

AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM
VOLUME II: RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES
Howard Gillman • Mark A. Graber • Keith E. Whittington

Supplementary Material

Chapter 11: The Contemporary Era – Foundations/Principles

Barack Obama, First Inaugural Address (2009)

Barack Obama entered the race for president after having represented Illinois for less than a term in the U.S. Senate. As a young, African-American in a crowded Democratic field, Obama positioned himself as a candidate who did not fit conventional political labels and who stood outside of “politics as usual” in Washington, D.C. After a bruising battle with Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination, Obama easily defeated the Republican candidate, John McCain. Although McCain favored the role of the maverick, the long-time senator defended the unpopular Iraq War and ran during a severe economic downturn. The 2008 elections solidified Democratic majorities in Congress as well.

Obama in his First Inaugural Address avoided laying out a new ideological or constitutional vision in favor of a more pragmatic message of making “hard choices.” Did this address suggest that Obama was not going to act on a distinctive constitutional vision, one that challenged the more conservative constitutional vision championed by such persons as the second President Bush or Antonin Scalia? Did Obama govern consistently with this vision during his first term?

...

The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works—whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified. Where the answer is yes, we intend to move forward. Where the answer is no, programs will end. And those of us who manage the public’s dollars will be held to account, to spend wisely, reform bad habits, and do our business in the light of day, because only then can we restore the vital trust between a people and their government.

Nor is the question before us whether the market is a force for good or ill. Its power to generate wealth and expand freedom is unmatched. But this crisis has reminded us that without a watchful eye, the market can spin out of control. The nation cannot prosper long when it favors only the prosperous. The success of our economy has always depended not just on the size of our gross domestic product, but on the reach of our prosperity, on the ability to extend opportunity to every willing heart—not out of charity, but because it is the surest route to our common good.

As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals. Our Founding Fathers faced with perils that we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man—a charter expanded by the blood of generations. Those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expedience’s sake.

...