Introductory Remarks
Constitution Day
September 17, 20013

In an early draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson smudged out a single word and replaced it with the word “citizens.” He really obliterated the unwanted word--so intent was he on changing it--and for more than two centuries, historians wondered what word he had so completely scratched out in favor of the word “citizens.” Just three years ago, using modern spectral imaging technology developed for military use, the Library of Congress revealed that the word he removed from the early text was “subjects.” Not subjects. Citizens. Not “tell me what to do,” but “let me participate”--perhaps the very essence of our American Revolution.

It is appropriate that we talk about the difference between subjects and citizens--as we mark Constitution Day (September 17)--less than a week after we commemorated the magnificent heroism on 9/11 in NYC, in Washington, D.C. and in the skies over Somerset, PA, and just less than a month after we marked the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington that culminated in Dr. King’s remarkable “I Have a Dream” speech.

At its most fundamental, the debate between subjects and citizens leads directly to the theme we chose for this year: “21st Century Citizenship: The Common Good.” This charge asks us to think about the value of citizenship, the idea of a “common good,” and the special challenges of the times in which we live, the 21st century.

This is not a new debate, just a perpetually unresolved one. It is a debate that began at least 2,000 years ago, when Greek thinkers first grappled with the conflict inherent in a vision of citizenship that sought to both protect individual rights and promote the common good.

Plato and Aristotle led the early debates, taken up in later centuries by Christian theologians like Augustine and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin. Thomas Aquinas felt that the biblical admonition to “love thy neighbor” was a guideline for governance as well as religion. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and others took up this debate between individual rights and state sovereignty. Terms like laissez faire and social contract competed for primacy in their writings.

Early American leaders were also attuned to these challenges. Ben Franklin in Philadelphia and Paul Revere in Boston each had a strong sense of civic duty, cast in terms of De Tocqueville’s
“greater good,” and pursued their belief by helping to build libraries, create public hospitals, fund mutual insurance companies, start volunteer fire departments, and found colleges, fraternal and even intellectual societies.

As Americans, and ever since Jefferson’s historic “smudge,” we have aspired to Supreme Court Justice Brandeis claim that “the most important office in our democracy is that of private citizen.” We believe that citizenship is a higher calling and that Jefferson’s edit (his historic “smudge”) was truly a distinction with a difference--not mere “subjects” but vaunted “citizens.”

At Mt Aloysius, we have been engaging the topic with you since day one this semester. Many of you discussed and debated the short reading on the common good that we distributed as part of orientation. Some of you are deep into the College “Connections” curriculum already, discussing the topic at least once a week. Many of you had the chance to hear Judge Klementik at Convocation, who kicked off our Speaker Series on the theme with his “three visions of citizenship”: “the personally responsible citizen; the participatory citizen; and the justice oriented citizen.”

Today, we will hear another perspective on this age old debate, a lecture entitled “Citizenship Extended: From the Nation to the Neighborhood.” And our speaker has certainly earned the right (no pun intended) to opine on the topic.

Terry Wright is a 27 year veteran of DC—he “survived,” he would tell you—rising up from an initial position as an unpaid intern (when he was the age of many of you) to the role of Special Assistant to a 7-term US Senator and advisor to the Vice President of the United States. He has the props, so to speak.

But let me tell you two things that are not included in the bio that you have in your hands, and that are the reason we invited him here today.

First, Terry has a lot in common with many in this room--got to the top of the heap in DC the old fashioned way. He earned it. Never a front row guy, not someone who stood around in line waiting for the credit, Terry Wright took on the lowest position in the office and worked his way all the way to the top. He did his job, and that of others on many occasions, and he did it exceedingly well. We invited Terry because his story is genuine. No political connections, he just worked hard and that’s all you need to know about his success.

Second, Terry represents perfectly all three notions of citizenship expressed by Judge Klementik, and is the perfect sequel to our Convocation address. Through all the status of his exalted position in our nation’s Capital, Terry never forgot his roots and what it was that drew him to the political process in the first place. Sure, he had his chances to work on the big issues—to be the justice oriented citizen that the Judge described—and was part of the team that worked on some of the biggest challenges in the US Senate, challenges central to our progress as a nation, and literally, to peace on the planet.

But Terry Wright worked just as hard on issues that mattered to only one person or one family or one community--whether it was
responding to phone call about a delayed social security check, or
✓ acting on a petition about an overdue bridge repair in a forgotten small town, or
✓ finding a long lost family member (a story he told us earlier today).

He paid just as much attention to these concerns—the kind of one on one dilemmas whose resolution meant the world to the citizens who came to the Senator’s door—as he did to the heady concerns of national and international politics. And I think that approach—never forgetting the individual (even as he got involved in the big issues of the day)—that presaged his easy return to civilian life, back in his home state and Wilmington-area neighborhood. That approach also gave him this perfect title for our Constitution Day speech: “Citizenship Extended: From the Nation to the Neighborhood.” Welcome Mr. Terry Wright.