

# The miracle of the

Erie Times-News | GoErie.com | Tuesday, December 4, 2018 B5

## American Constitution guides nation still



Charles Krauthammer

*This column is excerpted from Charles Krauthammer's forthcoming posthumous book, "The Point of It All." The book and column were edited by his son, Daniel Krauthammer.*

In October 1981, when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was assassinated, the networks ran over to Cairo and began covering the events all day and all night. The only thing I remember of all that coverage was a news anchor bringing in a Middle East expert and saying, "We've just looked at the Egyptian constitution, and our researchers tell us that the next in line for the presidency is the speaker of the parliament." The Middle East expert burst out laughing. "Nobody in Egypt has read the constitution in 30 years," he said. "No one knows it exists. And no one cares what's in it." Then he prompted, "Who's the leader of the military?" The anchor answered, "Hosni Mubarak," and the expert said, "He's your next president."

Two things struck me

about that. First, how naive we are about what constitutions are and what they mean around the world. And the second thing, the reason for the first, is how much reverence we have — in the United States and very few other countries — for this document.

Many things are miraculous about the U.S. Constitution. The first is that, somehow, on this edge of the civilized world two and a half centuries ago, there could have been a collection of such political geniuses as to have actually written it.

The second miracle is the substance of it — the way that the founders, drawing from Locke and Montesquieu and the Greeks, created an extraordinary political apparatus that to this day still works and that has worked with incredible success for nearly a quarter of a millennium.

But the third miracle, and the one that I think we appreciate the least, is the fact of the reverence that we have for it. This reverence is so deeply ingrained that we don't even see it; we just think it's in the air that we breathe. But it is extraordinarily rare. It exists in only a handful of countries. For almost all of the world, it is completely alien.

Consider the oath of office that we take for granted. Whenever we

bestow upon anyone the authority to wield the power of the state over free citizens, we make them swear to protect not the people, not the nation, not the flag, but the Constitution of the United States. A piece of paper. Of course, it stands for the pillars of the American experiment itself: the ideas, the structures, the philosophy that define a limited government with enumerated powers, whose mission is to preserve liberty and individual rights.

This is a gift — that we intrinsically have this sense of reverence for the Constitution. And it's important to remember that it is a gift from the past.

It is not something that we can in any way credit to ourselves. If anything, recent generations have allowed that kind of reverence to diminish, to bleed away over the decades, as we try — as it were — to adapt constitutionalism to modernity.

What's so remarkable is that constitutions are highly reactionary documents. The very essence of a constitution is to constrain the enthusiasms of a future that one cannot even see. In America, constitutionalism demands that even the most distant progeny swear allegiance to a past embodied in a document written in the late 1780s. If "tradition

... is the democracy of the dead," as G.K. Chesterton had it, then constitutionalism — which is ancient wisdom rendered into legal code — is the tyranny of the dead, the ultimate reach of the past into the future.

And in America, it succeeded. The propagandist Lincoln Steffens famously said, upon visiting Bolshevik Russia shortly after the revolution: "I have seen the future, and it works." American constitutionalism declares: "We have seen the past, and it works." Paradoxically, for all the forward-looking, blue-sky, futuristic spirit of its people, the astonishing stability, majesty and success of the American experiment owe much to the inherent restraint and conservatism of its original constitutional blueprint.

I've always had a sense that there is something providential about American history. And this is from somebody who isn't exactly religious. But starting with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution: Here is a nation founded on the edge of civilization — a tiny colony, living on the outskirts of the civilized world — that at a time when it needed it miraculously produced the greatest generation of political thinkers in the history of the world. Then a century

later, when it needed a Lincoln to save the republic, it found a Lincoln. In the first half of the 20th century, when it needed an FDR to get through the Depression and defeat fascism, it found him. In the second half, when it needed a Reagan to revive the country, he was there.

This is not to say that we will always be able to find our way. I don't see or expect or wait for the next great figure. But over the years we have seen extraordinary spontaneous popular reactions against government overreach and in support of constitutional principles, and they are further signs of hope.

There is something about the American spirit — about the bedrock decency and common sense of the American — that seems to help us find our way, something about American history that redeems itself in a way that inspires all. I would summarize it by quoting my favorite pundit, Otto von Bismarck. He was not known for his punditry, but he is famously said to have said: "God looks after children, drunkards, idiots and the United States of America." I think he still does. I hope he still does.

*The late Charles Krauthammer was a Pulitzer Prize-winning Washington Post columnist. He died June 21.*