

Moderate, Unify

by Thomas B. Griffith (Humanities '78)

President Dallin H. Oaks' talk, "Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution," provides a template for achieving unity while protecting our freedoms.

There are a set of cultural expectations about a general conference address given on Easter Sunday afternoon. It is likely that the speaker, especially if he is an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, will bear witness to the reality and transformative power of the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

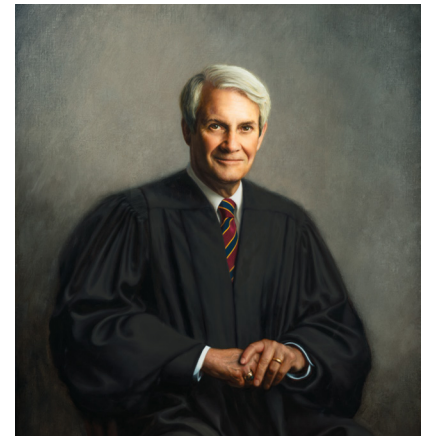
That President Dallin H. Oaks took a different tack in his April 2021 address, "Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution," signals, I believe, the importance and urgency of his message. To an American nation deeply divided by toxic political polarization, President Oaks offered the most elegant explanation I have seen of what is required for citizens in general—and Latter-day Saints in particular—to heal this divide. "On contested issues," he taught, "we should seek to moderate and to unify."¹

In that straightforward and simple directive, President Oaks captured the animating spirit that created the United States Constitution in 1787 and is necessary for its survival. In early July of 1787, the delegates who had gathered in Philadelphia to create a written constitution for the new nation faced the real prospect of failure. Yet by mid-September, they had produced the charter that would be the basis for our enduring success as a nation. In his letter transmitting the Constitution to Congress, Washington attributed this surprising turn of events—what one popular account of the convention called the "Miracle at Philadelphia"²—to the "spirit of amity, and of that mutual deference and concession which the peculiarity of our political situation rendered indispensable."³ Our current political situation renders indispensable those same qualities.

Constitutional law scholar Derek Webb explored what Washington meant in a brilliant article that points out that the delegates to the Convention exhibited not only civility in their debates—a good first step—but more important still was they were willing to set aside parochial interests, come to a compromise, and in some instances even give up cherished liberties for the sake of unity.⁴ The "miracle of Philadelphia" was not a *deus ex machina*. It came about only because people made an effort to understand one another and were willing to give up some things they valued dearly for the sake of unity.

Without that spirit, captured in President Oaks' charge, the Constitution will not survive.⁵ As Michael Gerson noted, "Our political system is designed for vigorous disagreement. It is not designed for irreconcilable contempt. Such contempt loosens the ties of citizenship and undermines the idea of patriotism."⁶ That is why it is so troubling that in our current political moment, contempt has replaced disagreement. And this contempt, Arthur Brooks observes, is "ripping our country apart. . . . Political scientists have found that our nation is more polarized than it has been at any time since the Civil War."⁷ NYU's social psychologist Jonathan Haidt warns, "There is a very good chance American democracy will fail, that . . . we will have a catastrophic failure of our democracy. . . . We just don't know what a democracy looks like when you drain all trust out of the system."⁸

What does it mean to "support and defend" the Constitution in this environment? At the very least, it means that we will support and defend the rights protected by the Constitution. But it



Portrait by Jonathan Linton

means much more than that. It means that we will "support and defend" the values that gave life to the process by which the Constitution was created. *Compromise for the sake of unity* is the animating spirit of the Constitution, and it is every bit as vital to its preservation in this moment of toxic political polarization as it was in the summer of 1787.

Latter-day Saints have a sense that we have a stewardship with regard to defending and supporting the Constitution. President Oaks has now given us a template for how to do that. His template may surprise some. We are not to be culture warriors. Rather, we are to be people who are building bridges of understanding across partisan divides. That is our standard. It brings to mind the scene from the television series *The Chosen*, in which the disciple Peter, troubled by Jesus' teaching as He calls Matthew to follow Him, remarks, "This is different!" To which the Lord responds, "Get used to different!"⁹

Latter-day Saints are called to work for at-onement in all our relationships—not just between an individual and God or within families but between people divided by contempt. That is hard work, to be sure, but as former Young Women General President Susan W. Tanner taught us so well, "[We] can do hard things."¹⁰ ■

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1. Dallin H. Oaks, "Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution," *Liabona*, May 2021, 105, 107.
2. Catherine Drinker Bowen, *The Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention, May to September 1787* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966).
3. James Madison, *Note of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 627.

4. Derek A. Webb, "The Original Meaning of Civility: Democratic Deliberation at the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention," *South Carolina Law Review* 64, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 183–219.
5. Yuval Levin, "The Constitution and National Unity," *National Review*, September 16, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3uW7rAy>.
6. Michael Gerson, "A Primer on Political Reality" *Washington Post*, February 19, 2010, <https://wapo.st/3uTe6LU>.

7. Arthur Brooks, "Our Culture of Contempt," *New York Times*, March 2, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/47TfSewl>.
8. Paul Kelly, "Very Good Chance' Democracy Is Doomed in America, Says Haidt," *The Australian*, July 20, 2019.
9. See, e.g., John 7:46, Luke 4:32, Matthew 7:28–29, Matthew 9:33.
10. Susan W. Tanner, "For the Strength of You: A Conversation with the Young Women General Presidency," *Ensign*, October 2007, 12.