

Original Intent

Today, many detractors of the sound doctrine found within the United States Constitution claim that it is impossible to know how the plain English words of the Constitution are to be understood, claiming that the words may mean nearly anything they decide they mean—in order to construe a meaning which fosters their un-American agenda. If it is true that the meanings of the words within the Constitution may be twisted into any perverse meaning, then the United States is left without a Constitution (for such a position means that the words mean nothing at all). If such is truly the condition, the nation faces the gravest and most dire consequences. Fortunately, words do have meanings, and those meanings may be known if we are willing to seek them out.

James Wilson, a leading participant in the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and who later became a United States Supreme Court Justice, said that, “The first and governing maxim in the interpretation of a statute is to discover the meaning of those who made it.” Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall, who participated in the Virginia Constitutional Ratification Convention, noted, in speaking to that body, that if a word was understood in a particular way when the Constitution was framed, the Constitutional Convention “must have used it in that sense.”

As he assumed the office of President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson confirmed the importance of keeping the Constitution within the bounds of “original intent,” saying:

“The Constitution on which our Union rests shall be administered by me according to the safe and honest meaning contemplated by the plain understanding of the people of the United States at the time of its adoption—a meaning to be found in the explanations of those who advocated, not those who opposed it...These explanations are preserved in the publications of the time.”¹

And if there is ever any doubt regarding the actual meaning of the Constitution and what one or another of the Founding Fathers said about the Constitution, the ultimate “trump” card in the matter is found in the actual plain English words of the United States Constitution and the original first ten amendments, The Bill of Rights.

—Scott N. Bradley

1 - The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Bergh 10:248. (1801)