

There's been too little discussion of the Constitution Center's role

By William C. Kashatus

Shortly after the federal constitutional convention disbanded in September 1787, Benjamin Franklin was asked by a neighbor, "What have we got, a republic or a monarchy?" With customary wit and wisdom, Franklin replied, "A republic, if you can keep it!"

Like most of the Framers, Franklin believed that the success of the new republic depended largely upon the commitment of the American people. If they were diligent and took an active role as citizens, then it would prosper. If not, the government would be short-lived.

That is why educating the public about the responsibilities of citizenship has always been one of our government's most important roles. The National Constitution Center proposed for Independence Mall presents a wonderful opportunity. A museum proposal has been put forth by the designer who developed Washington's successful Holocaust Museum. But there's been lamentably little public discussion of this plan, or the museum itself, aside from its role in making the Mall more attractive to tourists.

With a projected price tag of \$170 million, careful planning of the exhibits, educational programs, and technology for the Constitution Center is critical. Otherwise, it

could turn out to be a costly bust.

The Constitution is simply *not* exciting to Americans. Though one of history's greatest political documents, the circumstances surrounding its creation lack the fiery passion, personal sacrifice and popular spirit of the American Revolution — something that continues to attract visitors to Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell.

Many Americans lack even a cursory understanding of the Constitution's provisions or how it adapts to the changing moral conventions of society. And many confuse it with the Declaration of Independence.

The confusion is best explained by Michael Kammen, author of *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture*, who says it "emerged shortly after the federal convention with the Founding Fathers' own confusion as to the kind of union they created, especially with regard to how much sovereignty the states actually surrendered to the central government."

The ambiguity has colored every major crisis in our nation's history. That is why, according to Kammen, the Constitution is "too often neglected or poorly taught in American schools" and, more regrettable, why many of our leaders are "reluctant to serve the public as constitutional educators."

So there is a tremendous need for a National Constitution Center that

can explain the achievements, fragility, and basic dilemmas of governance and citizenship in a democratic society.

Such an institution can become a vital force of civic education, especially for the young. But only if the center can *engage* visitors by establishing the relevance of the Constitution to their daily lives.

It should contain a museum with lively exhibits and a library devoted to explaining the creation of our federal government as well as the landmark decisions that shaped its history.

Just as valuable would be an institute for the scholarly study of the Constitution and its relevance to contemporary issues.

Regardless of the design, the National Park Service and city planners would do well to establish a special commission of constitutional scholars, public-policy makers, and educators to help with the planning.

They should do so as soon as possible.

Only in this way can they do justice to a document that has changed the course of our nation's history and will hopefully continue to do so for at least another two centuries.

William C. Kashatus, formerly an interpreter at Independence National Historical Park, teaches at the William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia.

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