

[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



"Signing of the Constitution of the United States" (1940) by Howard Chandler Christy (Wikimedia Commons/Public domain)



by Steven P. Millies

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

October 4, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Nine years into the madness of Donald Trump, it may be time to admit: The trouble is us.

Many of the people who founded the United States are household names — Alexander Hamilton, of course, with Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Madison and others. But right now I want to give special mention to some other less familiar names of people who shaped our country, [Gouverneur Morris](#) and [James Wilson](#).

Both are worth knowing. They were Pennsylvania delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Morris was quoted to say, "[If the people should elect \[their leaders\], they will never fail to prefer some man of distinguished character.](#)" Wilson, while urging Pennsylvania to ratify the constitution, hoped that those who would govern under it would be citizens "[most noted for their virtue and talents.](#)"

Had these men lived to see 2024, there is a good chance that they might have been in Erie, Pennsylvania, to hear a presidential candidate [speak](#) on Sept. 29. How might the words of a former president and current candidate for president have sounded to them?

Imagine Gouverneur Morris as he heard someone whom the people elected [say](#):

"Joe Biden became mentally impaired. It's sad, but lying Kamala Harris, honestly, I believe she was born that way."

Or, maybe picture James Wilson evaluating the virtue and talents of the man who [said](#):

"Now if you had one really violent day ... one rough hour and I mean real rough, the word would get out and it would end immediately."

Collectively, we all have participated in trivializing our public life.

[Tweet this](#)

All that madness Trump spewed in Erie follows his scurrilous slanders during the presidential debate against [Haitians](#) who came legally to live in Springfield, Ohio. But if we're being honest, really it follows nine long years that have given us over [30,000 outright lies](#), an endless stream of insults, and repeated attacks on the constitutional

system of government which (let us not forget) Trump said we should "[terminate](#)." On other occasions he has called our country "[foolish](#)" and our laws "[corrupt and stupid](#)."

Now, at this point the columnist is confronted by a dilemma. He could go on and keep writing the column which tells you that, no matter how many American flags Trump [embraces](#) with [suggestively obscene](#) intentions, Trump is a perfect stranger to what makes America great. I could write that column. The trouble is, you know all that already. In fact, we have reasons to believe that Trump's most ardent supporters [know it, too](#).



(Pixabay/Wikilimages)

Nine years into this madness, the better use of this space is to call attention to the real wisdom in Morris' and Wilson's words. Gouverneur Morris and James Wilson are telling us that the trouble isn't Donald Trump. The trouble, actually, is us. Morris and Wilson assumed that the people of the United States would seek after our own interests when we vote because politics is serious business. It turns out that might have been a mistake.

Our generation of constitutional founders didn't live long enough to see our party system degrade our politics into two endlessly warring factions. Neither did they live long enough to see the line between entertainment and political life blur such that a [whole industry](#) now caters to our self-destructive expectations of "political humor." As much as David French could [write](#) about the Trump supporters who are "in on the joke" and who have mistaken "owning the Libs" for the purpose of politics, I would add, the Democrats share some [particular guilt](#) for blurring that line, too.

Collectively, we all have participated in trivializing our public life.

And this was underway for decades before Donald Trump ever descended his golden escalator. Yet when Trump stepped off that escalator, a charlatan and carnival barker with an unerring knack for the schoolyard insult and a recent reality TV host, he was the perfect man for our shallow politics. Trump has been successful because, more than any candidate who merely promises to improve our lives, Trump is matched to us and the moment we created for him.

How could someone only offering better schools or health care or a stable foreign policy hope to compete with such an entertaining rascal as our 45th president?

Advertisement

And the real problem is that, at this point, the entertaining madness of Donald Trump has become normal. When he says these things, mostly they just glide past us. "There he goes again," and we shrug. Gone are the days when Trump boasted about shooting someone on Fifth Avenue or denigrated John McCain's heroic patriotism and — for at least a bit — there was some outrage. Years have gone by, and we've lost our capacity to be outraged by Trump. This show of political leadership he puts on has been accepted into the mainstream like the low entertainment that it really is.

It's not like we weren't warned. Sure, unfamiliar people like Gouverneur Morris and James Wilson warned us. But so did [Washington](#) and [Hamilton](#). They found nothing amusing in the serious business of public life. They knew politics can save lives, ruin lives and end lives. They had seen up close the war which made this constitutional system possible, and they knew how precariously it hinges on the best judgment of its people.

Another Pennsylvania delegate to the convention is said to have told his landlady the Constitutional Convention had created "[A republic, if you can keep it.](#)" Some 237 years later, Dr. Franklin's admonition is a potent warning in and outside Pennsylvania.