Happy Bill of Rights Day, Do You Know Yours?

Local News

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OLYMPIA, Wash. - It's probably the least well-known of the December holidays, but it's also among the most important - at least in the United States. Today is "Bill of Rights Day," the date 220 years ago on which the first 10 amendments were added to the U.S. Constitution.

Those amendments guarantee Americans their freedom of speech and religion, the rights to "peaceably assemble" and to bear arms, the right to a speedy, public trial and more.

From today's "Occupy" movement to jury trials, says Mark Kamitomo, president of the Washington State Association for Justice, the Bill of Rights' protections are as important as ever.

"That's kind of the cornerstone of the whole idea of the Constitution. The Constitution exists for us, the people, and it really prescribes what our government cannot do to us - the rights we're allowed to have are those things that we can do, in spite of how our government might feel. That's the way it should be."

As an attorney, Kamitomo says he wouldn't change a thing about the Bill of Rights today - although he often wishes the dialogue between those who disagree about what the amendments mean were more civil.

"I would like to see more of a common-sense application in interpreting what those Bill of Rights mean. I don't mean to offend anybody out there, but I think we've gotten to a point where we have become hypersensitive in a lot of different areas, and we overreact."

If they've been around since 1791, why are these 10 amendments still so controversial? Kamitomo thinks it's partly because the framers of the Constitution had no idea of the complications of modern-day society - and also, because today's judges bring so many different viewpoints to the cases based on these issues.

"There's some fundamental principles that they all agree to, but there's very little agreement amongst judges generally, as to whether certain aspects under the Bill of Rights should be protected. I think that's where the controversy comes."

He doesn't see an end to the lively debates about these 10 amendments - and Americans' right to have those debates is part of the Bill of Rights.

Bill of Rights-related information and resources are online at billofrightsinstitute.org.