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... And on ‘Constitution Day’, What to Celebrate?

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Thanks to a recent congressional bill, tomorrow, Sept. 17 — the date the Constitution was signed in Philadelphia in 1787 — is now known as “Constitution Day.”

But what, exactly, should Americans celebrate about our Constitution?

We could celebrate the Constitution itself, although the document is hardly without flaws. The framers took pains in the original Constitution to preserve the institution of slavery. Even the amended version raises eyebrows with its failure to give District of Columbia residents a voting representative in Congress, and its awarding of the presidency to the winner of the electoral college, not the popular vote.

We could celebrate judicial interpretations of the Constitution, but these, too, are hardly perfect. The Supreme Court has at times upheld slavery, the-separate-but equal doctrine, the internment of Japanese-Americans, the criminalization of gay sex, and the censorship of antiwar protesters. Not exactly a civil liberties hall of fame.

Instead of celebrating the text of the Constitution or its judicial interpretations, Constitution Day should honor the commitment that “We the People” made to respect the dignity and humanity of every individual. Of course, some of this commitment is readily apparent from the Constitution’s text: the promises not to deprive people of liberty without due process of law; not to search their homes without cause; not to suppress their speech; and not to impose any religious belief on them. But the commitment goes beyond any individual clause in the Constitution. It is instead an obligation, implied from the Constitution’s Preamble, to strive continuously to “secure the Blessings of Liberty” for all people.

The gravity of this commitment is made evident when one considers recent battles over teaching “intelligent design” in public schools. These disputes are about whether intelligent design is a legitimate scientific alternative to the theory of evolution. But underneath is the intimation important as a supreme being. It is one that imposed religious provisions never mention God and which forbids any religious test for public office, has chosen to treat people as sacred.

The term “secular humanism” has taken on a negative connotation in recent years, often being equated with a valueless moral relativism. But the term accurately describes what our constitutional system is all about: This is not a cause for embarrassment but rather a reason for celebration. Any other system, after all — one that imposed religious beliefs on its citizens — would be an affront to the very human dignity we have pledged to protect. It would, as Supreme Court Justice Sandra O’Connor has rightfully observed, send “a message to nonadherents that they are outsiders.”

Constitution Day is an opportunity for us to identify, celebrate and recommit ourselves to our nation’s shared values. Affirming these common values is especially important as our citizenry becomes increasingly ethnically and religiously diverse. If we are to cultivate shared values, there is no better place to start than the spirit of our Constitution.

For despite its imperfections, the Constitution symbolizes our commitment as a secular society to respecting the dignity and humanity of all people.

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