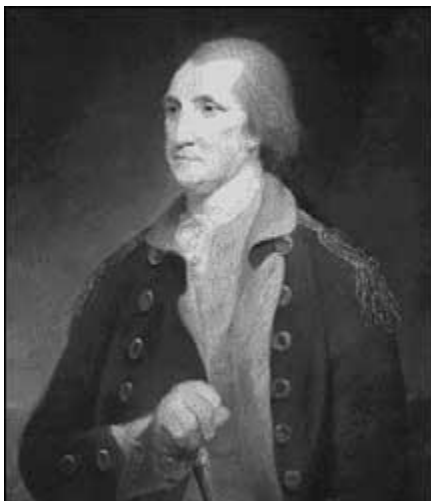


## **A More Perfect Union: The Creation of the U.S. Constitution**

May 25, 1787, Freshly spread dirt covered the cobblestone street in front of the Pennsylvania State House, protecting the men inside from the sound of passing carriages and carts. Guards stood at the entrances to ensure that the curious were kept at a distance. Robert Morris of Pennsylvania, the "financier" of the Revolution, opened the proceedings with a nomination--Gen. George Washington for the presidency of the Constitutional Convention. The vote was unanimous. With characteristic ceremonial modesty, the general expressed his embarrassment at his lack of qualifications to preside over such an august body and apologized for any errors into which he might fall in the course of its deliberations.

To many of those assembled, especially to the small, boyish-looking, 36-year-old delegate from Virginia, James Madison, the general's mere presence boded well for the convention, for the illustrious Washington gave to the gathering an air of importance and legitimacy. But his decision to attend the convention had been an agonizing one. The Father of the Country had almost remained at home.

Suffering from rheumatism, despondent over the loss of a brother, absorbed in the management of Mount Vernon, and doubting that the convention would accomplish very much or that many men of stature would attend, Washington delayed accepting the invitation to attend for several months. Torn between the hazards of lending his reputation to a gathering perhaps doomed to failure and the chance that the public would view his reluctance to attend with a critical eye, the general finally agreed to make the trip. James Madison was pleased.



General George Washington was unanimously elected president of the Philadelphia convention.

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## **The Articles of Confederation**

The determined Madison had for several years insatiably studied history and political theory searching for a solution to the political and economic dilemmas he saw plaguing America. The Virginian's labors convinced him of the futility and weakness of confederacies of independent states. America's own government under the Articles of Confederation, Madison was convinced, had to be replaced. In force since 1781, established as a "league of friendship" and a constitution for the 13 sovereign and independent states after the Revolution, the articles seemed to Madison woefully inadequate. With the states retaining considerable power, the central government, he believed, had insufficient power to regulate commerce. It could not tax and was generally impotent in setting commercial policy. It could not effectively support a war effort. It had little power to settle quarrels between states. Saddled with this weak government, the states were on the brink of economic disaster. The evidence was overwhelming. Congress was attempting to function with a depleted treasury; paper money was flooding the country, creating extraordinary inflation--a pound of tea in some areas could be purchased for a tidy \$100; and the depressed condition of business was taking its toll on many small farmers. Some of them were being thrown in jail for debt, and numerous farms were being confiscated and sold for taxes.

In 1786 some of the farmers had fought back. Led by Daniel Shays, a former captain in the Continental army, a group of armed men, sporting evergreen twigs in their hats, prevented the circuit court from sitting at Northampton, MA, and threatened to seize muskets stored in the arsenal at Springfield. Although the insurrection was put down by state troops, the incident confirmed the fears of many wealthy men that anarchy was just around the corner. Embellished day after day in the press, the uprising made upper-class Americans shudder as they imagined hordes of vicious outlaws descending upon innocent citizens. From his idyllic Mount Vernon setting, Washington wrote to Madison: "Wisdom and good examples are necessary at this time to rescue the political machine from the impending storm."

Madison thought he had the answer. He wanted a strong central government to provide order and stability. "Let it be tried then," he wrote, "whether any middle ground can be taken which will at once support a due supremacy of the national authority," while maintaining state power only when "subordinately useful." The resolute Virginian looked to the Constitutional Convention to forge a new government in this mold.

The convention had its specific origins in a proposal offered by Madison and John Tyler in the Virginia assembly that the Continental Congress be given power to regulate commerce throughout the Confederation. Through their efforts in the assembly a plan was devised inviting the several states to attend a convention at Annapolis, MD, in September 1786 to discuss commercial problems. Madison and a young lawyer from New York named Alexander Hamilton issued a report on the meeting in Annapolis, calling upon Congress to

summon delegates of all of the states to meet for the purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation. Although the report was widely viewed as a usurpation of congressional authority, the Congress did issue a formal call to the states for a convention. To Madison it represented the supreme chance to reverse the country's trend. And as the delegations gathered in Philadelphia, its importance was not lost to others. The squire of Gunston Hall, George Mason, wrote to his son, "The Eyes of the United States are turned upon this Assembly and their Expectations raised to a very anxious Degree. May God Grant that we may be able to gratify them, by establishing a wise and just Government."

## **The Delegates**

Seventy-four delegates were appointed to the convention, of which 55 actually attended sessions. Rhode Island was the only state that refused to send delegates. Dominated by men wedded to paper currency, low taxes, and popular government, Rhode Island's leaders refused to participate in what they saw as a conspiracy to overthrow the established government. Other Americans also had their suspicions. Patrick Henry, of the flowing red Glasgow cloak and the magnetic oratory, refused to attend, declaring he "smelt a rat." He suspected, correctly, that Madison had in mind the creation of a powerful central government and the subversion of the authority of the state legislatures. Henry along with many other political leaders, believed that the state governments offered the chief protection for personal liberties. He was determined not to lend a hand to any proceeding that seemed to pose a threat to that protection.

With Henry absent, with such towering figures as Jefferson and Adams abroad on foreign missions, and with John Jay in New York at the Foreign Office, the convention was without some of the country's major political leaders. It was, nevertheless, an impressive assemblage. In addition to Madison and Washington, there were Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania--crippled by gout, the 81-year-old Franklin was a man of many dimensions printer, storekeeper, publisher, scientist, public official, philosopher, diplomat, and ladies' man; James Wilson of Pennsylvania--a distinguished lawyer with a penchant for ill-advised land-jobbing schemes, which would force him late in life to flee from state to state avoiding prosecution for debt, the Scotsman brought a profound mind steeped in constitutional theory and law; Alexander Hamilton of New York--a brilliant, ambitious former aide-de-camp and secretary to Washington during the Revolution who had, after his marriage into the Schuyler family of New York, become a powerful political figure; George Mason of Virginia--the author of the Virginia Bill of Rights whom Jefferson later called "the Cato of his country without the avarice of the Roman"; John Dickinson of Delaware--the quiet, reserved author of the "Farmers' Letters" and chairman of the congressional committee that framed the articles; and Gouverneur Morris of Pennsylvania--well versed in French literature and language, with a flair and bravado to match his keen intellect, who had helped draft the New York State Constitution and had worked with Robert Morris in the Finance Office.

There were others who played major roles - Oliver Ellsworth of Connecticut; Edmund Randolph of Virginia; William Paterson of New Jersey; John Rutledge of South Carolina;

Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts; Roger Sherman of Connecticut; Luther Martin of Maryland; and the Pinckneys, Charles and Charles Cotesworth, of South Carolina. Franklin was the oldest member and Jonathan Dayton, the 27-year-old delegate from New Jersey was the youngest. The average age was 42. Most of the delegates had studied law, had served in colonial or state legislatures, or had been in the Congress. Well versed in philosophical theories of government advanced by such philosophers as James Harrington, John Locke, and Montesquieu, profiting from experience gained in state politics, the delegates composed an exceptional body, one that left a remarkably learned record of debate. Fortunately we have a relatively complete record of the proceedings, thanks to the indefatigable James Madison. Day after day, the Virginian sat in front of the presiding officer, compiling notes of the debates, not missing a single day or a single major speech. He later remarked that his self-confinement in the hall, which was often oppressively hot in the Philadelphia summer, almost killed him.

The sessions of the convention were held in secret--no reporters or visitors were permitted. Although many of the naturally loquacious members were prodded in the pubs and on the streets, most remained surprisingly discreet. To those suspicious of the convention, the curtain of secrecy only served to confirm their anxieties. Luther Martin of Maryland later charged that the conspiracy in Philadelphia needed a quiet breeding ground. Thomas Jefferson wrote John Adams from Paris, "I am sorry they began their deliberations by so abominable a precedent as that of tying up the tongues of their members."

### **The Virginia Plan**

On Tuesday morning, May 29, Edmund Randolph, the tall, 34-year-old governor of Virginia, opened the debate with a long speech decrying the evils that had befallen the country under the Articles of Confederation and stressing the need for creating a strong national government. Randolph then outlined a broad plan that he and his Virginia compatriots had, through long sessions at the Indian Queen tavern, put together in the days preceding the convention. James Madison had such a plan on his mind for years. The proposed government had three branches--legislative, executive, and judicial--each branch structured to check the other. Highly centralized, the government would have veto power over laws enacted by state legislatures. The plan, Randolph confessed, "meant a strong *consolidated* union in which the idea of states should be nearly annihilated." This was, indeed, the rat so offensive to Patrick Henry.

The introduction of the so-called Virginia Plan at the beginning of the convention was a tactical coup. The Virginians had forced the debate into their own frame of reference and in their own terms.

For 10 days the members of the convention discussed the sweeping and, to many delegates, startling Virginia resolutions. The critical issue, described succinctly by Gouverneur Morris on May 30, was the distinction between a federation and a national government, the "former being a mere compact resting on the good faith of the parties; the latter having a complet

and *compulsive* operation." Morris favored the latter, a "supreme power" capable of exercising necessary authority not merely a shadow government, fragmented and hopelessly ineffective.

### **The New Jersey Plan**

This nationalist position revolted many delegates who cringed at the vision of a central government swallowing state sovereignty. On June 13 delegates from smaller states rallied around proposals offered by New Jersey delegate William Paterson. Railing against efforts to throw the states into "hotchpot," Paterson proposed a "union of the States merely federal." The "New Jersey resolutions" called only for a revision of the articles to enable the Congress more easily to raise revenues and regulate commerce. It also provided that acts of Congress and ratified treaties be "the supreme law of the States."

For 3 days the convention debated Paterson's plan, finally voting for rejection. With the defeat of the New Jersey resolutions, the convention was moving toward creation of a new government, much to the dismay of many small-state delegates. The nationalists, led by Madison, appeared to have the proceedings in their grip. In addition, they were able to persuade the members that any new constitution should be ratified through conventions of the people and not by the Congress and the state legislatures- -another tactical coup. Madison and his allies believed that the constitution they had in mind would likely be scuttled in the legislatures, where many state political leaders stood to lose power. The nationalists wanted to bring the issue before "the people," where ratification was more likely.

### **Hamilton's Plan**

On June 18 Alexander Hamilton presented his own ideal plan of government. Erudite and polished, the speech, nevertheless, failed to win a following. It went too far. Calling the British government "the best in the world," Hamilton proposed a model strikingly similar an executive to serve during good behavior or life with veto power over all laws; a senate with members serving during good behavior; the legislature to have power to pass "all laws whatsoever." Hamilton later wrote to Washington that the people were now willing to accept "something not very remote from that which they have lately quitted." What the people had "lately quitted," of course, was monarchy. Some members of the convention fully expected the country to turn in this direction. Hugh Williamson of North Carolina, a wealthy physician, declared that it was "pretty certain . . . that we should at some time or other have a king." Newspaper accounts appeared in the summer of 1787 alleging that a plot was under way to invite the second son of George III, Frederick, Duke of York, the secular bishop of Osnaburgh in Prussia, to become "king of the United States."



Alexander Hamilton on June 18 called the British government "the best in the world" and proposed a model strikingly similar. The erudite New Yorker, however, later became one of the most ardent spokesmen for the new Constitution.

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Strongly militating against any serious attempt to establish monarchy was the enmity so prevalent in the revolutionary period toward royalty and the privileged classes. Some state constitutions had even prohibited titles of nobility. In the same year as the Philadelphia convention, Royall Tyler, a revolutionary war veteran, in his play *The Contract*, gave his own jaundiced view of the upper classes:

*Exult each patriot heart! this night is shewn  
A piece, which we may fairly call our own;  
Where the proud titles of "My Lord!" "Your Grace!"  
To humble Mr. and plain Sir give place.*

Most delegates were well aware that there were too many Royall Tylers in the country, with too many memories of British rule and too many ties to a recent bloody war, to accept a king. As the debate moved into the specifics of the new government, Alexander Hamilton and others of his persuasion would have to accept something less.

By the end of June, debate between the large and small states over the issue of representation in the first chamber of the legislature was becoming increasingly acrimonious. Delegates from Virginia and other large states demanded that voting in Congress be according to population; representatives of smaller states insisted upon the equality they had enjoyed under the articles. With the oratory degenerating into threats and accusations, Benjamin Franklin appealed for daily prayers. Dressed in his customary gray homespun, the aged philosopher pleaded that "the Father of lights . . . illuminate our understandings." Franklin's appeal for prayers was never fulfilled; the convention, as Hugh Williamson noted, had no funds to pay a preacher.

On June 29 the delegates from the small states lost the first battle. The convention approved a resolution establishing population as the basis for representation in the House of Representatives, thus favoring the larger states. On a subsequent small-state proposal that the states have equal representation in the Senate, the vote resulted in a tie. With large-state delegates unwilling to compromise on this issue, one member thought that the convention

"was on the verge of dissolution, scarce held together by the strength of an hair."

By July 10 George Washington was so frustrated over the deadlock that he bemoaned "having had any agency" in the proceedings and called the opponents of a strong central government "narrow minded politicians . . . under the influence of local views." Luther Martin of Maryland, perhaps one whom Washington saw as "narrow minded," thought otherwise. A tiger in debate, not content merely to parry an opponent's argument but determined to bludgeon it into eternal rest, Martin had become perhaps the small states' most effective, if irascible, orator. The Marylander leaped eagerly into the battle on the representation issue declaring, "The States have a right to an equality of representation. This is secured to us by our present articles of confederation; we are in possession of this privilege."

### **The Great Compromise**

Also crowding into this complicated and divisive discussion over representation was the North-South division over the method by which slaves were to be counted for purposes of taxation and representation. On July 12 Oliver Ellsworth proposed that representation for the lower house be based on the number of free persons and three-fifths of "all other persons," a euphemism for slaves. In the following week the members finally compromised, agreeing that direct taxation be according to representation and that the representation of the lower house be based on the white inhabitants and three-fifths of the "other people." With this compromise and with the growing realization that such compromise was necessary to avoid a complete breakdown of the convention, the members then approved Senate equality. Roger Sherman had remarked that it was the wish of the delegates "that some general government should be established." With the crisis over representation now settled, it began to look again as if this wish might be fulfilled.

For the next few days the air in the City of Brotherly Love, although insufferably muggy and swarming with blue-bottle flies, had the clean scent of conciliation. In this period of welcome calm, the members decided to appoint a Committee of Detail to draw up a draft constitution. The convention would now at last have something on paper. As Nathaniel Gorham of Massachusetts, John Rutledge, Edmund Randolph, James Wilson, and Oliver Ellsworth went to work, the other delegates voted themselves a much needed 10-day vacation.

During the adjournment, Gouverneur Morris and George Washington rode out along a creek that ran through land that had been part of the Valley Forge encampment 10 years earlier. While Morris cast for trout, Washington pensively looked over the now lush ground where his freezing troops had suffered, at a time when it had seemed as if the American Revolution had reached its end. The country had come a long way.

### **The First Draft**

On Monday August 6, 1787, the convention accepted the first draft of the Constitution. Here

was the article-by-article model from which the final document would result some 5 weeks later. As the members began to consider the various sections, the willingness to compromise of the previous days quickly evaporated. The most serious controversy erupted over the question of regulation of commerce. The southern states, exporters of raw materials, rice, indigo, and tobacco, were fearful that a New England-dominated Congress might, through export taxes, severely damage the South's economic life. C. C. Pinckney declared that if Congress had the power to regulate trade, the southern states would be "nothing more than overseers for the Northern States."

On August 21 the debate over the issue of commerce became very closely linked to another explosive issue--slavery. When Martin of Maryland proposed a tax on slave importation, the convention was thrust into a strident discussion of the institution of slavery and its moral and economic relationship to the new government. Rutledge of South Carolina, asserting that slavery had nothing at all to do with morality, declared, "Interest alone is the governing principle with nations." Sherman of Connecticut was for dropping the tender issue altogether before it jeopardized the convention. Mason of Virginia expressed concern over unlimited importation of slaves but later indicated that he also favored federal protection of slave property already held. This nagging issue of possible federal intervention in slave traffic, which Sherman and others feared could irrevocably split northern and southern delegates, was settled by, in Mason's words, "a bargain." Mason later wrote that delegates from South Carolina and Georgia, who most feared federal meddling in the slave trade, made a deal with delegates from the New England states. In exchange for the New Englanders' support for continuing slave importation for 20 years, the southerners accepted a clause that required only a simple majority vote on navigation laws, a crippling blow to southern economic interests.

The bargain was also a crippling blow to those working to abolish slavery. Congregationalist minister and abolitionist Samuel Hopkins of Connecticut charged that the convention had sold out: "How does it appear . . . that these States, who have been fighting for liberty and consider themselves as the highest and most noble example of zeal for it, cannot agree in any political Constitution, unless it indulge and authorize them to enslave their fellow men . . . Ah! these unclean spirits, like frogs, they, like the Furies of the poets are spreading discord, and exciting men to contention and war." Hopkins considered the Constitution a document fit for the flames.

On August 31 a weary George Mason, who had 3 months earlier written so expectantly to his son about the "great Business now before us," bitterly exclaimed that he "would sooner chop off his right hand than put it to the Constitution as it now stands." Mason despaired that the convention was rushing to saddle the country with an ill-advised, potentially ruinous central authority. He was concerned that a "bill of rights," ensuring individual liberties, had not been made part of the Constitution. Mason called for a new convention to reconsider the whole question of the formation of a new government. Although Mason's motion was overwhelmingly voted down, opponents of the Constitution did not abandon the idea of a new convention. It was futilely suggested again and again for over 2 years.



One of the last major unresolved problems was the method of electing the executive. A number of proposals, including direct election by the people, by state legislatures, by state governors, and by the national legislature, were considered. The result was the electoral college, a master stroke of compromise, quaint and curious but politically expedient. The large states got proportional strength in the number of delegates, the state legislatures got the right of selecting delegates, and the House the right to choose the president in the event no candidate received a majority of electoral votes. Mason later predicted that the House would probably choose the president 19 times out of 20.

In the early days of September, with the exhausted delegates anxious to return home, compromise came easily. On September 8 the convention was ready to turn the Constitution over to a Committee of Style and Arrangement. Gouverneur Morris was the chief architect. Years later he wrote to Timothy Pickering: "That Instrument was written by the Fingers which wrote this letter." The Constitution was presented to the convention on September 12, and the delegates methodically began to consider each section. Although close votes followed on several articles, it was clear that the grueling work of the convention in the historic summer of 1787 was reaching its end.

Before the final vote on the Constitution on September 15, Edmund Randolph proposed that amendments be made by the state conventions and then turned over to another general convention for consideration. He was joined by George Mason and Elbridge Gerry. The three lonely allies were soundly rebuffed. Late in the afternoon the roll of the states was called on the Constitution, and from every delegation the word was "Aye."

On September 17 the members met for the last time, and the venerable Franklin had written a speech that was delivered by his colleague James Wilson. Appealing for unity behind the Constitution, Franklin declared, "I think it will astonish our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear that our councils are confounded like those of the builders of Babel; and that our States are on the point of separation, only to meet hereafter for the purpose of cutting one another's throats." With Mason, Gerry, and Randolph withstanding appeals to attach their signatures, the other delegates in the hall formally signed the Constitution, and the convention adjourned at 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

Weary from weeks of intense pressure but generally satisfied with their work, the delegates shared a farewell dinner at City Tavern. Two blocks away on Market Street, printers John Dunlap and David Claypoole worked into the night on the final imprint of the six-page Constitution, copies of which would leave Philadelphia on the morning stage. The debate over the nation's form of government was now set for the larger arena.

As the members of the convention returned home in the following days, Alexander Hamilton privately assessed the chances of the Constitution for ratification. In its favor were the support of Washington, commercial interests, men of property, creditors, and the belief among many Americans that the Articles of Confederation were inadequate. Against it were the opposition of a few influential men in the convention and state politicians fearful of

losing power, the general revulsion against taxation, the suspicion that a centralized government would be insensitive to local interests, and the fear among debtors that a new government would "restrain the means of cheating Creditors."

### **The Federalists and the Anti-Federalists**

Because of its size, wealth, and influence and because it was the first state to call a ratifying convention, Pennsylvania was the focus of national attention. The positions of the Federalists, those who supported the Constitution, and the anti-Federalists, those who opposed it, were printed and reprinted by scores of newspapers across the country. And passions in the state were most warm. When the Federalist-dominated Pennsylvania assembly lacked a quorum on September 29 to call a state ratifying convention, a Philadelphia mob, in order to provide the necessary numbers, dragged two anti-Federalist members from their lodgings through the streets to the State House where the bedraggled representatives were forced to stay while the assembly voted. It was a curious example of participatory democracy.

On October 5 anti-Federalist Samuel Bryan published the first of his "Centinel" essays in Philadelphia's Independent Gazetteer. Republished in newspapers in various states, the essays assailed the sweeping power of the central government, the usurpation of state sovereignty, and the absence of a bill of rights guaranteeing individual liberties such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion. "The United States are to be melted down," Bryan declared, into a despotic empire dominated by "well-born" aristocrats. Bryan was echoing the fear of many anti-Federalists that the new government would become one controlled by the wealthy established families and the culturally refined. The common working people, Bryan believed, were in danger of being subjugated to the will of an all-powerful authority remote and inaccessible to the people. It was this kind of authority, he believed, that Americans had fought a war against only a few years earlier.

The next day James Wilson, delivering a stirring defense of the Constitution to a large crowd gathered in the yard of the State House, praised the new government as the best "which has ever been offered to the world." The Scotsman's view prevailed. Led by Wilson, Federalists dominated in the Pennsylvania convention, carrying the vote on December 12 by a healthy 46 to 23.

The vote for ratification in Pennsylvania did not end the rancor and bitterness. Franklin declared that scurrilous articles in the press were giving the impression that Pennsylvania was "peopled by a set of the most unprincipled, wicked, rascally and quarrelsome scoundrels upon the face of the globe." And in Carlisle, on December 26, anti-Federalist rioters broke up a Federalist celebration and hung Wilson and the Federalist chief justice of Pennsylvania, Thomas McKean, in effigy; put the torch to a copy of the Constitution; and busted a few Federalist heads.

In New York the Constitution was under siege in the press by a series of essays signed

"Cato." Mounting a counterattack, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay enlisted help from Madison and, in late 1787, they published the first of a series of essays now known as the Federalist Papers. The 85 essays, most of which were penned by Hamilton himself, probed the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation and the need for an energetic national government. Thomas Jefferson later called the *Federalist Papers* the "best commentary on the principles of government ever written."

Against this kind of Federalist leadership and determination, the opposition in most states was disorganized and generally inert. The leading spokesmen were largely state-centered men with regional and local interests and loyalties. Madison wrote of the Massachusetts anti-Federalists, "There was not a single character capable of uniting their wills or directing their measures. . . . They had no plan whatever." The anti-Federalists attacked wildly on several fronts: the lack of a bill of rights, discrimination against southern states in navigation legislation, direct taxation, the loss of state sovereignty. Many charged that the Constitution represented the work of aristocratic politicians bent on protecting their own class interests. At the Massachusetts convention one delegate declared, "These lawyers, and men of learning and moneyed men, that . . . make us poor illiterate people swallow down the pill . . . they will swallow up all us little folks like the great Leviathan; yes, just as the whale swallowed up Jonah!" Some newspaper articles, presumably written by anti-Federalists, resorted to fanciful predictions of the horrors that might emerge under the new Constitution pagans and deists could control the government; the use of Inquisition-like torture could be instituted as punishment for federal crimes; even the pope could be elected president.

One anti-Federalist argument gave opponents some genuine difficulty--the claim that the territory of the 13 states was too extensive for a representative government. In a republic embracing a large area, anti-Federalists argued, government would be impersonal, unrepresentative, dominated by men of wealth, and oppressive of the poor and working classes. Had not the illustrious Montesquieu himself ridiculed the notion that an extensive territory composed of varying climates and people, could be a single republican state? James Madison, always ready with the Federalist volley, turned the argument completely around and insisted that the vastness of the country would itself be a strong argument in favor of a republic. Claiming that a large republic would counterbalance various political interest groups vying for power, Madison wrote, "The smaller the society the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it; the fewer the distinct parties and interests, the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party and the more easily will they concert and execute their plans of oppression." Extend the size of the republic, Madison argued, and the country would be less vulnerable to separate factions within it.

## **Ratification**

By January 9, 1788, five states of the nine necessary for ratification had approved the Constitution--Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, and Connecticut. But the eventual outcome remained uncertain in pivotal states such as Massachusetts, New York, and Virginia. On February 6, with Federalists agreeing to recommend a list of amendments

amounting to a bill of rights, Massachusetts ratified by a vote of 187 to 168. The revolutionary leader, John Hancock, elected to preside over the Massachusetts ratifying convention but unable to make up his mind on the Constitution, took to his bed with a convenient case of gout. Later seduced by the Federalists with visions of the vice presidency and possibly the presidency, Hancock, whom Madison noted as "an idolater of popularity," suddenly experienced a miraculous cure and delivered a critical block of votes. Although Massachusetts was now safely in the Federalist column, the recommendation of a bill of rights was a significant victory for the anti-Federalists. Six of the remaining states later appended similar recommendations.

When the New Hampshire convention was adjourned by Federalists who sensed imminent defeat and when Rhode Island on March 24 turned down the Constitution in a popular referendum by an overwhelming vote of 10 to 1, Federalist leaders were apprehensive. Looking ahead to the Maryland convention, Madison wrote to Washington, "The difference between even a postponement and adoption in Maryland may . . . possibly give a fatal advantage to that which opposes the constitution." Madison had little reason to worry. The final vote on April 28 63 for, 11 against. In Baltimore, a huge parade celebrating the Federalist victory rolled through the downtown streets, highlighted by a 15-foot float called "Ship Federalist." The symbolically seaworthy craft was later launched in the waters off Baltimore and sailed down the Potomac to Mount Vernon.

On July 2, 1788, the Confederation Congress, meeting in New York, received word that a reconvened New Hampshire ratifying convention had approved the Constitution. With South Carolina's acceptance of the Constitution in May, New Hampshire thus became the ninth state to ratify. The Congress appointed a committee "for putting the said Constitution into operation."

In the next 2 months, thanks largely to the efforts of Madison and Hamilton in their own states, Virginia and New York both ratified while adding their own amendments. The margin for the Federalists in both states, however, was extremely close. Hamilton figured that the majority of the people in New York actually opposed the Constitution, and it is probable that a majority of people in the entire country opposed it. Only the promise of amendments had ensured a Federalist victory.

## **The Bill of Rights**

The call for a bill of rights had been the anti-Federalists' most powerful weapon. Attacking the proposed Constitution for its vagueness and lack of specific protection against tyranny, Patrick Henry asked the Virginia convention, "What can avail your specious, imaginary balances, your rope-dancing, chain-rattling, ridiculous ideal checks and contrivances." The anti-Federalists, demanding a more concise, unequivocal Constitution, one that laid out for all to see the right of the people and limitations of the power of government, claimed that the brevity of the document only revealed its inferior nature. Richard Henry Lee despaired at the lack of provisions to protect "those essential rights of mankind without which liberty

cannot exist." Trading the old government for the new without such a bill of rights, Lee argued, would be trading Scylla for Charybdis.

A bill of rights had been barely mentioned in the Philadelphia convention, most delegates holding that the fundamental rights of individuals had been secured in the state constitutions. James Wilson maintained that a bill of rights was superfluous because all power not expressly delegated to the new government was reserved to the people. It was clear, however, that in this argument the anti-Federalists held the upper hand. Even Thomas Jefferson, generally in favor of the new government, wrote to Madison that a bill of rights was "what the people are entitled to against every government on earth."

By the fall of 1788 Madison had been convinced that not only was a bill of rights necessary to ensure acceptance of the Constitution but that it would have positive effects. He wrote, on October 17, that such "fundamental maxims of free Government" would be "a good ground for an appeal to the sense of community" against potential oppression and would "counteract the impulses of interest and passion."

Madison's support of the bill of rights was of critical significance. One of the new representatives from Virginia to the First Federal Congress, as established by the new Constitution, he worked tirelessly to persuade the House to enact amendments. Defusing the anti-Federalists' objections to the Constitution, Madison was able to shepherd through 17 amendments in the early months of the Congress, a list that was later trimmed to 12 in the Senate. On October 2, 1789, President Washington sent to each of the states a copy of the 12 amendments adopted by the Congress in September. By December 15, 1791, three-fourths of the states had ratified the 10 amendments now so familiar to Americans as the "Bill of Rights."

Benjamin Franklin told a French correspondent in 1788 that the formation of the new government had been like a game of dice, with many players of diverse prejudices and interests unable to make any uncontested moves. Madison wrote to Jefferson that the welding of these clashing interests was "a task more difficult than can be well conceived by those who were not concerned in the execution of it." When the delegates left Philadelphia after the convention, few, if any, were convinced that the Constitution they had approved outlined the ideal form of government for the country. But late in his life James Madison scrawled out another letter, one never addressed. In it he declared that no government can be perfect, and "that which is the least imperfect is therefore the best government."

### **The Document Enshrined**

The fate of the United States Constitution after its signing on September 17, 1787, can be contrasted sharply to the travels and physical abuse of America's other great parchment, the [Declaration of Independence](#). As the Continental Congress, during the years of the revolutionary war, scurried from town to town, the rolled-up Declaration was carried along. After the formation of the new government under the Constitution, the one-page

Declaration, eminently suited for display purposes, graced the walls of various government buildings in Washington, exposing it to prolonged damaging sunlight. It was also subjected to the work of early calligraphers responding to a demand for reproductions of the revered document. As any visitor to the National Archives can readily observe, the early treatment of the now barely legible Declaration took a disastrous toll. The Constitution, in excellent physical condition after more than 200 years, has enjoyed a more serene existence. By 1796 the Constitution was in the custody of the Department of State along with the Declaration and traveled with the federal government from New York to Philadelphia to Washington. Both documents were secretly moved to Leesburg, VA, before the imminent attack by the British on Washington in 1814. Following the war, the Constitution remained in the State Department while the Declaration continued its travels--to the Patent Office Building from 1841 to 1876, to Independence Hall in Philadelphia during the Centennial celebration, and back to Washington in 1877. On September 29, 1921, President Warren Harding issued an Executive order transferring the Constitution and the Declaration to the Library of Congress for preservation and exhibition. The next day Librarian of Congress Herbert Putnam, acting on authority of Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes, carried the Constitution and the Declaration in a Model-T Ford truck to the library and placed them in his office safe until an appropriate exhibit area could be constructed. The documents were officially put on display at a ceremony in the library on February 28, 1924. On February 20, 1933, at the laying of the cornerstone of the future National Archives Building, President Herbert Hoover remarked, "There will be aggregated here the most sacred documents of our history--the originals of the Declaration of Independence and of the Constitution of the United States." The two documents however, were not immediately transferred to the Archives. During World War II both were moved from the library to Fort Knox for protection and returned to the library in 1944. It was not until successful negotiations were completed between Librarian of Congress Luther Evans and Archivist of the United States Wayne Grover that the transfer to the National Archives was finally accomplished by special direction of the Joint Congressional Committee on the Library.

On December 13, 1952, the Constitution and the Declaration were placed in helium-filled cases, enclosed in wooden crates, laid on mattresses in an armored Marine Corps personnel carrier, and escorted by ceremonial troops, two tanks, and four servicemen carrying submachine guns down Pennsylvania and Constitution avenues to the National Archives. Two days later, President Harry Truman declared at a formal ceremony in the Archives Exhibition Hall.

"We are engaged here today in a symbolic act. 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 that the wit of modern man can devise. All this is an honorable effort, based upon reverence for the great past, and our generation can take just pride in it."

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**Bibliographic note:** Web version based on the *Introduction* by Roger A. Bruns to *A More Perfect Union : The Creation of the United States Constitution*. Washington, DC : Published for the National Archives and Records Administration by the National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1986. 33 p.

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