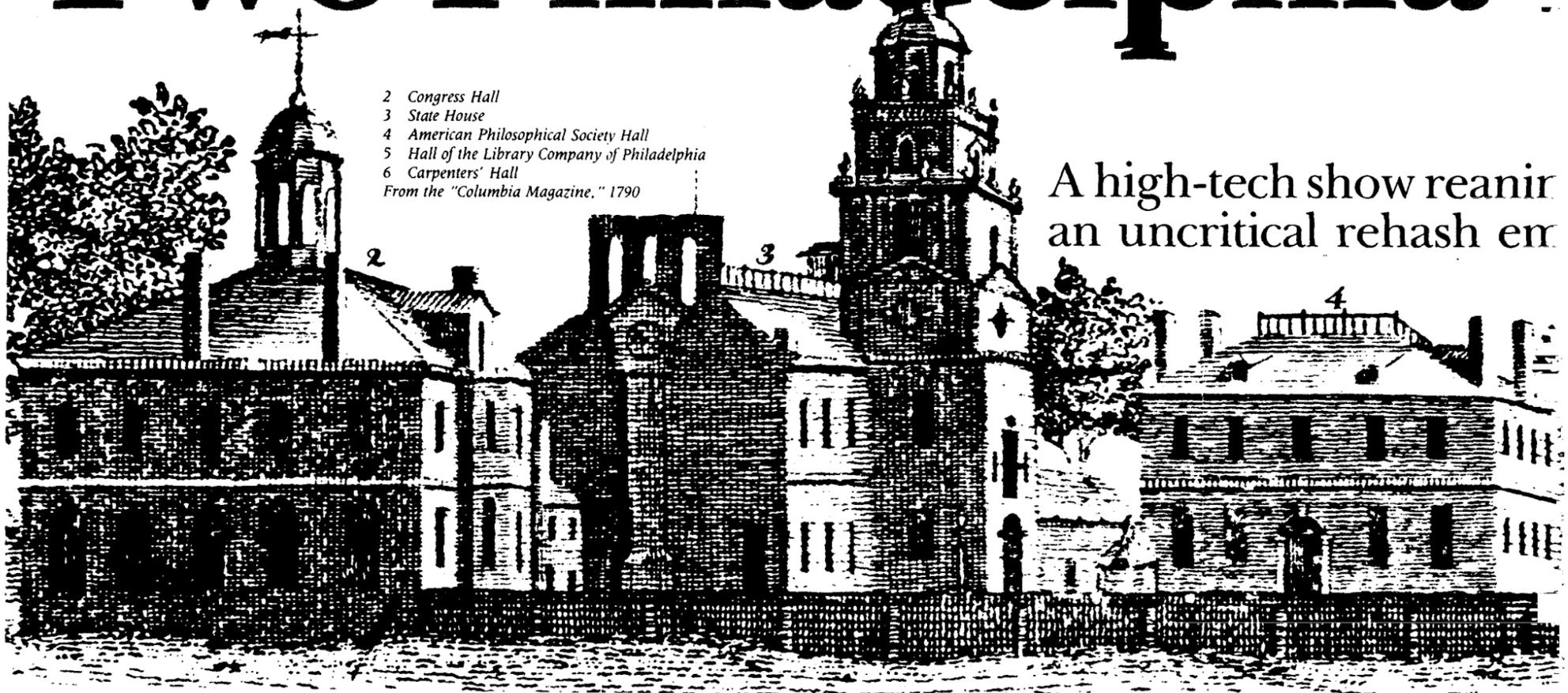


# Two Philadelphia



2 Congress Hall  
3 State House  
4 American Philosophical Society Hall  
5 Hall of the Library Company of Philadelphia  
6 Carpenters' Hall  
From the "Columbia Magazine," 1790

A high-tech show reair  
an uncritical rehash em

The Constitution of the United States, its meaning and the ways in which it has changed to meet changing conditions have a special significance in this 200th anniversary year. As the contragate hearings are making clear, the idea of upholding and defending the Constitution has many meanings. And as recent speeches by Attorney General Edwin Meese demonstrate, the Constitution has had many ideological uses.

With this issue we begin a series of articles on the Constitution as a living framework for democratic government in the United States. Our first piece, by Mike Wallace, is a review of the ways the Constitution is being presented to the public in two bicentennial exhibitions in Philadelphia, the site of the 1787 convention at which it was written. Future pieces will discuss the founding of the Constitution, the presidency, free speech, the 14th Amendment and the collective rights of labor.

By Mike Wallace

PHILADELPHIA

**M**Y EXPECTATIONS WERE NOT HIGH AS I boarded a Philadelphia-bound Amtrak train south to Constitution country. It was bicentennial time again, and given the recent Statue of Liberty rededication, this was a dispiriting thought. The bash served up an unpleasant brew of Reaganite reaction and corporate commercialism. And so far, under ex-Chief Justice Burger's stewardship, the Constitution's 200th birthday party has been a windy and pious affair (apart from Justice Thurgood Marshall's tart interjection on the subject of slavery). The odds were not good that the two bicentennial museum exhibits—which *In These Times* had commissioned me to investigate—would depart from the standards set by official orators.

But a pleasant surprise awaited me. Even

though one of the presentations—the inauspiciously entitled "Miracle at Philadelphia"—lived down to expectations, the other show—despite its ponderous moniker, "A Promise of Permanency: the Constitution of the United States through 200 Years"—represented something of a breakthrough in popular presentations of historical material. Were I rating it in a Michelin Green guide it would warrant if not Three Stars (Worth a Journey) then certainly Two (Worth a Detour).

The Constitution, MTV-style: "Promise of Permanency," commissioned by the National Park Service and housed in its Independence National Historical Park Visitors Center, is a state-of-the-art electronic examination of how the Constitution adapted to American society changing over the years, and to show how it matters today. On entering, visitors are confronted by a gigantic panoramic photomural composed of scenes from two centuries of our history (including a full-scale anti-Vietnam demonstration with one huge picket sign proclaiming "Stop this Lousy War!" and another demanding the release of the Fort Hood Three). These images form a dynamic backdrop to the guts of the exhibit: dozens of television monitors, each stuffed with a novel combination of laser disk, computer and touch-screen technologies.

The screens are grouped into three areas. In the first, each monitor presents a viewer with images scrolling slowly from right to left. Each image (a face, a cartoon, a photograph) represents a key historical event—usually a Supreme Court decision or a piece of congressional legislation. Together the 75 images, arranged chronologically, constitute a time line of American constitutional history from 1787 to the present. At any point the visitor may reach out and touch a passing image. Immediately, the screen clears, and a 60-second video is aired that treats the issue depicted by the image. In the earliest cases (the 1798 use of the Alien and Sedition Acts to squelch dissent, the protection of private contracts in the 1819 Dartmouth College case), the videos rely on stills and text. In the more contemporary in-

stances (the 1944 rulings on interning Japanese-Americans, the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, *Roe vs. Wade's* 1973 legalization of abortion) the presentations add dramatic film and video clips of demonstrations and debates to the mix. It's not exactly MTV, but the capsule histories are punchy and pithy.

In terms of content, the time line promotes the defensible proposition that there has been a steady expansion of citizen rights over the years through constitutional amendments or

## THE CONSTITUTION 200 YEARS

judicial/legislative activity (though the presentation also documents the many steps backward that delayed or occasionally reversed progress).

Both text and images convey the impression that citizens have shaped American history as much as have black-robed judges. The 19th Amendment was a response to the suffrage movement, the Smith Act convictions of Communists were sustained in a climate of fear and repression and it took the black movement to win the Civil Rights Act, thus securing blacks "long-denied constitutional rights."

**Tackling controversy:** Perhaps most remarkable of all, the exhibit does not shy away from tackling extremely controversial contemporary issues. The second bank of monitors displays a menu of hot topics: aid to parochial schools, birth control, compulsory flag salutes, gays' rights in the classroom, picketers' rights, monopolistic economic practices, creationism, gun control, the ERA, regulation of pornography and on and on. As in the first section, touching a particular issue summons a 60-second video mini-presentation. Each first informs us of which constitutional provisions apply to the issue in question then presents exponents of "both sides" (e.g., *Bella Abzug vs. Phyllis Schlafly* on the ERA).

When constitutional law on a given issue is well established and free from serious political attack, the voice-over comes down firmly on one side: picketing, though subject to government's responsibility to preserve order, "is protected by the First Amendment" and "is a time-honored form of communicating grievances." In other instances, the narrator walks a finely balanced line, presents dissenting judicial opinions and notes that the matter of creationism or abortion remains "highly controversial."

The most controversial topics get a still deeper airing in the third area. A group of plinths studded with monitors present two- or three-minute debates between articulate and forceful spokespersons on "both sides" of (for example) the death penalty. At the end (in some stations) you are encouraged to vote (courtesy of touch-screen technology) for the arguments you found most compelling (you can't record your vote before the debate is finished). Then your response is compared to the running tallies kept in the computer's memory bank. When I was there, shortly after the opening, 493 participants had expressed themselves on the death penalty: 49.1 percent opposed, 47.5 percent in favor, and 3.4 percent unsure. (Interestingly, far fewer had weighed in on the matter of affirmative action. Of the 97 respondents, 15.5 percent were opposed, 15.5 percent were in favor, but 69 percent were not at all sure which way to come down on the matter.)

"Promise of Permanency" represents a startling departure from conventional popular presentations of historical material. While the fusty and filiopietistic shrines of the '50s have long been replaced by dynamic exhibits that recall warts as well as wonders, most museum designers fail to connect the past with the present by noting that the periods they examine were part of a living continuum. Industrial museums now recount 19th-century worker discontent with capitalism, but avoid noting that capitalism and conflict remain facts of contemporary life—even when the industrial museums are themselves located in old factories aban-

# Times:

ates the Constitution;  
alms it.



done by capitalists now happily relocated in Singapore.

**Promising tremors:** "Promise" shakes the windows and rattles the walls of conventional museology. Not only does it connect past and present with a vengeance but it also avoids the omniscient stance embedded in most presentations by admitting that historical (like contemporary) perspectives are open to various interpretations.

It is remarkable that the show is ultimately the responsibility of the Reagan administration, which elsewhere has busied itself with rescuing conventional pieties from the attacks of critical historians and dissenters. Partly this suggests the considerable leeway carved out by the current generation of National Park Service historians, many of whom are veterans of the social history wars of recent decades. Partly it is due to the peculiarities of the funding process. This is an expensive exhibit—\$1.3 million, most of which was provided by Bell of Pennsylvania. The *quid* Bell extracted for its *quo* was relatively modest: a little display on "The Promise of Technology" tucked off in a corner where TV videos muse on such topics as what might have happened at the Convention if the Framers had had access to modern communications.

Fair enough, and hardly as tacky as some of the Miss Liberty corporate tie-ins, though it remains disgraceful that because the government will fund cruise missiles rather than public education we must turn to telephone manufacturers.

Still, despite my reservations about "public-private cooperation," in this case it seems to have worked well, although it will take time to see how people respond. Children are ecstatic about it. Pre-fifth graders swarm over the area, poking at screens for the sheer delight of making things happen. Gaggles of teens giggle at the more controversial topics; they concentrate on materials dealing with sex discrimi-

nation and gay teachers.

Older users tend to hesitate at actually touching the screens (when they can find one not surrounded by a pack of 10-year-olds). Courteous young guides (curiously, all female) facilitate usage for the wary. But once absorbed, people seem to spend considerable time pondering the electronic information. All in all, a cheery sight for a professional historian often exasperated by our general ahistorical culture.

**An unsatisfactory miracle:** When visitors leave "Promise" they can walk a few blocks to the Second Bank of the United States and take in the "Miracle at Philadelphia" show—a very



different kind of experience. For one thing, the designers were set a different task: to explain the origins of the Constitution. They also worked with more traditional artifacts: the show incorporates portraits and documents into a narrative exposition, picking up the pace only occasionally with quickie-videos, multiscreen slide shows and the odd "hands-on" opportunity. The exhibit is handsomely produced. But the content is unsatisfactory.

The show (in a sense, all too successfully) recreates the world view of the Framers—the merchants, planters, speculators and lawyers who formed the core of the nationalist party. It states their case compellingly, but fails to provide any critical perspective or sense of distance from that perspective. As a result the exhibit creates an impression that only the Framers had a legitimate position on the Constitution. In an odd way, a sophisticated analysis of a late 18th-century *mentalite*, turns into its opposite, the kind of uncritical celebration characteristic of a turn-of-the-century pageant.

The first in a sequence of exhibit spaces presents the nationalists' perspective on the 1780s Articles of Confederation—the country was going to hell in a handbasket. "Advocates of public order" (the show says) were particularly distressed at what James Madison called "rampant democracy in the states." The nationalists are shown anguishing over such threats to "liberty and property" as the rebellion of farmers led by Daniel Shays, who "claimed" they could not pay their debts or taxes. To forestall the disaffection of those John Jay called "the better kind of people," the nationalists proposed a strong central government.

The exhibit, throughout, makes perfectly clear that the framers feared an "excess of democracy" and the "danger of levelling spirit"; that they were out to limit popular power; and that the Constitution represented an end run on the popularly controlled state legislatures in a way calculated to catapult the upper classes into the national driver's seat. None of this is presented as being the least bit questionable. By its silence, the show seems to endorse the elite's point of view.

**Countering rampant democracy:** The problem worsens as we move into a sequence of exhibit spaces that invite us to imagine ourselves delegates. We are asked to take a badge, to swear ourselves to secrecy—without ever explaining why secrecy was required—and to promise to consider the arguments of our fellow delegates. We are then shepherded through a panel that supposedly allowed us to ponder different sides of a given issue but in fact ham-handedly manipulated us into endorsing the wisdom of whatever the Convention finally agreed upon. Most objectionable here is the treatment of slavery. We are asked to move levers around in a way that is presumed open-ended but in fact forces us to reject pro-slavery and anti-slavery extremists and come down on the side of "compromise for the sake of Union."

In its one departure from seeing the world through Federalist eyes, an adjoining panel informs us that the "compromise" eventually proved "futile," but the presentation still leaves us with the preposterous notion that the Constitution represented a compromise on slavery. It was, of course, nothing of the sort: it guaranteed and underwrote slaveholders' rights and even extended them, providing a national army to suppress insurrections and a fugitive-slave provision that ensured the return

of runaways.

The remaining sections are equally inaccurate. A discussion of checks and balances cleverly employs an orrery, an 18th-century model of the solar system, to convey the notion of the government as a mechanical process. By failing to provide critical commentary, however, the show provides a *de facto* endorsement of the idea that government is a stately matter of keeping institutions balanced rather than a participation in the hurly-burly world of politics and popular action.

Near the end, after all of our supposed consideration of different points of view, we are confronted with a station that asks us, "Would you have endorsed the Constitution?" and provides us a pen with which to register our approbation. This is the symbolic culmination of the show, conceived of as a way for today's generation to repledge itself to the Founders' project. It is also the show's most annoyingly manipulative feature. Not only is there no way to register a *negative* judgment but it is only after signing (or declining) that we are directed to the exhibit's final part, dealing with ratification. Here we learn, for the first time, and way too late in the day (especially as most people leave before they get this far), that "Many Americans, perhaps even a majority in 1787, opposed the Constitution."

It seems that the antifederalists, whose objections we now hear for the first time, "worried most about the loss of state sovereignty and the 'aristocratic' character of the new government," and claimed the Constitution was a power grab by "a few rich and great men." Despite all this, as we go out the door, we are informed that the Bill of Rights—which was brought into existence only at antifederalist insistence—was the "culmination of the process set in motion by the nationalists."

**A possible subtext:** Now let me be clear that I am *not* arguing that the exhibit's designers (Richard Rabinowitz's American History Workshop) should have promoted Charles Beard's old proposition that the Constitution represented a counterrevolution by the propertied, a goodly number of whom were out to feather their own nests. If anything, that might in fact be the show's closet agenda: it has compiled so many quotes illustrating the Framers' contempt for democracy that a critically minded or knowledgeable viewer could create a subtext that runs quite against the grain of the show's superficially celebratory perspective.

(Examination of another of the show's slide presentations, misleadingly billed as an account of who the nationalists were, supports this hypothesis. On the one hand, it totally eschews any social analysis: it presents assorted bits of facts about the Framers but never nails down the main point, that they were almost exclusively drawn from the upper classes. But the slide show *does* note that eight delegates were business associates of Robert Morris. Though this means absolutely nothing to anyone not a specialist in 18th-century history, it is perhaps meant as a coy reminder to the cognoscenti that many of these guys were speculating in the national debt and hoped to make a killing in the market if a new central government paid off depreciated paper at face value—which it did).

Continued on page 16

# EDITORIAL

WE CAN'T RAISE THE MINIMUM WAGE—  
IT'S A TEACHING TOOL FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



IT MAKES TEENAGERS WAGE EARNERS  
BY HIRING THEM AS WAGE LEARNERS



WHAT ABOUT ALL THE OLDER WORKERS  
TRYING TO SUPPORT FAMILIES ON \$3.35/HR.?



ADULT EDUCATION!



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## Minimum wage is coming up

With budget deficits and welfare reform high on the political agendas of both parties, legislation to increase the minimum wage is particularly important. Hearings in both Senate and House committees considering minimum-wage increases are scheduled for this month, and bills should be brought to the floor of both houses by late summer or early fall.

In the '60s and '70s, the minimum wage generally provided a family of three enough income to escape official poverty. But with the current minimum still at \$3.35 per hour—it was last increased in 1981—it now falls \$2,100 short of the official poverty level. In fact, the minimum wage's real value is now at its lowest level since 1955. A full-time, year-round worker earning the current minimum will bring home \$6,968 a year, only 77 percent of the estimated poverty threshold of \$9,044 for a family of three.

An increase of one dollar—to \$4.35 per hour—would again bring the minimum wage about up to the poverty line for a full-time, year-round worker with two dependents. Tying further increases to changes in inflation would keep it there.

Conservatives argue against an increase in minimum wages—and, in fact, for its elimination—on the ground that higher minimums mean fewer jobs for unskilled teenagers, especially blacks. The evidence for this is questionable, but even if there were some truth to it, the fact is that some 70 percent of those earning minimum wages are 20 years or older, with 48 percent over 25. And while blacks and Hispanics are disproportionately represented, 83 percent of those earning the minimum wage are white—and 63 percent are women.

Higher minimum wages would not mean fewer jobs overall. It would mean fewer people needing public assistance, and it would give unemployed youths a slightly greater incentive to find work. Conservatives should understand this. Since greed is their operative principle, doesn't it make sense to make work more attractive than welfare?

## South Korea surges toward democratic government

In a stunningly sudden—though in some form inevitable—reversal of its long-standing denial of democratic rights, South Korea's ruling party capitulated last week to opposition demands for direct presidential elections and other democratic reforms. The decisive step was taken by Roh Tae Woo, handpicked successor-designate of Presi-

dent Chun Doo Hwan, a former general who seized power in 1979 after his predecessor, Park Chung Hee, who led an army coup in 1961 and then had himself elected president, was assassinated. Roh's bold move instantly ended South Korea's political crisis, which only a few days earlier seemed intractable.

As in the Philippines and Haiti, South Korea's Reagan administration-supported dictator was defeated with minimal force by a population solidly united in opposition to the regime. Led by increasingly determined student demonstrations, all sections of South Korean society joined in demands for freedom of the press, the right to organize political parties and for various social reforms.

Since 1948, when the notorious Syngman Rhee was installed as the Republic of Korea's first president, students have played a leading role in opposition movements. In 1960, Rhee was forced out of office after 125 demonstrating students were killed by police, setting off nationwide protests and ushering in South Korea's only period—nine months—of relatively democratic rule. In the years since the mid-'60s, reflecting the modernization and growth of South Korea's economy, the number of colleges and universities has grown from 70 to 201 and the number of students from 109,000 to 1,277,000. And the students, in a society with a deep respect for education and learning, have become the nation's best organized and most effective political force.

Like Japan, South Korea has been a nation of economic miracles. Since the '40s, per capita gross national product has grown from less than \$200 to \$2,200. In 1965 there was only one car for every 2,600 people and .8 telephones per 100; now there is a car for every 85 people and 14 telephones per 100. Last year South Korea's economy grew by 12.5 percent, and it is now growing even more rapidly. This has been made possible by a combination of massive American aid, accessibility to the most modern technology and a culture of discipline. But despite a rapidly increasing standard of living, dissatisfaction has been widespread.

In its own way, and despite vastly different economies, South Korea's experience is similar to Poland's in 1980. In both instances, an increasingly educated and literate working population found the continued denial of civil liberties and political rights unbearable. In both nations the political system was conflicting too sharply with the nation's needs. Unfortunately for the Solidarity movement, the presence of Soviet troops frustrated their victory.

The South Koreans have been more fortunate. A combination of the massive popular movement, the need for stability and international respectability before the 1988 Olympic games in Seoul and an American administration increasingly sensitive to world opinion about its support of right-wing dictatorships made this initial victory possible.

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"...with liberty and justice for all"

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(ISSN 0160-5992)

Published 41 times a year: weekly except the first week of January, first week of March, last week of November, last week of December; bi-weekly in June through the first week in September by Institute for Public Affairs, 1300 W. Belmont, Chicago, IL 60657, (312) 472-5700

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This issue (Vol. 11, No. 29) published July 8, 1987, for newsstand sales July 8-21, 1987.

