Name _____ Date _____

Michael Beschloss' Comments on the New Encasement of Page 2 of the Constitution

Michael Beschloss, an American historian and specialist in the Presidency, made the following remarks as the new encasement for page 2 of the Constitution was unveiled to the public at 8:30 a.m. on September 15, 2000, in the Rotunda of the National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

We couldn't have more perfect timing than to unveil Page Two of the Constitution of the United States at the outset of the 2000 Presidential campaign.
Page Two, of course, gives us the office of the Presidency. Without this page, Al Gore and George W. Bush might be running not for President, but for King or Chancellor or Prime Minister. And without the sacred document that contains this page, we might be living in a country dominated by tyrants or a foreign power.

In the language of the 2000 campaign, the Framers of the Constitution were uniters, not dividers -- and they were fighting for us. The Framers gave us a document durable and flexible enough to take us from the agrarian land of the 18th century, of the musket, the axe and the plow -- to the country we know today, of the Internet and the human genome and a thousand different cultures living together in one nation like a glittering mosaic.

When I was a ten-year-old boy growing up in Illinois, I read in an encyclopedia about how the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were displayed here at the National Archives. For a ten-year-old boy, it was thrilling - the hermetically-sealed cases filled with inert helium gas, the device that would plunge the documents into a vault underground at the first hint of fire, vandalism, or nuclear war.

That was state-of-the-art technology to protect the Charters of Freedom from the dangers of the twentieth century. George Washington and James Madison could never have dreamt that these documents would one day have to be protected from something called the hydrogen bomb.
As I grew older and became an historian, I realized that this display here at the Archives is a perfect metaphor for what the Constitution means to all of us.

For twenty-one decades, this document has protected us -- and we've protected it.
The Constitution has sheltered each American generation from public dangers like dictatorship, anarchy, famine, civil war, political corruption, fascism, Communism, despair.
And during those same two centuries, we have used the scientific ingenuity at our command to shelter the Charters of Freedom from physical dangers like sunlight and hurricanes all the way to pollution and environmental hazards of the 21st century unimaginable to the Framers at Philadelphia.

Most of us learn in school what occurred in Philadelphia in 1787 to create the Constitution. But what few of us know - even few historians - is what happened to the physical document since then. So I thought I would take a few minutes to talk about how the Constitution moved from Philadelphia to the National Archives and the 21st-century housing we'll get to preview today.

The Constitution had a happier early life than the Declaration of Independence did. Partly because it was only one page and thus easier to display, the Declaration was endlessly rolled up, unrolled and put up on the wall of various government buildings in the glare of sunlight. Calligraphers who made copies rubbed ink off the parchment.

In those days, if you can believe it, copies of some documents were made by taking a damp sheet of thin paper and pressing it against the document until the ink was transferred. We don't know whether the Declaration was one of them. But you can see the damage to the document today. Some of its words are barely visible.
In 1789, the first Congress gave the Constitution and the Declaration to the State Department, which took them - along

with the rest of the federal government - from New York to Philadelphia to Washington.

In 1814, Secretary of State James Monroe warned that the British were about to attack. The two charters were wrapped in linen bags and secretly taken for safety up the Potomac River to an unused gristmill. Then, while Washington was in flames, the Declaration and Constitution were hidden in a private home in Leesburg, Virginia.
For the rest of the 19th century, the Charters went back to the State Department. In those days, people had a more casual approach to preservation. For years, the Declaration was hung on a sunlit wall near a smoky working fireplace.

In the end, the Constitution and the Declaration went into State Department vaults, where they could not been seen. The safes weren't fireproof or burglarproof. And the documents were fading.
In 1921, President Harding decreed that the Charters go to the Library of Congress to be preserved and displayed to the "patriotic public." A Model-T truck was rolled up. The Charters were loaded into the back and cushioned by a pile of leather U.S. Mail sacks for the trip up Capitol Hill.
In 1924, Calvin Coolidge dedicated the new shrine -- a display made of gold-plated bronze and marble, lit by soft incandescent lamps. True to his reputation, Coolidge said not a single word. But there was no need. When the Charters were unveiled, the audience gasped.

After Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt had to deal with the possibility that Washington might be attacked. With great secrecy, technicians locked the Charters into bronze containers, took them to Union Station and put them on a Pullman sleeper, bound for Kentucky. They were taken off at Fort Knox. There, amid acres of gold bullion, the Constitution and its sister document spent most of World War II.
When the National Archives was built in the early 1930s, the crown jewel of this building was to be the great Rotunda showing off the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. Franklin Roosevelt ordered the documents moved here. But the Librarian of Congress, Herbert Putnam, flatly refused.
FDR felt it wasn't worth haggling with Putnam. Only when Putnam had retired, seven years after the war was over, came the great journey.

On December 13, 1952, members of the Armed Forces Special Police carried the heavy cases out of the Library of Congress and put them onto mattresses inside an armored Marine personnel carrier. The Army Band and the Air Force Drum and Bugle Corps played while the vehicle and two tanks pushed down Capitol Hill.

Three days later, in this room, President Harry Truman opened the display that I later read about as a ten-year-old in Illinois. He told the audience, "We are enshrining these documents for future ages. . . This magnificent hall has been constructed to exhibit them and the vault beneath, that we have built to protect them, is as safe from destruction as anything the wit of modern man can devise."
In recent years, the Charters have been inspected for damage with the help of an electronic imaging monitoring system developed by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Five years ago, changes were seen in the glass that led the Archives to launch the project that will soon lead to the re-encasement of what Archibald MacLeish called "these fragile objects which bear so great a weight of meaning to our people."
Today we take a step closer to the culmination of that project. Page Two of the Constitution comes back home.

With this act, we celebrate the words that have helped to keep us free for 213 years.
We celebrate the technological genius that brought us canals, railroads, the telephone, the electric light, the space shuttle - and the ingenuity that will now allow our great-grandchildren to come to this hall in the 22nd century and see a Constitution and a Declaration of Independence whose words are as sharp and legible as the document we'll be seeing in a few moments.

That ingenuity was one of the flames the creators of the Constitution hoped to keep alive two centuries after they met in Philadelphia. Benjamin Franklin would be proud of us.

Name _____ Date _____

_____ 1. This document can best be described as a(n)_____.

A. political campaign
B. newspaper article
C. speech
D. editorial

_____ 2. This document was created on _____.

A. September 15, 2009
B. September 5, 2000
C. September 15, 2010
D. September 15, 2000

_____ 3. Who was the president in 1921?

A. Coolidge
B. Clinton
C. Hoover
D. Harding

_____ 4. The author of this document is best known as_____.

A. an historian
B. one of the framers of the Constitution
C. the Secretary of State
D. our president

5. According to the document, from what dangers has the Constitution sheltered various generations of Americans?

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6. Why does the document end by asserting that Benjamin Franklin would be proud?

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7. Who refused to accede to the president's wishes to move the Constitution to the National Archives? What was his official title?

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8. Explain how copies were made of documents like the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence in their earliest days.

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Name _____ Date _____

9. Briefly tell the history of the Constitution's movements across the U.S. as they are related in this document.

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10. Do you think it is important for documents like the Constitution to be exhibited for public viewing? Explain your answer.