

### Commemorating the Bicentennial

Will the bicentennial commemoration of this country's experiment with constitutionalism be little more than, as one observer predicts, "another bloated, empty mega-celebration" (Kaus 1986)? Or might it be, as Chief Justice Warren Burger hopes, "a history and civic lesson for all of us"? The answer depends largely on the programs school and community groups have already initiated, but it's certainly not too late to begin planning to acknowledge some key dates.

**14 September 1786.** Delegates to the Annapolis Convention resolve to hold another convention in Philadelphia "to render the Constitution of the Federal Government adequate to the exigencies of the Union."

**25 May 1787.** The Philadelphia Convention opens.

**17 September 1787.** The Constitution is signed at the Philadelphia Convention.

**27 October 1787.** The first of the *Federalist Papers* is published.

**2 July 1788.** The Constitution is ratified by the states.

**15 December 1791.** The Bill of Rights becomes part of the U.S. Constitution.

While a one-time national holiday is proposed for Constitution Day (17 September 1987), the spread of dates makes clear that instructive commemorations in schools can easily stretch over a five-year period. The National Commission on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, which Burger chairs, will concentrate its activities on three years: 1987—"Framing the Constitution"; 1988—"Ratifying the Constitution: The People Consent"; and 1989—"Establishing a Government Under the Constitution."

**Resources.** (1) Chief Justice Burger's commission hopes to recognize and publicize exemplary bicentennial projects. One of its projects for high school students is a national writing competition: "The Constitution: How Does the Separation of Powers Help Make It Work?" The deadline for submissions is spring 1987, and winners

will receive a monetary award and a trip to Washington, D.C. For contest information, a selected bibliography, an application for official recognition of projects, and the commission's monthly newsletter and calendar, write The Commission on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, 734 Jackson Pl., N.W., Washington, DC 20503.

(2) The National Council for the Social Studies will sponsor a televised address by Burger on 15 November 1986, at 12:30 P.M. (EST). Burger's remarks will be followed by questions and a panel discussion of Constitutional issues. For information about sites for local viewing and other special activities, write or call Fran Haley, executive director, NCSS, 3501 Newark St., N.W., Washington, DC 20016 (202) 966-7840.

(3) The American Bar Association and other groups are sponsoring a mock trial and student seminar program. In the spring of 1987, winning teams from state competitions will go to Washington, D.C., for a week-long event, which will open with two days of mock trials followed by a seminar in which students will develop their understanding of the Constitution and conflict resolution. Resources and an instructor's guide are available. Also from ABA: *Salute to the Constitution*, a free bicentennial newsletter and two activity handbooks, one for the elementary grades and the other for grades 7-12. Write or call Charlotte Anderson, ABA, Youth Bicentennial Initiative, 750 N. Lake Shore Dr., Chicago, IL 60611 (312) 988-5738.

(4) Project '87, sponsored by the American Historical and American Political Science Associations, publishes *This Constitution: A Bicentennial Chronicle*. This impressive quarterly magazine provides substantive articles, primary documents, and teaching material. Other publications of Project '87 include *Lessons on the Constitution*, a collection of 60 lessons and plans for secondary classrooms designed to complement standard high school texts. Write SSEC Publications, 855 Broadway, Boulder, CO 80302.

Also, *The Blessings of Liberty*, a portable exhibit of 12 full-color 22" x 36" posters accompanied by a user's guide (\$70/set, \$100 mounted). Write Project '87, 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20503.

(5) Local initiatives. Many state bicentennial commissions are helping schools plan educational commemorations. In Florida, for example, PBS channels aired and then made available to schools a one-hour program showing Floridians discussing First Amendment issues. Attorneys interacted with students in schools during the week the program was aired. Write Annette Boyd Pitts, LRE Coordinator, Florida Bar, Tallahassee, FL 32301.

(6) The Cottage Lane elementary school model for conducting democratic school meetings is excellent (Shaheen 1980), as is *Reasoning With Democratic Values* (Lockwood and Harris 1985), which involves secondary American history students in lively discussions of enduring issues of fairness. Both would be splendid centerpieces in a school district's endeavor to use the bicentennial to foster civic intelligence.

Perhaps the best way to keep this commemoration from degenerating into hollow ceremonies in which students learn little of lasting value is to engage students in thinking deeply about issues of fairness. These issues fill their social lives and pervade the curriculum they are studying. What is required is involving students in a systematic examination of opposing viewpoints on vital problems.

### References

- Kaus, Mickey. "Empty Robe." *The New Republic*, July 14 & 21, 1986.
- Lockwood, Alan L., and David E. Harris. *Reasoning With Democratic Values: Ethical Problems in United States History*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1985.
- Shaheen, J. "Cottage Lane: A Student Government Program That Works." *Social Education* 44 (1980): 387-390.

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