

LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE

# A More Perfect Union: Meaning in the Preamble of the United States Constitution

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The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States of America contains language that is incredibly meaningful to some, misunderstood by many, and in need of periodic revisitation for all. What did the framers mean when they used the language they chose to use? This article intends to provide a basic review of that language so that more of us understand the intent of the framers and, for those in positions of leadership, to embrace their responsibility of more completely understanding why they do what they do.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

– Preamble to the U.S. Constitution

## To Form a More Perfect Union

The phrase “to form a more perfect union” is one of the stated purposes for establishing the constitution. To understand this phrase more fully, we must consider the historical context in which the constitution was written. Before the constitution, the United States was governed by the Articles of Confederation, which created a weak central government. Under the Articles, the states retained most of their sovereignty and operated more like independent entities rather than parts of a unified nation. This system led to several challenges that included economic issues,

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2023, 10: 285 - <http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v10.285>

defense concerns, interstate disputes, and the lack of a central executive.

Without a strong central authority, there were disputes among states over tariffs and trade. Also, states printed their own money. This often led to confusion and inflation. The central government had difficulties raising an army and there was no consistent means of defending the nation in its entirety. States often had disputes over boundaries and other matters because the central government lacked an effective mechanism to resolve these issues. Finally, the Articles did not establish an executive branch to enforce laws or a judiciary to interpret them. This resulted in inefficient and mostly ineffective governance.

Given these challenges and the increasing desire to create a robust and lasting nation-state, the framers of the constitution aimed to establish a governmental structure that would be robust and more collaborative than that which existed under the Articles. In this context, “to form a more perfect union” meant they wanted to create a system of government that was more effective, cohesive, and united than as prescribed by the Articles. Furthermore, the phrase speaks to the aspiration of the framers. They did not want to claim the new system was perfect. They did, however, believe it would be a significant improvement to the Articles. For them, use of the words “more perfect” also implied eternal effort. The endeavor for the United States of America to always strive to improve and refine its union continues to this day.

### Establish Justice

When the framers included the phrase “establish justice,” they were emphasizing the importance of creating a system of fairness and equity for the new nation. To understand this in the context of the constitution and the intentions of the framers, we must consider the rule of law, the judiciary, protection of rights, correcting injustices of the Articles of Confederation, along with moral and ethical implications.

A fundamental principle of any democracy is that everyone, regardless of status or power, is subject to the rule of law. The framers wanted a system where laws are transparently created, consistently enforced, and impartially judged. One of the primary means of ensuring justice is through a judicial system. The constitution provides for a Supreme Court and leaves the establishment of lower courts to Congress. This judiciary serves to interpret the law, settle disputes, and ensure that laws are consistent with the constitution. The framers were also concerned about protecting individual rights and ensuring that the government does not overstep its boundaries. This protection is seen in various parts of the constitution, most notably in the Bill of Rights, which specifies protections for individuals against potential governmental overreach. Among other problems as noticed previously, the Articles of Confederation lacked a strong judiciary. The constitution sought to rectify these shortcomings and create a more robust framework for justice. Lastly, and beyond the logistical and structural aspects of establishing a justice system, the phrase “establish justice” also carries moral and ethical undertones. The framers wanted the new nation to be just in its treatment of citizens and in its interactions with other nations.

### Insure Domestic Tranquility

The framers also held a desire to maintain peace and order within the country’s borders. The factors that contributed to the inclusion of insuring domestic tranquility were Shays’ Rebellion, interstate disputes, uprisings, economic stability, and social order.

Shortly before the Constitutional Convention, Shays’ Rebellion took place in Massachusetts in 1786 and 1787. This was an uprising led by disaffected Revolutionary War veterans facing economic hardships, particularly due to high taxes and debts. The weak central government under the Articles of Confederation struggled to respond effectively to this internal crisis. This event, in particular, highlighted the need for a stronger central

authority capable of maintaining order and addressing internal disturbances.

Under the Articles of Confederation, states often acted with a high degree of autonomy, leading to disputes and tensions among them. The framers aimed to create a system that would mediate such conflicts, preventing them from escalating and ensuring peaceful coexistence among states. The framers were additionally concerned about potential uprisings or rebellions that could threaten the stability of the young nation. They believed that a strong central government would be better equipped to prevent or address such disturbances, ensuring a stable environment for its citizens. Domestic tranquility also encompasses economic stability. A peaceful and orderly environment is conducive to economic activities, trade, and commerce. By insuring domestic tranquility, the framers hoped to create conditions that would allow businesses and commerce to flourish.

Finally, insuring domestic tranquility suggests a broader societal goal, that of maintaining social harmony and preventing conflicts that could arise. Such conflicts include disputes over rights, political disagreements, or other civil unrest. In essence, here the framers were emphasizing the need for a stable and peaceful environment within the country, an environment free from internal strife, rebellion, and significant disorder. This tranquility would provide a foundation for the new nation's growth, prosperity, and continued success.

### **Provide for the Common Defence**

For the framers, a primary duty of the new federal government was to defend the nation and its citizens against external threats. Here again, it is helpful to consider the historical and geopolitical context. Under the Articles of Confederation, the central government had limited power to raise and maintain an army and navy. This lack of centralized military authority made the young nation vulnerable to external threats and foreign interference. At the time the constitution was drafted, the United

States faced potential threats from European powers with interests in North America, including Britain, Spain, and France. Additionally, there were concerns about conflicts with Native American tribes on the frontiers. It was believed that by pooling resources and coordinating defense at the federal level, states could better protect themselves as a collective unit than they could individually. The framers recognized the importance of presenting a united front against potential adversaries. The constitution, in its main body, granted Congress the powers to raise and support armies, provide and maintain a navy, and call forth the militia to execute federal laws, suppress insurrections, and repel invasions. The role of the President as the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces was also established.

While the framers recognized the need for a strong centralized defense, they were also wary of standing armies as potential tools of tyranny. Hence, they put checks and balances in place, such as giving Congress, the representatives of the people, the power of the purse and the authority to declare war. Providing for the common defense underscores the federal government's responsibility to protect the nation and its citizens from foreign threats and aggressions, ensuring that the United States can maintain its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

### **Promote the General Welfare**

The framers also intended that the federal government should act in ways that benefit the well-being of all its citizens. This broad directive suggests several ideas. First is the common good. The federal government should operate in the interest of all its citizens rather than cater to specific factions, interest groups, or classes. The goal was to create a government that served the collective interests of the nation. Second, the government should also create conditions where commerce, trade, and industry can thrive, benefiting the population at large. This includes regulating interstate commerce and other economic activities as needed to ensure fairness

and stability. Third, the government has the responsibility to undertake or support endeavors that benefit the public broadly, such as infrastructure projects that would facilitate transportation, communication, and commerce. Lastly, part of ensuring the general welfare is safeguarding the rights and liberties of citizens. This idea is fleshed out in more detail in the Bill of Rights and subsequent amendments.

Additionally, the government should act to protect the health and safety of its citizens, whether that means regulating practices that could harm the public or providing direct assistance in times of need. The United States was, and remains, a vast country with a diverse population. Different regions and groups have varied interests and concerns. “Promote the general welfare” implies striving for policies and actions that consider and balance these diverse interests for the broader good of the nation. Over time, the concept of “general welfare” has been the subject of debate, particularly when discussing the scope and role of federal government intervention in various sectors. Some argue for a more limited interpretation, while others see it as justification for broader government involvement in areas that benefit public well-being. While the precise boundaries of “promote the general welfare” have been and continue to be debated, the phrase underscores the framers’ intent that the federal government should work to create conditions conducive to the well-being and prosperity of *all* its citizens.

### Secure the Blessings of Liberty

Securing the “blessings of liberty” underscores the framers’ dedication to protecting and perpetuating individual freedoms and rights for both current and future generations of Americans. From an historical perspective, the framers of the constitution had recently participated in the American Revolution, a war fought primarily to break free from British rule and perceived tyrannies. They deeply valued individual rights and freedoms and were keen on establishing a government that would

guard against the loss of these liberties. The framers also embraced liberty as a core value and one of the fundamental principles upon which the United States was founded. The framers intended for the new government to not just protect existing freedoms but to also foster an environment where liberty could flourish.

The framers were also quite wary of oppressive government power, having experienced it under British rule. The constitution, with its checks and balances and separation of powers, was designed to prevent any single branch of government from becoming too powerful and threatening the liberties of the people. Shortly following the ratification of the constitution, the first 10 amendments were added. Known as the Bill of Rights, these amendments explicitly enumerated various individual rights and protections, such as freedom of speech, religion, and assembly, further emphasizing the commitment to protecting liberty.

The framers focused on securing liberty for their own generation and the generations to come. The idea was to create a lasting framework that would ensure the freedoms they valued would endure for their “posterity,” or descendants. The choice of the word “blessings” holds significance here as well. It conveys the idea that liberty is not just a right or principle but a precious gift, something to be cherished and revered. The framers purposefully enshrined and protected the principles of freedom and individual rights as the foundational law of the land to ensure that current and future citizens would enjoy the benefits of a free society.

The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States of America serves as the guidepost by which to measure our national progress in perpetuity. It is prudent to periodically revisit and refresh our minds with the framer’s language. A more perfect union does not just happen. It is the outcome of representatives and citizens alike being ever mindful of and dedicated to upholding justice, insuring domestic tranquility,

providing for the common defense, promoting the general welfare, and continually securing the blessings of liberty. These are all elements that mirror effective leadership. Leaders protect and support their teams. Leaders maintain social harmony and accountability. Leaders provide structure and clarity while safeguarding the rights and liberties of all. The list truly does go on. As our American experiment continues, let this remain our collective persistent charge.

## Supplemental Resources

Sources on topics related to the Constitution of the United States of America, its interpretation, and critical examinations of the framers' language and intent that informed this basic review included the following:

*Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States* (1833) by Joseph Story is a foundational work on constitutional law.

*Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (1996) by Jack N. Rakove won the Pulitzer Prize and provides a deep dive into the framers' intent. It is most noteworthy for its exploration of the complex politics and diverse viewpoints that influenced the drafting of the constitution.

"The Anti-Federalist Papers" is the collective name given to the works written by multiple anonymous authors, likely Patrick Henry, George Clinton, and Samuel Bryan among several others – between

September 25, 1787, and the early 1790s. These authors voiced concerns about the power of the federal government under the constitution and succeeded in influencing the first assembly of the United States Congress to draft the Bill of Rights.

*The Bill of Rights: Creation and Reconstruction* (1998) by Akhil Reed Amar examines the framers' intent and how interpretations have evolved over time.

"The Constitution of the United States of America"

*The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (1998) and *Power and Liberty: Constitutionalism in the American Revolution* (2021) by Gordon S. Wood provide valuable context for understanding the political and intellectual climate in which the Constitution and its Preamble were written.

*The Federalist*, commonly referred to as "The Federalist Papers," is a series of 85 essays written by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison – all under the pen name "Publius" – between October 1787 and May 1788 promoting the ratification of the Constitution of the United States of America.

*The Framers' Coup: The Making of the United States Constitution* (2016) by Michael J. Klarman delves into the historical context and development of the constitution while also providing insight into the framers' intent.