

2019 Year-End Report on the Federal Judiciary | Supreme Court of the United States

By Chief Justice John Roberts

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In the winter of 1788, New York newspapers reported accounts that medical students were robbing graves so they could practice surgery on cadavers. In April, the chatter gelled into a rumor that students at New York Hospital were dissecting a schoolboy's recently deceased mother. An angry mob stormed the hospital, and the mayor gave some of the medical staff refuge in the city jail. When the mob marched on the jail, John Jay, who lived nearby, grabbed his sword and joined Governor Clinton to quell the riot. In the ensuing commotion, a rioter struck Jay in the head with a rock, knocking him unconscious and leaving him, according to one account, with "two large holes in his forehead." Hamilton and Madison pressed the Federalist project forward while Jay recovered from his injuries.

It is sadly ironic that John Jay's efforts to educate his fellow citizens about the Framers' plan of government fell victim to a rock thrown by a rioter motivated by a rumor. Happily, Hamilton, Madison, and Jay ultimately succeeded in convincing the public of the virtues of the principles embodied in the Constitution. Those principles leave no place for mob violence. But in the ensuing years, we have come to take democracy for granted, and civic education has fallen by the wayside. In our age, when social media can instantly spread rumor and false information on a grand scale, the public's need to understand our government, and the protections it provides, is ever more vital. The judiciary has an important role to play in civic education, and I am pleased to report that the judges and staff of our federal courts are taking up the challenge.

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