Forword

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Commission of the Bicentennial of the Constitution

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FOREWORD

by

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Chief Justice of the United States, 1969-1986

Most students, professors, and practitioners of law well appreciate
the vitality of our national charter; it has survived 200 years of
change, war, and economic depression and it still functions today.
In 1787, the delegates in Philadelphia did not set forth solutions to
all the problems that might arise in the new nation, but they did
create a blueprint for a government that could develop these so-
lutions. The Constitution is therefore a "living document," as John
Marshall said, because it created a system of government that has
certain fixed limits on power but is sufficiently accommodating to
changing political, economic, and social conditions. Countless cases
over 200 years attest to that reality.

Federalism, one of the features of our Constitution that provides
for flexible governance by having the state and federal governments
coordinate efforts, is a consistent theme in the essays that follow.
We are reminded of the important role that state courts play in
enforcing the Constitution. If Congress did not exercise its power
to "ordain and establish" a system of inferior courts, state courts
of general jurisdiction would nonetheless be available to enforce
constitutional rights. Even now, with our vast network of federal
courts, there are more constitutional claims adjudicated in state courts
than in all federal courts combined.

These essays also demonstrate another important role played by
state courts in our system. Although the Constitution guarantees
certain freedoms, it does not purport to deal with every significant
liberty. Indeed, those powers of government affecting perhaps the
most intimate and personal facets of life—such as family, health,
moral, and criminal matters—are primarily left to the states and to
regulation by state constitutions. Federalism permits state courts to
apply and develop state constitutions independently of the federal
Constitution. The decision in 1787 to leave this independent power and responsibility to state courts is an important part of our Constitution that, like so many others, deserves continuing study.

One need not agree with everything in these essays to agree that, during this 200th anniversary period, it is important that we come to understand our Constitution—the most remarkable document of its kind in all history—and how it came into being.