

Harry S. Truman (1884-1972)

Address at the National Archives Dedication of the New Shrine for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights

given on December 15, 1952

Mr. Chief Justice of the United States, Mr. Larson, the Librarian of Congress, the Archivist:

We are assembled here on this Bill of Rights Day to do honor to the three great documents which, together, constitute the charter of our form of government.

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights are now assembled in one place for display and safekeeping. Here, so far as is humanly possible, they will be protected from disaster and from the ravages of time.

I am glad that the Bill of Rights is at last to be exhibited side by side with the Constitution. These two original documents have been separated far too long. In my opinion the Bill of Rights is the most important part of the Constitution of the United States--the only document in the world that protects the citizen against his Government.

10 We venerate these documents not because they are old, not because they are valuable historical relics, but because they still have meaning for us. It is 161 years today since the Bill of Rights was ratified. But it is still pointing the way to greater freedom and greater opportunities for human happiness. So long as we govern our Nation by the letter and the spirit of the Bill of Rights, we can be sure that our Nation will grow in strength and wisdom and freedom.

Everyone who holds office in the Federal Government or in the government of one of our States takes an oath to support the Constitution of the United States. I have taken such an oath many times, including two times when I took the special oath required of the President of the United States.

This oath we take has a deep significance. Its simple words compress a lot of our history and a lot of our philosophy of government into one small space. In many countries men swear to be loyal to their king, or to their nation. Here we promise to uphold and defend a great document.

20 This is because the document sets forth our idea of government. And beyond this, with the Declaration of Independence, it expresses our idea of man. We believe that man should be free. And these documents establish a system under which man can be free and set up a framework to protect and expand that freedom.

The longer I live, the more I am impressed by the significance of our simple official oath to uphold and defend the Constitution. Perhaps it takes a lifetime of experience to understand how much the Constitution means to our national life.

You can read about the Constitution and you can study it in books, but the Constitution is not merely a matter of words. The Constitution is a living force--it is a growing thing.

The Constitution belongs to no one group of people and to no single branch of the Government. We acknowledge our judges as the interpreters of the Constitution, but our executive branch and our legislative branch alike operate within its framework and must apply it and its principles in all they do.

The Constitution expresses an idea that belongs to the people--the idea of the free man. What this idea means may vary from time to time. There was a time when people believed that the Constitution meant that men could not be prevented from exploiting child labor or paying sweatshop wages.

35 We no longer believe these things. We have discovered that the Constitution does not prevent us from correcting social injustice, or advancing the general welfare. The idea of freedom which is embodied in these [p.1078] great documents has overcome all attempts to turn them into a rigid set of rules to suppress freedom.

As we look toward the future, we must be sure that what we honor and venerate in these documents is not their words alone, but the ideas of liberty which they express.

40 We are engaged here today in a symbolic act. We are enshrining these documents for future ages. But unless we keep alive in our hearts the true meaning of these documents, what we are doing here could prove to be of little value.

We have treated the documents themselves with the utmost respect. We have used every device that modern science has invented to protect and preserve them. From their glass cases we have excluded everything that might harm them, even the air itself. This magnificent hall has been constructed to exhibit them, and the vault beneath, that we have built to protect them, is as safe from destruction as anything that the wit of modern man can devise. All this is an honorable effort, based upon reverence for the great past, and our generation can take just pride in it.

But we must face the fact that all this pomp and circumstance could be the exact opposite of what we intend. This ceremony could be no more than a magnificent burial. If the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were enshrined in the Archives Building, but nowhere else, they would be dead, and this place would be only a stately tomb.

The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence can live only as long as they are enshrined in our hearts and minds. If they are not so enshrined, they would be no better than mummies in their glass cases, and they could in time become idols whose worship would be a grim mockery of the true faith. Only as these documents are reflected in the thoughts and acts of Americans can they remain symbols of a power that can move the world.

That power is our faith in human liberty. That faith is immortal, but it is not invincible. It has sometimes been abandoned, it has been betrayed, it has been beaten to earth again and again, and although it has never been killed, it has been reduced to impotence for centuries at a time. It is far older than our Republic. The motto on our Liberty Bell, "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof," is from the book of Leviticus, which is supposed to have been written nearly 1,500 years before Christ. In the 35 centuries since that date, the love of liberty has never died, but liberty itself has been lost again and again.

We find it hard to believe that liberty could ever be lost in this country. But it can be lost, and it will be, if the time ever comes when these documents are regarded not as the supreme expression of our profound belief, but merely as curiosities in glass cases.

Today, the ideals which these three documents express are having to struggle for survival throughout the world. When we sealed the Declaration and the Constitution in the Library of Congress, almost a year and a half ago, I had something to say about the threat of totalitarianism and communism. That threat still menaces freedom. The struggle against communism is just as crucial, just as demanding, as it was then.

We are uniting the strength of free men against this threat. We are resisting Communist aggression and we will continue to resist the Communist threat with all our will and with all our strength.

But the idea of freedom is in danger from others as well as the Communists. There are some who hate communism, but, who, at the same time, are unwilling to acknowledge the ideals of the Constitution as the supreme law of the land. They are the people who believe it is too dangerous to proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants. What these people really believe is that the Preamble ought to be changed from "We, the people" to read, "Some of us--some of the people of the United States, but not including those we disapprove of or disagree with--do ordain and establish this [p.1079] Constitution."

Whether they know it or not, these people are enclosing the spirit as well as the letter of the original Constitution in a glass case, sealed off from the living nation. They are turning it into a mummy, as dead as some old Pharaoh of Egypt, and in doing that they are giving aid and comfort to the enemies of democracy.

The first article of the Bill of Rights provides that Congress shall make no law respecting freedom of worship or abridging freedom of opinion. There are some among us who seem to feel that this provision goes too far, even for the purpose of preventing tyranny over the mind of man. Of course, there are dangers in religious freedom and freedom of opinion. But to deny these rights is worse than dangerous, it is absolutely fatal to liberty. The external threat to liberty should not drive us into suppressing liberty at home. Those who want the Government to regulate matters of the mind and spirit are like men who are so afraid of being murdered that they commit suicide to avoid assassination.

All freedom-loving nations, not the United States alone, are facing a stern challenge from the Communist tyranny. In the circumstances, alarm is justified. The man who isn't alarmed simply doesn't understand the situation--or he is crazy. But alarm is one thing, and hysteria is another. Hysteria impels people to destroy the very thing they are struggling to preserve.

Invasion and conquest by Communist armies would be a horror beyond our capacity to imagine. But invasion and conquest by Communist ideas of right and wrong would be just as bad.

90 For us to embrace the methods and morals of communism in order to defeat Communist aggression would be a moral disaster worse than any physical catastrophe. If that should come to pass, then the Constitution and the Declaration would be utterly dead and what we are doing today would be the gloomiest burial in the history of the world.

But I do not believe it is going to come to pass. On the contrary, I believe that this ceremony here today marks a new dedication to the ideals of liberty.

95 Since 1789 we have learned much about controlling the physical world around us. In 1789 they had nothing to compare with our modern methods of preserving priceless documents. They did not know how to place these sheets under conditions that, left undisturbed, may keep them intact and legible for a thousand years.

Perhaps our progress in learning the art of government has been less spectacular, but I, for one, believe that it has been no less certain. I believe the great experiment that we call the United States of America has taught much to mankind.

100 We know more than our forefathers did about the maintenance of popular liberty. Hence it should be easier, not harder, for us to preserve the spirit of the Republic, not in a marble shrine, but in human hearts. We have the knowledge. The question is, have we the will to apply that knowledge ?

Whether we will preserve and extend popular liberty is a very serious question, but, after all, it is a very old question.

The men who signed the Declaration faced it. So did those who wrote the Constitution. But each succeeding
105 generation has faced it, and so far each succeeding generation has answered it in the affirmative. I am sure that our generation will give the same affirmative answer.

So I confidently predict that what we are doing today is placing before the eyes of many generations to come the symbols of a living faith. And, like the sight of the flag "in the dawn's early light," the sight of these symbols will lift up their hearts, so they will go out of this building helped and strengthened and inspired.

(1959 words)

Quelle: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=14358&st=&st1=>

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1. Why is it so important that the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights be preserved?
2. What reason did President Truman give for stating that the Bill of Rights was, in his opinion, the most important part of the Constitution?
3. President Truman said that as long as Americans abide by these three documents our country will grow. What did he mean?
4. How is the oath that America's elected officials and government workers take unique from oaths taken by people in other nations?
5. Truman states that Constitution, along with the Declaration of Independence, "expresses our idea of man." What does he mean by this? How do these documents depict and protect the American view of humanity and its freedoms?
6. Truman says that the Constitution "is a living force-it is a growing thing." Explain what is meant by this and cite examples in American history that reflects the truth of this statement.
7. Define liberty. What does Truman say is crucial in order for liberty to be upheld in the United States? What do you think is crucial for the sake of liberty? What are some examples of situations in history in which people's liberty has or had been violated? How can liberty be lost in America?
8. President Truman remarked that there were places where liberty was being suppressed in 1952. Can you give an example of a place he may have been thinking of? Can you site an example of a nations whose people are denied freedoms today?
9. Describe how this speech relates to the American Revolution and the Civil Rights Movement.
10. Is one of the dedicated documents more important than the other two? Why or why not? What do you think this nation would be like if each document had not been written and implemented?
11. When the President spoke of symbols he named the flag, these documents and by inference, the Star Spangled Banner. What other symbols can you name that we honor today?