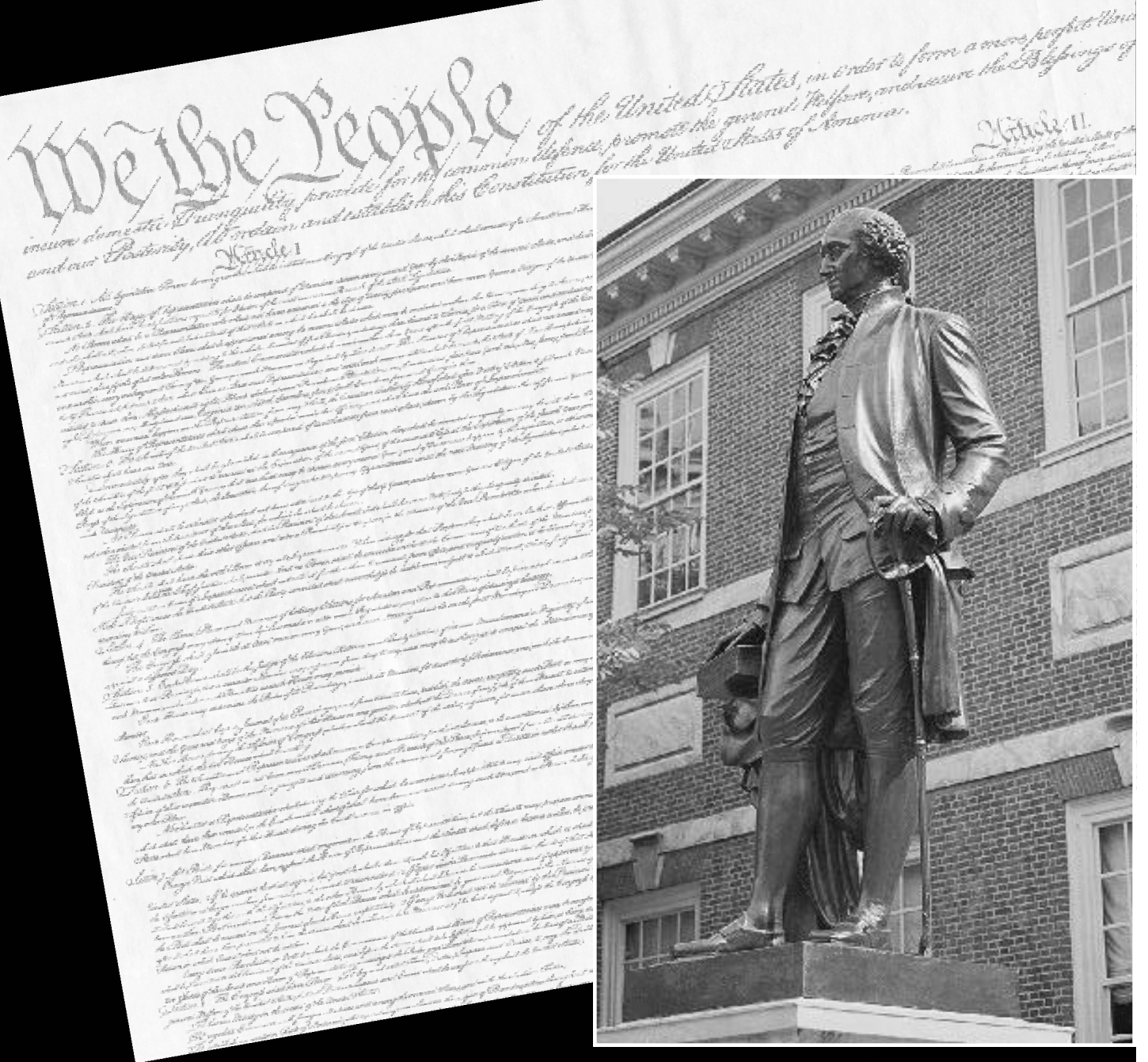


Teacher's Resource Guide



“We the People” The Story of the Constitution

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TEACHER'S RESOURCE GUIDE
FOR

“We the People”
The Story of the Constitution

A Video
from
Knowledge Unlimited

“We the People”

The Story of the Constitution

INTRODUCTION

In 1787, 55 leaders from 12 of the 13 states met in Philadelphia to discuss how the young United States of America should be governed. Over the previous six years, the nation had struggled under the weak and ineffective Articles of Confederation. The 13 states were hardly united, and it was nearly impossible to enforce the laws of the land. So the founding fathers decided to completely rewrite the Articles and, in the process, redesign the structure of American government. The document these men came up with during that hot summer was written to meet the challenges of the new country while ensuring flexibility for the changes to come in the years ahead. During the more than 200 years since, the United States of America has changed dramatically, yet this “rugged” Constitution has remained a strong and sturdy guiding force for our land.

“WE THE PEOPLE”: THE STORY OF THE CONSTITUTION provides an overview of how this document was written. It looks at the events that led up to the creation of the Constitution, and it examines the thoughts and words of some of the men who wrote it. The video focuses on some of the major debates and compromises that shaped the Constitution and demonstrates the document’s enduring relevance. In addition, the video gives your students a historical understanding of why the Constitution was written and what the founders wanted to accomplish.

It is our hope that the video and the activities in this Teacher’s Resource Guide will give your students the historical context they need to interpret Constitutional debates of the past and to contemplate Constitutional decisions in the future. Of course, a 30-minute video can only begin to explore a subject as vast as this one. But our aim is that this video will stimulate your students to think about the Constitution and incorporate into their lives a richer understanding of the foundation for America’s government. We hope you enjoy it.

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THE TEACHER’S RESOURCE GUIDE

The guide consists of the following:

1. A brief introduction, describing the video and stating its goals and objectives.
2. A Readiness Activity to be completed before students view the video.
3. Four follow up lessons to be completed after students view the video. Reproducible activity sheets accompany each lesson.
4. The complete script of the video “WE THE PEOPLE”: THE STORY OF THE CONSTITUTION.
5. A brief bibliography of recommended readings, with suggestions for younger and older readers.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After viewing the video and completing the activities in this guide, students should

1. Have a better understanding of the actual process the founders went through in writing the Constitution.
2. Possess a historical understanding of why it was necessary to write the Constitution.
3. Be familiar with some of the debates that the founders had as they organized the structure of American government.
4. Know more about the people who wrote the Constitution and what their concerns and motivations were.
5. Be able to interpret and contemplate constitutional issues in the context of the Constitution’s history.

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A READINESS ACTIVITY

(Do this activity before viewing the video.)

Objective: To help students better appreciate the video as a result of having identified key personalities, terms, documents, and events described in it.

Use the Readiness Activity Sheet (opposite page).

1. Split your class into four or five small groups.
2. Reproduce copies of the Readiness Activity Sheet and hand them out. This sheet contains a list of names and vocabulary terms found in the video “WE THE PEOPLE”: THE STORY OF THE CONSTITUTION.
3. Tell the students that they will be viewing a video on the history of the United States Constitution. Ask the students for their thoughts and opinions on why it is important to learn about this subject.
4. Assign each group three of the names, terms, or events on the sheet. Give each group about ten minutes to discuss the terms and agree on definitions. Ask one person in each group to record the group’s definitions for each term in one or two sentences.
5. Have each group read its definitions to the whole class. Then, as a class, discuss the names and other terms, and try to supply more complete information where necessary.

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READINESS ACTIVITY SHEET

In a small group, discuss the names, terms, or events you have been assigned from the list below. Have one member of the group record an agreed-upon definition or description for each name or term.

James Madison

The Federalist

compromise

Bill of Rights

amendment

federal

Articles of Confederation

Constitutional Convention

John Locke

Shays’ Rebellion

Parliament

Magna Carta

Philadelphia

Age of Reason

slavery

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LESSON 1

Note-Taking Activity

Objectives: To give students practice in note taking and test their overall comprehension of the video.

Use Activity Sheet for Lesson 1 (opposite page).

1. Review some of the basics of good note-taking skills with the class. Discuss why taking careful notes is important. Point out that learning to differentiate between relevant and not-so-relevant information is more important than how many pages of notes you take.
2. Reproduce copies of Activity Sheet for Lesson 1. You may choose to hand the activity sheet out before students view the video so that they know what points to look for. Or you may choose to hand out the activity sheet after you have shown the video, to help them determine how complete their notes are.
3. Show the video and ask students to take good notes. Tell them they will be answering the questions on the activity sheet based on their notes.
4. After they view the video, have students write their responses to the questions on Activity Sheet for Lesson 1. They may want to use an extra sheet of paper if they need the room.
5. Use these responses to help students evaluate their note-taking skills and as the basis for a class discussion about the important concepts of the video.

“We the People”

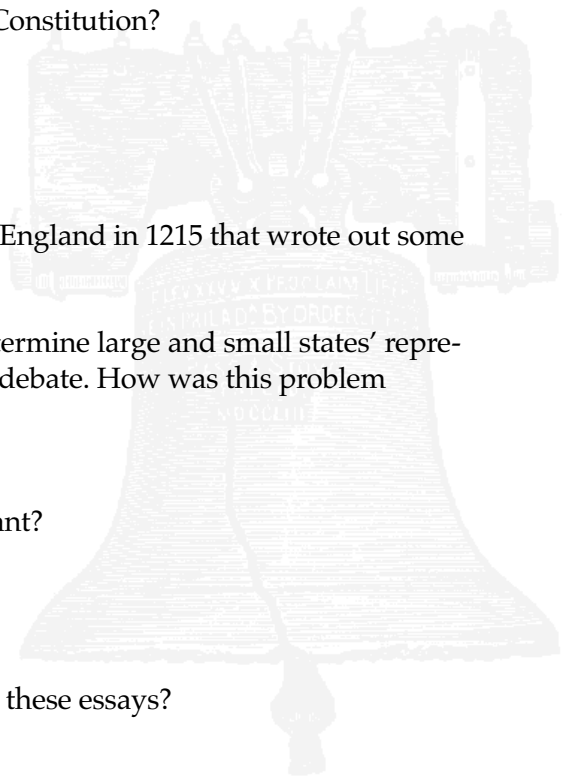
The Story of the Constitution

ACTIVITY SHEET FOR LESSON 1

Note-Taking Activity

As you watch “WE THE PEOPLE”: THE STORY OF THE CONSTITUTION, take careful notes about the events, people, places, and ideas that are mentioned in the video. When the video is over, use these notes to answer the following questions:

1. During what year did 55 of our nation’s founders meet in Philadelphia to write the Constitution?
2. Name any four of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention who debated and ultimately wrote the Constitution.
3. What does it mean that the Constitution created a “federal” system of governance?
4. Name the document that in 1781 became the United States’ first formal set of governing rules.
5. What are tariffs? How did they impact the creation of the Constitution?
6. What was Shays’ Rebellion and why was it significant?
7. What is the name of the document signed by King John of England in 1215 that wrote out some of the laws of his government?
8. One important issue the delegates debated was how to determine large and small states’ representation in Congress. Briefly explain the two sides of this debate. How was this problem resolved?
9. What was the “three-fifths clause” and why was it important?
10. Which state was first to ratify the Constitution?
11. Who wrote the *Federalist* essays? What was the purpose of these essays?
12. The first ten amendments to the Constitution were ratified together. What are these first ten amendments commonly called? In what year were they ratified?



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LESSON 2

Interpreting the Preamble to the Constitution

Objectives: To have students think about the meaning of the words in the Constitution, to make students familiar with the Preamble, and to help students recognize the ideals of the Constitution both 200 years ago and today.

Use Activity Sheet for Lesson 2 (opposite page).

1. Hand out copies of Activity Sheet for Lesson 2, and tell students they will be analyzing the phrases that make up the Constitution’s Preamble.
2. Ask a member of the class to read the Constitution’s Preamble, which appears on Activity Sheet for Lesson 2.
3. Ask students to read the instructions carefully. Then answer any questions they might have.
4. Tell students to write down their interpretations of the phrases in the Preamble on the activity sheet. Encourage them to use an extra sheet of paper if they need the room.

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ACTIVITY SHEET FOR LESSON 2

Interpreting the Preamble to the Constitution

This activity is designed to give you an opportunity to think about the words that make up the Constitution. The following words come from the Preamble to the Constitution, probably the most well-known and celebrated part of the Constitution.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

These words have been read and recited by Americans for more than 200 years. But what exactly do they mean? Think about the meaning of each of the phrases listed below. Then, after each phrase, write your answers to three questions: 1) What do you suppose the writers of the Constitution meant by this specific phrase? 2) Why did the Constitution’s framers include this phrase? 3) What does this phrase mean to you and to the United States today? As you answer, you may want to consider the political, social, and cultural circumstances of the times. Think about the system of government the founders lived under prior to the writing of this document. Also consider the concerns of Americans as they began this new nation. Write your answers in the space provided after each phrase. You may want to use extra paper if you need the room.

1. **“We the People of the United States of America”**

2. **“in Order to form a more perfect Union”**

3. **“establish Justice”**

4. **“ensure domestic Tranquility”**

5. **“provide for the common defence”**

6. **“promote the general Welfare”**

7. **“secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity”**

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LESSON 3

Role-Playing Activity

Objective: To help students recognize that the Constitution was written by people with differing interests and motivations. Students should become aware of the important role that compromise played at the Constitutional Convention.

Use Activity Sheet for Lesson 3 (opposite page).

1. Reproduce copies of Activity Sheet for Lesson 3 and hand them out.
2. Decide how many different role-playing groups you want in your classroom. You can divide the class in half and give each group one of the two scenarios, or you can split the class into smaller sections and have multiple groups work on the same scenario.
3. Ask students to read the instructions on the activity sheet carefully. Remind them that this activity requires research in secondary sources, including encyclopedias, books, the Internet, and so on.
4. Initiate and facilitate the discussion.

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ACTIVITY SHEET FOR LESSON 3

Role Playing Debates at the Constitutional Convention

When the delegates at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 began their work, they didn't know what sort of government they were going to create for the young United States. Many of the 55 delegates had ideas for what they thought was best for the nation. But it was not until the delegates spent time debating the strengths and weaknesses of each idea that they created the structure of America's government.

The purpose of this exercise is to give you a sense of what the delegates experienced as they decided how American government should be structured. Pretend that you are a delegate at the convention. Do some research on one of the debates below. Use your creativity as well as encyclopedias, biographies, textbooks, the Internet, and other resources to help you learn more about how the delegates might have felt about these issues. Then divide into teams and argue your position with students who have taken the other side of the debate. Try to put yourself in the minds of the delegates who argued the same position. Attempt to reach a compromise and resolve the debates, just as the delegates had to do. You may reach the same solutions as the delegates did, or you may not.

Role-Play 1: Representation in Congress

Situation: The delegates were unsure how representation in Congress should work. The small states wanted each state to have equal representation and the large states wanted the number of representatives in Congress for each state to be based on that state's population.

Assignment: Divide into two groups. Students in one group are delegates from small states; students in the other group are delegates from large states. Examine why you do or do not want equal representation in Congress. Find out what the issues are that concern the small and large states. Feel free to bring in other concerns, but keep your focus on determining what is the best way for your state and your nation to assign representatives to Congress.

Role-Play 2: Regarding Slavery

Situation: After it was decided to have two houses in Congress, it became necessary to determine how to count each state's population so that the number of representatives for the House of Representatives could be decided. Specifically, there was a debate about if and how to count slaves. The delegates from the northern states didn't want the slaves counted at all, while the delegates from the southern states argued that slaves should be counted as full persons, in the same manner as other non-voting people (women and children).

Assignment: Divide into two groups — northern and southern delegates. Explain why you do or do not want slaves counted, and then debate what to do. **Through your research, make sure that you carefully understand why the northern and southern delegates took the positions they did on this issue.** Take note of how you resolved this issue. Did you come up with a similar compromise to the one that was agreed to in 1787? Why or why not?

Option: Ask a few students to enter the debate as slaves and abolitionists. How do these perspectives change the debate?

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LESSON 4

Independent Study Project

Objective: To give students the opportunity to learn more about the U.S. Constitution and the era in which it was written through an independent study project.

Use Activity Sheet for Lesson 4 (opposite page).

1. Reproduce copies of Activity Sheet for Lesson 4 and hand them out.
2. Explain to students that they will be doing an independent study project. Have students choose a project from one of the five described on Activity Sheet for Lesson 4.
3. Encourage students to create their own projects if they wish. But before allowing them to proceed, have them write brief outlines of their projects for your approval.

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ACTIVITY SHEET FOR LESSON 4

Independent Study Project

Here are five ideas for an independent study project on the Constitution. Read each one and then decide which one interests you the most. Then follow the instructions to complete the project. You may also come up with your own independent study project, but be sure to get your teacher’s OK first.

1. When America was founded, men and women wore clothes quite different from those people wear today. Men wore breeches, ruffled shirts, waistcoats, and wigs. Women wore bodices, petticoats, hoops, corsets, and capes. Imagine that you are a fashion reviewer for a late 18th century newspaper and you are assigned to attend the inauguration festivities of the nation’s first president, George Washington. Write a review of some of the clothes that people wore. In your descriptions of the people and their clothes, make sure you explain the functions of the items as well.
2. Pretend that you are the leader of a country that just decided to write its first constitution. Your nation has never had a document that explains its rules of governance, so you recently traveled to America to learn about the U.S. Constitution. Write a speech to give to your fellow politicians explaining the values in the American Constitution. Highlight the parts of the U.S. Constitution that you want to incorporate into your own constitution. Similarly, identify some of the rules and principals in the American document that you don’t want to incorporate into your own. Make sure that you explain your reasoning in detail.
3. During the past 20 years, there have been more than 100 new constitutions written worldwide. Pick any nation in the world that interests you and learn if its people have any written document that explains the rules of their land. After you find a country that does have a constitution, read that document and learn what rights it gives its citizens. Does this nation seem like a democracy to you? How is the document you read different from the American Constitution? Would you rather live under these rules than the rules in the U.S. Constitution? Explain.
4. There were 55 men in Philadelphia debating the rules and issues that ultimately shaped the Constitution. These men included George Washington, James Madison, Ben Franklin, and many others. Learn more about one of these men, and then write a brief biography of him. You may want to answer these questions in your writing: What had this man done prior to coming to Philadelphia? Did he ultimately sign the Constitution? Were there parts of the Constitution he didn’t like? Also include any other information about your subject that you think is interesting or important.
5. Pretend you have been given the right to change a single part of the Bill of Rights. You can add one amendment or you can add something to an amendment that already exists. But you must remove one whole amendment if you are adding an entirely new one, or you must remove part of an amendment if you are adding onto an amendment that already exists. Write a brief essay explaining what you would do and why.

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Video Script

DRAMATIC VOICE

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

NARRATOR

The Constitution of the United States — it defines our rights as citizens and sets down the rules that describe how our nation’s government is to be run. It provides the basic meaning of what it means to be an American. The men who wrote the Constitution two centuries ago hoped it would solve the many problems faced by the new nation at that time. But they also wanted it to guide the nation in the centuries ahead. This is the story of how and why they created this amazing document.

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NARRATOR

In the hot summer of 1787, a group of people met in Philadelphia to write a new set of rules for the government of the United States. Among them were some of the nation’s most famous men — George Washington, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and many others. The meetings these men held led to a new set of rules for the United States.

This set of rules — the U.S. Constitution — has guided the nation for more than 200 years. The Constitution carefully describes the powers of Congress, the president, and the nation’s courts. It creates what’s called a “federal” system in which the national government shares power with the states. It gives a great deal of power to the national government. But it also makes sure that individual citizens keep many important rights and freedoms.

Nations all over the world still imitate this document. For the past two centuries, millions of people have looked to this country for ideas about freedom, democracy, and a government based on strict but fair rules. Some other nations have even copied parts of the U.S. Constitution for their own use.

The United States Constitution is as important to each American today as it was when it first went into effect. Every day, millions of Americans go to their jobs or to school. They take trips, spend money, read magazines and newspapers, visit friends. They attend places of worship, choose their leaders, and work on problems facing their communities. They may not ever think about the Constitution while they do these things. But almost every act is either regulated or protected by this unique document.

In a way, it’s surprising that the Constitution has lasted as long as it has. According to one expert, since 1970 alone more than 100 nations have adopted constitutions or changed them completely. But the U.S. Constitution has guided our nation for more than two centuries.

When our nation’s founders gathered there in 1787, Philadelphia was one of the nation’s largest cities, but it was small compared with cities today. In 1787, the new nation was a collection of farms and very small towns scattered across an unsettled wilderness. This collection of small communities was having a great deal of trouble just surviving as a single nation. The men who traveled to Philadelphia thought the most important thing they could do was find a way to keep the struggling young nation from falling apart. The founders feared that without a new Constitution, the young nation’s experiment in democracy would fail.

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The Articles of Confederation

DRAMATIC VOICE

“Our Country, my Friend, is not yet out of Danger. There are great difficulties in our Constitution and Situation to reconcile Government, Finance, Commerce, and foreign affairs, with our Liberties. The Prospect before Us is joyfull, but there are intricacies in it, which will perplex the wisest Heads and wound the most honest hearts and disturb the coolest and firmest Tempers.”

NARRATOR

John Adams, writing to Samuel Adams, spoke for many of America’s leaders in 1786 when he expressed these doubts. Americans had hoped to create a democracy that would be admired by the whole world. Now, many of them believed their nation might not even survive.

Only a few years earlier, the 13 colonies in North America had won a bitter war for independence from Great Britain. The war began after Great Britain tried to increase its control over the colonies. Many American leaders said the legislatures in these colonies should be free to make their own decisions. When Great Britain tried to weaken the power of these colonial legislatures, the colonists rebelled. In 1776, they signed the Declaration of Independence, breaking all ties with Great Britain. And in 1781, they won their revolution and founded a new nation.

By 1787, these original 13 colonies had formed the United States. But they remained fiercely independent from each other. Even the flag they adopted, with its 13 stars and 13 stripes, emphasized that the new nation was made up of these separate states. The leaders of the Revolution had fought for liberty and independence. They feared the power of any government to take away the rights and freedoms of the individual. But they especially feared the power a strong central government might have over the states.

So the national government these independent states created was very weak. Many leaders of the Revolution felt that democracy could only survive if the state governments were stronger than the national government. They thought a strong central government could never rule an area as huge as the entire United States without destroying democracy. One leader put it this way:

DRAMATIC VOICE

“So extensive a territory as that of the United States . . . cannot be governed in freedom. . . . Force then becomes necessary . . . to make the government feared and respected.”

NARRATOR

The new country adopted a set of rules called the Articles of Confederation. The Articles made each state almost as powerful as an independent nation.

DRAMATIC VOICE

“Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every Power, Jurisdiction and right, which is not by this confederation expressly delegated to the United States, in Congress assembled.” — Article 2, Articles of Confederation

NARRATOR

The Articles went into effect in 1781. They set up a national Congress in which each state had one vote. But only the state governments — *not* the national Congress — could raise money by making their citizens pay taxes. Congress had to *ask* the states for any money it needed, and often the states ignored these requests. Congress had no way to make the states agree to any requests or laws it made.

Under the Articles, each state had its own money, and each state made its own rules about trade. Many states set up special taxes, called tariffs, on goods from other states. This made it hard for each state to trade with others. Bitter arguments among the states became common.

In the 1780s, farmers in many parts of the new nation were having a terrible time earning money. Many were sent to prison because they could not pay their debts. Others lost their farms. Some farmers in Massachusetts asked the

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state government for help, but the government turned them down. Then, about 1,000 farmers, led by Daniel Shays, a Revolutionary War soldier, took up weapons and forced many of the state’s courts to close.

The national government was too weak to stop the uprising. Eventually, the Massachusetts militia put an end to what is now called Shays’ Rebellion. But the uprising had an electrifying effect on the young nation. It led the call to change the Articles of Confederation. People wanted a stronger central government. There was even talk that the Union couldn’t be held together much longer if the Articles weren’t changed. In a letter to James Madison, George Washington observed the following:

DRAMATIC VOICE

“We are either a United people, or we are not. If the former, let us, in all matters of general concern act as a nation, which have national objects to promote, and a national character to support. If we are not, let us no longer act a farce by pretending to it. For whilst we are playing a double game, or playing a game between the two we shall never be consistent or respectable, but may become the dupes of some powers and, most assuredly, the contempt of all.”

The Constitutional Convention Philadelphia, 1787

NARRATOR

To solve such problems, 55 American leaders gathered secretly in Philadelphia in 1787 to strengthen the Articles of Confederation. Every state except Rhode Island sent delegates to the Constitutional Convention, which was held in the Pennsylvania statehouse, where the Declaration of Independence had been signed 11 years earlier.

Congress only wanted the delegates to *change* the Articles. When they arrived in Philadelphia, they decided to keep their meetings secret. The heat and humidity that summer in Philadelphia were nearly unbearable. Despite this, the windows of the statehouse were kept shut. The delegates wanted to keep people from listening in and spying — and perhaps trying to influence their discussions.

Americans had a great deal of respect and admiration for many of the leaders at the Constitutional Convention. Many people believed that men like General Washington and Benjamin Franklin could do no wrong. The delegates knew that most Americans would approve any proposal these two men favored. So the delegates acted boldly when Washington and Franklin agreed to ignore the instructions from Congress and write a completely new set of rules for the government of the United States.

Although many of the delegates had fought to break away from Great Britain, they knew that some of their most cherished ideas about rights came from the British. The idea of a written constitution began in England in the year 1215, when King John signed the famous Magna Carta — or “great charter.” In the Magna Carta, King John wrote down a number of rules about his government. The Magna Carta gave some rights to barons, who were England’s wealthy nobles. These rights did not apply to other people. But the Magna Carta was important because it put in writing for the first time the idea that government must follow the rule of law and respect the rights of citizens.

In the late 1600s, the English philosopher John Locke said that people were wise enough to choose the kind of government they wanted. He said that all government was really a contract — that is, a kind of agreement between citizens and leaders. In that contract, citizens agree to obey the government, but only as long as the government agrees to protect each individual’s rights and property. John Locke lived during a time in history known as the Age of Reason, or the Enlightenment. Before this time, most government was imposed on people by powerful elites who didn’t believe that ordinary people were smart enough to govern themselves. The ideas of the Enlightenment greatly influenced the founding fathers. Locke’s idea of a contract between the people and the government is expressed in the Preamble to the Constitution: “We the people . . . do ordain and establish this Constitution.”

While the delegates in Philadelphia may have agreed with each other about Locke’s ideas, they argued for weeks about many problems of establishing a firm, strong, and fair new government for the United States.

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In writing the Constitution, the nation’s founders had to agree to several important compromises. Each delegate had to give up something in order to get a final version of the Constitution they could all agree on.

Compromise at the Convention

DRAMATIC VOICE

“In passing judgment on [this Constitution], you must call to mind that we had clashing interests to reconcile. . . . View the system then as resulting from a spirit of accommodation.” (Pierce Butler)

NARRATOR

One big argument was about how large and small states would choose members of Congress. Some delegates said each state should have a different number of Congressmen depending on how many people lived in that state. Under this plan, states with large populations, like New York and Virginia, would have had many more members in Congress than small states like Delaware or Connecticut. Delegates from the smaller states wanted each state to have *the same* number of lawmakers in Congress. So the delegates decided to create *two* parts of Congress — the House of Representatives and the Senate. In the House, the number of representatives each state has is based on the state’s population. But each state has exactly the *same* number of senators — two. The decision to apportion seats to Congress this way came to be known as the “Great Compromise” of the Constitutional Convention.

Another controversial issue the founders compromised on was slavery. By 1787, some 650,000 blacks lived in the United States. Most were slaves. Slavery existed in nearly every state, but many northern states were moving towards abolishing it. Most slaveholders lived in the South, and they argued that the planting and harvesting of labor-intensive crops made slave labor necessary.

Most enlightened people of the 1780s saw slavery as a terrible thing. In the North, such men as Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, and John Jay campaigned for its abolition. And in the South, men like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, George Mason, and James Madison hoped that slavery would eventually end — though as slaveholders themselves, they took few measures to help bring this about.

Despite these sentiments, there remained a strong force that fervently believed slavery was vital to the South’s economy. So the delegates knew they had to deal with the problem delicately. Antislavery delegates were afraid southern states would leave the Union if the Constitution contained any provision outlawing slavery. One big argument had to do with representation in Congress and whether slaves should be counted as part of each state’s population. The delegates finally agreed that each slave would be counted as three-fifths of a person in deciding each state’s number of representatives and in fixing the amount of taxes the state had to pay.

It might seem as though this so-called “three-fifths clause” meant that the founders viewed a black person as three-fifths of a human being. But the three-fifths clause was actually an attempt to preserve and strengthen the *antislavery* forces in Congress. It was an antislavery northerner, James Wilson of Pennsylvania, who proposed the three-fifths compromise. Frederick Douglass, the 19th century black abolitionist, recognized the damaging effect that the three-fifths clause had on pro-slavery forces. He referred to it as “a downright disability laid upon the slave-holding states” in that it deprived them of “two-fifths of their natural basis of representation.”

Given the likely prospect that the southern states would reject a Constitution that made no provision for slavery, the founders compromised, citing the need to preserve the union as their most important aim. But it was clear to them all that this problem wouldn’t go away.

The importation of slaves into the United States ended in 1808. But it wasn’t until after the carnage of the Civil War that slavery finally came to an end with the 13th Amendment to the Constitution.

Back in Philadelphia, the Convention faced a third challenge — the need for a bill of rights. The delegates in the stifling statehouse spent most of their time devising and adjusting how the machinery of government would work under the new Constitution. Some delegates were worried about the new government’s potential effects on the

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rights of individual Americans. These leaders wanted a “bill of rights” — that is, they wanted the Constitution to list such core individual rights as freedom of speech, press, and religion; the right to a jury trial; the right not to be searched unfairly; and so on. Other delegates said a bill of rights wasn’t needed. They argued that most states’ constitutions already provided for such rights. To this objection, James Madison said:

DRAMATIC VOICE

“It is too uncertain ground to leave this provision upon. . . . Some states have no bills of rights, there are others provided with very defective ones, and there are others whose bills of rights are not only defective but absolutely improper.”

NARRATOR

Again the delegates compromised. They did not, at first, include a bill of rights in the Constitution. Instead, they agreed to work hard and add these rights later, as a set of amendments — or changes — to the Constitution. The first ten amendments, added in 1791, make up the Bill of Rights.

Ratification

NARRATOR

The Constitution was signed on September 17, 1787. But before it could become law, it had to be ratified, or approved, by at least nine of the 13 states. Many of the smaller states quickly ratified the Constitution. Delaware was the first, ratifying it on December 7, 1787. The ninth state to ratify was New Hampshire, which gave its formal approval on June 21, 1788. With this, the Constitution technically went into effect.

But there was a problem. Several of the larger states, specifically New York and Virginia, had not ratified the Constitution. Many people were concerned that without the approval of these two states, the Constitution would be meaningless. Critics of the Constitution cited the lack of a bill of rights as their chief objection. But many also thought the Constitution granted too much power to the national government and the president and not enough to the states. Eventually, two main groups emerged in this argument. Those who supported the Constitution became known as the Federalists. Those who opposed the Constitution were the Anti-Federalists. In New York, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay wrote a series of essays in which they argued passionately for passage of the Constitution.

DRAMATIC VOICE

“To secure the public good, and private rights, against the danger of . . . faction, and at the same time to preserve the spirit and the form of popular government, is then the great object to which our enquiries are directed.”

NARRATOR

These essays by Hamilton, Madison, and Jay were printed in newspapers and later published under the title *The Federalist*. Historians cite the *Federalist* essays as crucial to mustering the support needed to ratify the Constitution.

In Virginia, the great patriot Patrick Henry had rallied the colonists in defiance of Great Britain with his cry “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death.” But now, he spoke out strongly against the Constitution. He was afraid the president might eventually become as powerful as a king.

Eventually, both New York and Virginia did ratify the Constitution. Now the Constitution had teeth. In January, 1789, the states selected presidential electors. And in February, those electors unanimously chose George Washington to be our nation’s first president. He was inaugurated on April 30, 1789.

In 1791, as the Federalists had promised, the Bill of Rights was added. These first ten amendments to the Constitution list and guarantee the fundamental rights and freedoms that all of us enjoy as American citizens.

“We the People”

The Story of the Constitution

A “Living” Constitution

DRAMATIC VOICE

“Under this Constitution, to be a citizen of the United States . . . will be to be a citizen of the freest, purest, and happiest government upon the face of the Earth.”

NARRATOR

As these words from Dr. Benjamin Rush show, America’s leaders wanted the Constitution to be admired and imitated by people all over the world. The delegates were sure that they were creating a new and far better form of government than had ever existed before.

However, the nation’s founders could never have predicted many of the tremendous changes to come in the years ahead. They could never have known that a nation of about four million farmers and merchants would grow into a mighty industrial country of more than 250 million people, many of whom would live in huge cities.

The U.S. today faces problems very different from those in 1787. The Revolutionary War was fought with simple rifles and small cannons. Today, a single nuclear bomb can destroy an entire city. In 1787, Americans were only beginning to settle a vast, unexplored wilderness. Today, the land is settled. And now factories produce millions of tons of poisonous waste, much of which is dumped where it can seep into the soil and water.

For these reasons, you might think the Constitution must be hopelessly out of date. But this isn’t true. Even though it was written to solve problems facing the nation 200 years ago, the Constitution still guides the nation today.

The nation’s founders may not have known what kinds of changes would occur in the future. But they knew America *would* change. And they wanted that change to occur in an orderly way — a way that would protect the basic freedoms of each American citizen. So they put in place a system of amendments that would allow the Constitution to grow in order to meet the changing times. Today, this “living Constitution” continues to help the nation grow.

Our founding fathers were not perfect, and neither was the Constitution they wrote. They were men of their times who recognized and protected an institution — slavery — that condemned hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children to lives of endless suffering and hardship.

But in giving his approval to the Constitution, Benjamin Franklin recognized both the imperfections and the achievement:

DRAMATIC VOICE

“When you assemble a number of men, to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. From such an assembly can a perfect production be expected? It therefore astonishes me, Sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does. . . . Thus I consent Sir, to this Constitution, because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best.”

NARRATOR

Most people regard 1776 as the birth date of our country. Indeed, each year we mark the Fourth of July with celebrations, fireworks, picnics, and parades. But in 1987, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the Constitutional Convention, President Ronald Reagan suggested that “it was with the writing of our Constitution, setting down the architecture of democratic government, that the noble sentiments and brave rhetoric of 1776 took on substance, that the hopes and dreams of the revolutionists could become a living, enduring reality.”

Recommended Readings

For Younger Readers

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