

Lesson Twenty-Seven

Ratifying the Constitution

LESSON IDEA

To show how carefully the Constitution was scrutinized by individual Americans prior to ratification, and why the first ten amendments (Bill of Rights) were deemed necessary.

PREPARATION

Review lessons 24–26 prior to discussing the questions posed in the first part of tonight's lesson. Read "During the Week" and decide how to adapt the assignments suggested in *Your Rugged Constitution* to the needs of your family.

IN SEPTEMBER 1787, the Philadelphia State House was the focus of every American's attention. Fifty-five men had assembled there in May to decide on a form of government for the new nation. They met in the same room of the same building where patriots of similar vision had gathered in the summer of 1776 to decide whether the 13 colonies should submit to the dictates of the English King or fight for their independence.

Do you recall what happened in 1776? [Richard Henry Lee of Virginia proposed that of all ties with England be dissolved and that the colonies become free and independent states. The delegates approved the Lee Resolution, which became the official Declaration of Independence, on July 2nd. The final draft of the Declaration, largely the work of Thomas Jefferson, was adopted on July 4th.]

During the 11 years after the Declaration of Independence was signed, a war was fought, the British were defeated, and independence was established. Now, a permanent government was

needed — one that would preserve the independence of the states, yet give the fledgling nation sufficient strength to remain united and defend itself against such foreign powers as England, France, and Spain.

Delegates to the Constitutional Convention devised an ingenious solution. What form of government did they design? [Review points made in last week's lesson on republics and democracies.]

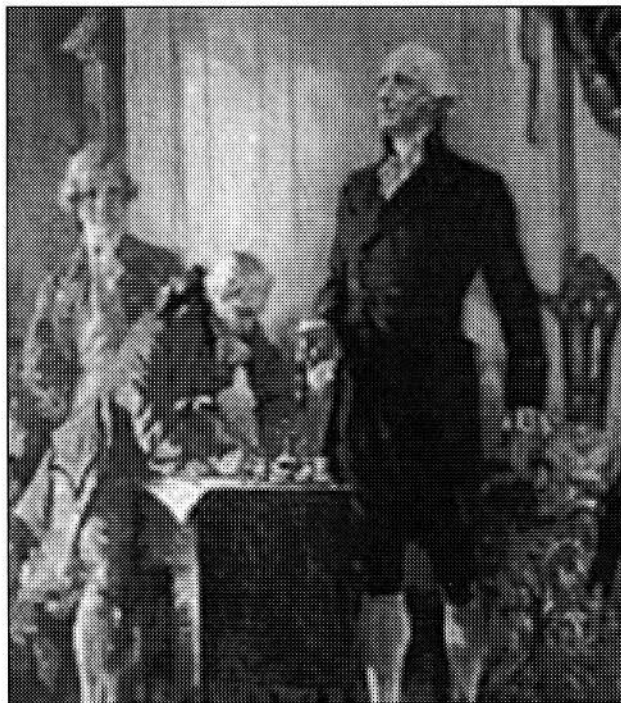
How did they preserve the independence of small states? [Review lesson 24 on the Constitutional Convention, explaining how both large and small state have equal representation in the Senate, while large states have more representatives in the House.]

What was the power of the federal government to be restrained? [Review lesson 25 on checks and balances, emphasizing the division of government authority into three branches — legislative, executive, and judicial.]

There were some leaders, even at the Philadelphia Convention, who believed that the federal government was still too powerful, or that it might become so. Edmund Randolph, Elbridge Gerry, and James Mason refused to sign the Constitution they had helped draft, due

to sundry flaws they perceived. Randolph, in particular, strongly believed that any corrections should be made before, not after, the state ratification process. "A bad feature in government," he argued, "becomes more and more fixed every day."

Based on what we know about government today, would you agree or disagree with Randolph's concern? [Encourage discussion. An



Washington at the Signing of the Constitution, 1787

U.S. House of Representatives



example that would illustrate Randolph's point: The top federal income tax rate, which was originally less than 2 percent, now stands at nearly 40 percent.]

Randolph, Gerry, and Mason believed that the judiciary would be been granted excessive power, which should be curbed. Randolph urged that the President's term of office be limited. And Mason and Gerry were convinced that a bill of rights should be included for the protection of the people.

There were other objections, but the main theme of their arguments was that there were loopholes in the Constitution that could be exploited to erode the freedoms the delegates were anxious to secure for the American people.

Nevertheless, when the Convention adjourned late in the afternoon of September 17th, Benjamin Franklin noted the painting of a glowing sun on the back of George Washington's chair and commented prophetically:

I have often ... in the course of the session, and the vicissitudes of my hopes and fears as to its issue, looked at that [sun] behind the President without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting. But now at length I

have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting sun.

Their work temporarily completed, the Framers met for dinner at the City Tavern in Philadelphia to say their farewells. It was a momentous and happy occasion, a well-earned relief from the tedious work of the four-month Convention. Yet few had any illusions about the difficulties they would encounter during the months and years ahead. Most knew that, after returning home, they spend endless hours writing and answering letters, debating issues, and defending provisions of the Constitution they had drafted from critics.

IN MASSACHUSETTS and Virginia (the states that had spearheaded the drive for independence and nationhood), there was substantial opposition to the creation of a central government. So strong were the convictions of Samuel Adams (the spirited Massachusetts patriot) and Patrick Henry (the fiery Virginia statesman and orator) that both stayed away from the Philadelphia Convention. New York Governor George Clinton was another strong foe of federalism. Even though ratification by only nine states was required to bring the Constitution into effect, the union could be neither permanent nor strong unless New York, Virginia, and Massachusetts endorsed the new pact.

Washington, no longer obligated to remain neutral (as he had while presiding at the Convention), made his position clear. He endorsed the Constitution and believed that it should be ratified. If later found wanting in some respects, it could be amended as the Constitution itself provided. In newspapers, shops, and taverns, Washington's prestige and opinions were utilized by pro-Constitutionalists to sway public sentiment in favor of ratification.

Delaware, whose vote had been decisive in ratifying the Declaration of Independence in 1776, was first to approve the Constitution on December 7, 1787. Pennsylvania ratified five days later and

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Many revisionist historians have in recent years sought to reduce the American Revolution, the Constitution, and George Washington to the level of today's often corrupt and unprincipled politics. To counter such attempts, you may wish to acquaint your family with the superb seven-volume study of our first President by Douglas S. Freeman. Entitled *George Washington*, it is an exciting account of Washington, his associates, and the historical events in which he played such a central role. There is also a 754-page abridgement of the series, entitled, *Washington*, for those whose time is limited. Especially pertinent to our recent lessons is Chapter 19 of the abridged version, which details Washington's thoughts and actions during the tense period from September 1787 to July 1788, when the Constitution was facing the test of ratification by each state.

