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**Constitution
Translated for Kids**

A Lesson in Democracy
by Cathy Travis

Kids are naturally curious about the rules that govern adults, be they forces of nature or government. For matters of government, Independence Day, 2002, is an extraordinarily good time for citizens to remember who we are and to explain to young people, and the rest of the world, what makes this nation the world's leading democracy.

Explaining the government to kids is so hard that adults frequently bypass real information and substitute ambiguous or negative comments about politicians. But "We the people" are the government, and the single supreme document that established our government and articulates our rights and responsibilities is a profoundly simple document: the United States Constitution.

When I wrote *Constitution Translated for Kids*, almost 10 years ago, I was motivated by my niece and nephew, Sami and Rob, and later our young cousins, Tyler and Shelby. I believed that when kids know what is in the Constitution, our nation will be a fundamentally stronger, better place. Today it is all the more important to remember the ideas that bind us together as a nation

On September 11 at 9:42 a.m., as we were evacuated from the United States Capitol after the Pentagon attack, there was a powerful illustration of how this democracy works. As buildings were being evacuated, Capitol Hill telephones were automatically transferred to the congressional district offices of Members of the House of Representatives and the Senate in over a thousand locations around the country.

That speaks volumes about the nature of our democracy. "We the People" reside in every corner of this nation, and that is where government derives its power. Our power is not in a building or even in the place our representatives meet. It is with our citizens, and it is our common ideas and our freedoms that make us great.

On Independence Day 2002, remember what makes us a great and enduring nation.

- It's not a single religion that makes us great; it's our freedom to worship any way we please (or not) that makes us a faithful, great nation.
- It's not our wealth that makes us great; it's our freedom that allows anybody here to pursue wealth (or not).
- It's not our great and beautiful places that make us great; it's the freedom to gather anyplace we choose, to support any cause we deem worthy.
- It's not necessarily what we say that makes us great; it's the freedom to say whatever we choose, and the avowed liberty—and responsibility—to say it to Congress always.
- It's certainly not what our TV and print reporters say; it's the fact they can say anything in print or electronically freely.
- It's not our flag that binds us together; it is the ideas and the shared history it represents that makes us cling to it.
- It is our enduring ideas of democratic government whose fundamental responsibility is to protect the nation and the rights of our citizens that makes this nation the standard bearer for democracy in the 21st Century.

The hard part of understanding the Constitution is the legalistic, complicated language of diplomats and lawyers over 2 centuries ago.

But it need not be so hard. In a world where religious and political extremists judge our national values by the movies we export and the commercial success we enjoy, 7.4.76 is the date to relate to 9.11.01, and the world in which we now live.

It was on July 4th, 1776 that the British colonies of the Americas broke away from royal rule, declared themselves independent, and called the new country the United States of America. They encouraged citizens of the new nation to pursue life, liberty and happiness.

After a war with England, and then a contentious battle of ideas in free debates, our founders gave us the outline for how the government would operate, and how the rights of citizens and states would forever be enshrined in the Constitution.

The ideas in the Constitution are still entirely who we are in this nation. It overshadows the identity of gender, ethnicity, geography, religion, wealth, national origin, and individual takes on our fundamental ideas.

The Constitution is now front and center as we remind the world who we are and what we hold dear in this country. It reminds us where we came from ... and why.

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Created: June 27, 2002

Updated: July 8, 2002

Source Link: [Connect For Kids](#)

Connect for Kids, an award-winning multimedia project of the Benton Foundation, helps adults make their communities better places for families and children. The Web site offers a place on the Internet for adults—parents, grandparents, educators, policymakers and others—who want to become more active citizens, from volunteering to voting with kids in mind.