



ASTRONAUTS FOR AMERICA

What Every American Needs to Know About

GUARDRAILS OF DEMOCRACY

(and how they are under assault right now)

Consistent with our lifelong oath, we support and defend the Constitution, and the American ideals that sustain our democratic republic. We stand for truth, science and accountability as essential to self-government.

JAMES MADISON WARNED US IN 1788

James Madison did not trust words on parchment to protect a republic. In Federalist No. 48, written in 1788, he warned that constitutional principles alone are not enough to prevent any branch of government from overreaching its authority. Real protection, he argued, requires active resistance by the other branches, and an informed, vigilant citizenry.

“A mere demarcation on parchment of the constitutional limits of the several departments, is not a sufficient guard against those encroachments which lead to a tyrannical concentration of all the powers of government in the same hands.”

James Madison, Federalist No. 48, 1788

Madison’s warning applies today with striking precision. The branch he most feared (the legislative) has not become tyrannical, as he worried it might. Instead, it has largely stepped back from its check-and-balance function altogether. The branch he considered structurally limited (the executive) has expanded into the space that Congress vacated. The Constitution has not changed. The behavior of those who swore to uphold it has.

THE SEVEN GUARDRAILS: WHAT THEY ARE AND WHAT IS HAPPENING

If the founding values of the Declaration of Independence and Preamble to the Constitution are the foundation, and constitutional principles are the building blocks, then long-established institutional norms are the mortar of our democratic republic. They cement the blocks together, helping to protect us from the winds and quakes of tyranny. Their erosion also serves as our “canary in the coal mine.” Prof. Sheri Berman of Columbia University summarizes recent broad research on causes of democratic republic demise, ***“In the contemporary west, democratic breakdown typically does not happen through coups as it often did historically, but through a gradual process in which norms and institutions are weakened from within.”***

The often quoted “guardrails of democracy” are not partisan talking points. The first six are institutional norms, established by the Founders and accepted across generations of American legislators, executive branch officials and jurists of all political affiliations: the unwritten but expected safeguards of a stable democratic republic.

The seventh, Truth, Science and Evidence, may look like an addition to the academics’ list. Political scientists have not catalogued this ideal as an institutional norm per se, but we former astronauts see it as every bit as necessary to the survival of the republic as any of the traditional six. In his 1796 Farewell Address, George Washington said, ***“I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs, that honesty is the best policy.”*** We see that the “honesty” norm is as old as the republic. It is reflected as “*integrity*” or “*honor*” in NASA, NSF, and military core values statements. Across hundreds of federal entities, these terms are foundational elements of public service. What is new is the apparatus: statistical agencies and scientific and regulatory bodies, established to put them into practice. The Table shows the norms, their purposes, origins and current active threat examples.

	THE NORM	WHAT IT MEANS (<i>ITS ORIGIN</i>)	ACTIVE THREAT EXAMPLES
1	Executive Constraint	The president operates within constitutional limits and the rule of law, not above it. (<i>Washington's Farewell Address</i>)	Use of emergency powers for debatably non-emergency purposes; <u>impoundment of appropriated funds</u> ; Supreme Court "Unitary Executive Theory" rulings.
2	Mutual Tolerance	Political opponents accept each other's legitimacy even in sharp disagreement. (<i>Washington's Farewell Address</i>)	Characterizing political opponents as <u>enemies, traitors, or criminals</u> without legal basis; <u>calls for imprisonment, or worse</u> , of political opponents.
3	Peaceful Transfer of Power	Electoral losers concede and transfer authority without violence or obstruction. (<i>Washington's Farewell Address</i>).	Refusal to accept certified election results; <u>pressure on officials to overturn vote counts</u> ; <u>incitement of violence at the Capitol</u> .
4	Judicial Independence	Courts decide cases on law and fact, free from political pressure or intimidation. (<i>Hamilton, Federalist No. 78</i>)	Public <u>attacks on judges by name</u> ; threats of impeachment for adverse rulings; <u>public defiance of court orders</u> by executive agencies.
5	Administrative Neutrality	Career civil servants and the military serve the Constitution, not the person or party in power. (<i>Washington Administration</i>)	Mass <u>dismissal of nonpartisan career officials</u> and replacement with political loyalists; use of agencies against political foes; <u>controversial use of DC Guard</u> .
6	Legislative Bipartisanship	On matters of constitutional gravity, legislators reach across party lines. (<i>Roger Sherman's "Great Compromise"</i>)	Congress <u>declining to exercise oversight</u> of the executive; <u>abdication of appropriations authority</u> ; partisan paralysis on constitutional questions.
7	Truth, Science & Evidence	Government is honest. Government invests in science to promote human knowledge, stimulate economic growth, safeguard public health, and ensure national security. Government decisions are informed by objective evidence and established science. (<i>Truth: Washington's Farewell Address; Science: Franklin; Evidence: John Adams, Boston Massacre Trial (1770), Declaration of Independence (1776)</i>)	Reported severe obstructionist tactics and unprecedented backlogs of Freedom of Information requests; <u>firing of the Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics</u> following an unfavorable jobs report; termination of NASA carbon satellites; deletion of the National Climate Assessment from federal websites;

SEEING IT IS NOT ENOUGH

Madison believed that executive overreach would be easy to detect because executive power is direct and visible. He was right about detection. Every norm violation listed above is documented, on the record, and in plain sight. Some were even announced in advance as policy goals or justified as emergency measures.

What Madison knew, and built no guarantee for, is that norms run on character, not just structure. His model assumed that when one branch overreached, the officeholders in the other branches would resist, because they were people of sufficient integrity to put their oath and their institution above their party. Norms are not self-enforcing; they hold only if the people who occupy Congress, the courts, and executive branch offices are willing to honor them.

"The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society; and in the next place, to take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous whilst they continue to hold their public trust."

--James Madison, Federalist No. 57, 1788

But the Constitution stays silent on "wisdom" and "virtue." That silence is not an oversight. The Founders left the question of character to the ballot box, because they had no better tool. Officeholders of integrity are not an eighth guardrail this pamphlet is proposing...they are the assumption the other seven depend upon.

WHAT WE CAN DO

The Founders trusted the American voters to be the ultimate guardians of the republic. That trust has not expired.

"A republic, if you can keep it."

— Attributed to Benjamin Franklin, replying to Elizabeth Willing Powel as he left the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, Sept 17, 1787: "Well Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?"

Notice that Franklin put the burden on us, not on government. So, when both the Constitution's framework and its institutional norms, the guardrails, fail, what can we-the-people do to **"keep it"**?

- **Learn the institutional norms.** Know what healthy democratic behavior looks like so you can recognize when it is absent. Learn about its norm origins and their threats and triumphs over time.
- **Put the norms to the test.** All government officials swear or affirm an oath to support and defend the Constitution. However, neither the Constitution nor federal law requires any official to honor these seven norms. That's exactly why they are vulnerable, and exactly why they depend upon citizens, not courts, to enforce them. If you or your local community group or civic organization want to encourage candidates to take a stand on institutional norms, the attached Sample Candidate Integrity Pledge form is offered. Trim, edit, or adapt as you or your community/organization sees fit.
- **Share this pamphlet.** An informed neighbor is a protected republic. Pass it on.
- **Vote...**as though your country depends on it!

We are not a partisan organization.

We are former NASA astronauts who view our oath to support and defend the Constitution as a lifelong commitment. Further, we appreciate the need for the guardrails we know as the institutional norms in protecting that Constitution and thereby preserving our democratic republic.

SAMPLE CANDIDATE INTEGRITY PLEDGE

As a candidate for public office, I recognize that I serve the people first, not the party, not the wealthy donors, and not myself. I pledge, if elected, to uphold the following:

I. Respect Lawfully Imposed Limits: I will accept valid limits imposed by the other branches rather than treating constitutional checks and balances as obstacles to bypass, and legal loopholes as methods to tilt the political playing field in favor of my party or me personally.

II. Accept Electoral Outcomes: I will accept the results of free and fair elections. I will not attempt to overturn, obstruct, or delegitimize election results without clear and proven evidence of fraud adjudicated by the courts.

III. Honor Mutual Tolerance: I will treat political opponents as legitimate adversaries, not as enemies, traitors, or criminals. I will not call for the prosecution or imprisonment of opponents without due process and lawful evidence of wrongdoing.

IV. Respect Judicial Independence: I will not intimidate, threaten, or attempt to direct the decisions of courts or judges. I accept the authority of the judiciary as a co-equal branch of government.

V. Defend a Neutral Civil Service and Military: I will not weaponize the agencies of government against political opponents, nor will I demand personal loyalty from career public servants or military personnel whose oath is to the Constitution.

VI. Govern Across Party Lines: On matters of constitutional gravity and national interest, I will seek common ground. I will not treat compromise as weakness or cooperation as betrayal.

VII. Honor Truth and Science: I will base my decisions on evidence and established science. I will not knowingly misrepresent facts to the public, suppress scientific findings for political purposes, or dismantle the government's capacity to collect and share important objective data.

By signing below, I make this pledge publicly and invite my constituents to hold me to it.

Candidate Official Signature

Office Held/Sought

Date

Return signed pledge to _____
