

A NEW BEGINNING

Americans had fought hard to win their freedom. But could they find a way to govern themselves?

CAST

Narrators A-1

Sarah Bache, Franklin's daughter

The delegates:

George Washington, Virginia

Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania

James Madison, Virginia

Robert Morris, Pennsylvania

John Rutledge, South Carolina

Edmund Randolph, Virginia

Alexander Hamilton, New York

Charles Pinckney, South Carolina

Gouverneur Morris, Pennsylvania

Elbridge Gerry, Massachusetts

Rufus King, Massachusetts

William Paterson, New Jersey

Roger Sherman, Connecticut

George Wythe, Virginia

William Davie, North Carolina



states had won a hard-fought war for independence in 1783. But once free, the 13 states acted more like independent countries than one nation (see pp. 5-7).

The U.S. had only a weak national government. Under the Articles of Confederation, the nation's first constitution, the U.S. had no president or executive leader. Congress ran the government but had little power. It could not levy taxes, regulate trade, or interfere with the states. Foreign governments had little respect for the new nation.

Several times, Congress asked the states for more power. Each time, its requests were turned down.

These problems greatly troubled men like George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madi-

son. They urged Congress to call a federal convention for May, 1787, to revise the Articles of Confederation.

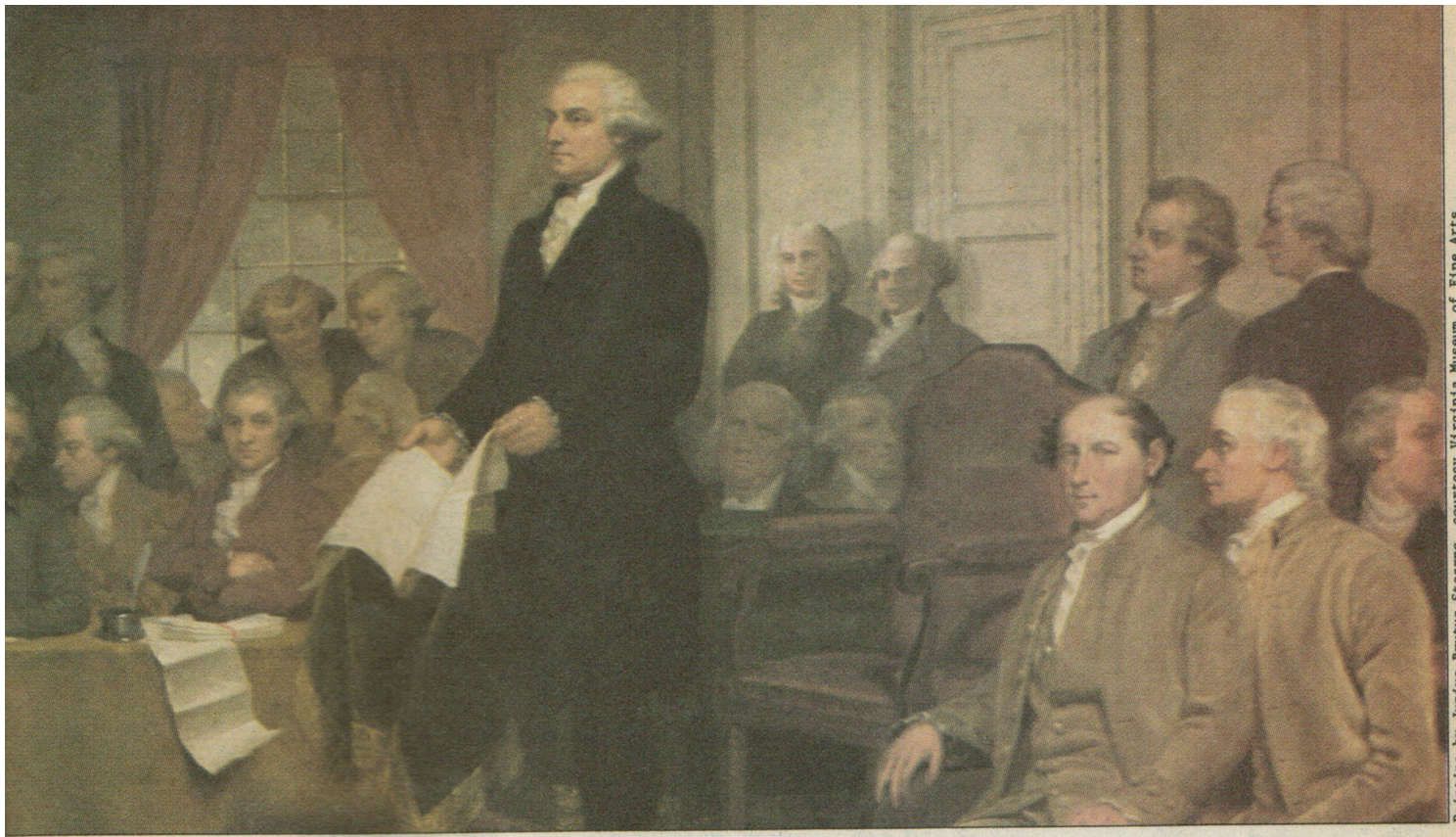
Congress agreed, and every state but Rhode Island sent delegates. But instead of revising the Articles of Confederation, they drafted an entirely new constitution. Why? The winter before, a violent uprising called Shays' Rebellion had taken place in Massachusetts. Many Americans were asking: "Is the nation headed for anarchy? Could the U.S. survive under the Articles of Confederation?"

SCENE ONE

Narrator A: The Federal Convention is scheduled to begin on Monday, May 14, 1787. The day before, cheering crowds greet General Washington when he arrives in Philadelphia. Washington's first stop is to see Benjamin Franklin.

ABOUT THIS PLAY

Everything else had failed. In 1787, the United States was a nation united in name only. The 13



Painting by Junius Brutus Stearns, courtesy Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Franklin: Good afternoon, General! Welcome to Philadelphia!

Washington: Thank you. We have a hard job ahead of us.

Franklin: True. But we can do it. There are some talented men coming to this convention.

Washington: If they ever get here. I'm told that only the Pennsylvania and Virginia delegations are here.

Franklin: Don't worry. Sooner or later, the others will arrive.

Washington: We desperately need a strong central government. Under the Articles of Confederation, the states act like independent nations. Congress cannot levy taxes. The states squabble with each other over trade and boundaries. Seven states have their own paper money. Nine states have their own navy!

Franklin: Shays' Rebellion showed how weak our government is.

Washington: I'm worried. We fought a long and hard war for independence. Now we're fighting one another. We must have a strong government to hold this nation together.

Franklin: I agree. Of course, that idea scares many people.

Washington: I know. But we cannot continue to be weak and divided.

Our nation's survival is at stake!

SCENE TWO

Narrator B: The delegates trickle in slowly. Not until Friday, May 25, does the convention finally open.

R. Morris: On behalf of the entire Pennsylvania delegation, I propose that General Washington be chosen as president of this convention.

Rutledge: I second the motion. Let the vote be unanimous!

All: Hear, hear!

Washington: (to R. Morris) But Dr. Franklin should be president. After all, he is the oldest and most experienced among us.

R. Morris: Franklin wants *you* to be president. He was not feeling well today, or he would have been here himself to nominate you.

Narrator B: Washington is elected by unanimous vote.

Washington: I thank you for this great honor, although I regret my lack of experience for the job. We have important work before us. Let us raise a standard to which the wise and the honest can repair.

SCENE THREE

Narrator C: On May 29, the Virginia Plan is offered. But first . . .

Wythe: Mr. President! This convention will decide our nation's future. Should not everything we say be kept secret? That way, we will feel free to speak our minds.

Hamilton: I second the motion. Nothing should be printed in the newspapers about the convention until we have finished our work.

Washington: All in favor say aye.

All: Aye!

Washington: Close the windows and doors! Station guards outside!

Narrator C: Governor Randolph offers the Virginia Plan. Written mainly by Madison, the plan calls for a strong national government.

Randolph: Our present government, under the Articles of Confederation, is too weak. It does not meet the needs of the nation.

Washington: What do you suggest?

Randolph: We in Virginia propose a *national* government with three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial. Congress would have two houses, with seats based on state population. This government would have *supreme* power.

Pinckney: *Supreme* power? Do you intend to abolish the state governments altogether?

Randolph: Not at all. But we need a

national government strong enough to take care of the things that states cannot handle: war and peace, treaties, trade, money, and taxes.

Gerry: Your plan would do away with the Articles of Confederation. We have no authority to do that! This convention was called to *revise* the Articles, not create a whole new government. I can tell you this—the states will *never* accept a national government!

SCENE FOUR

Narrator D: On June 15, William Paterson introduces an alternative plan. The New Jersey Plan favors the small states by giving each state an equal vote in Congress, regardless of state population.

Paterson: The New Jersey Plan would *revise* the Articles of Confederation — not do away with them.

Washington: Please explain.

Paterson: This plan would keep our *federal* system of government. Congress would be given the power to regulate trade and levy taxes. Each state would have an equal vote in Congress — just as it does now.

Madison: That's not fair! In state legislatures, large counties have more

seats than small counties. So in Congress, the large states also should have more power.

Paterson: You forget, Mr. Madison. We were sent here as delegates from 12 independent, sovereign states. We have no power to form one all-powerful union. The people are not ripe for such a change!

Hamilton: Nonsense! We Americans believe that all *people* are created equal—not all states! Only if larger states have more seats will each American be fairly represented.

Wilson: Of course! Why should New Jersey's 180,000 people have as many votes in Congress as the 430,000 from Pennsylvania? I say no! I will never agree to such a plan!

SCENE FIVE

Narrator E: The large and small states are deadlocked. Gloom descends over the convention. When Franklin returns home one evening, his daughter is waiting . . .

Bache: Father, you look tired!

Franklin: Sarah, the convention is doomed to fail.

Bache: How can you say that? Some of the wisest men in America are at that convention.

Franklin: I am sworn to secrecy, so I cannot tell you the details. But I will say this: The large and the small states are not seeing eye to eye.

Philadelphia in 1787: Building No. 3 is the State House where the convention met; 2 is Congress Hall; 6 is Carpenters' Hall.

Bache: You mean that the convention cannot agree on anything?

Franklin: We have agreed on some things. But on one important question we are sharply divided.

Bache: Compromise is the only solution. For the sake of the nation, you must keep trying!

SCENE SIX

Narrator F: Roger Sherman offers what later becomes known as the Great Compromise.

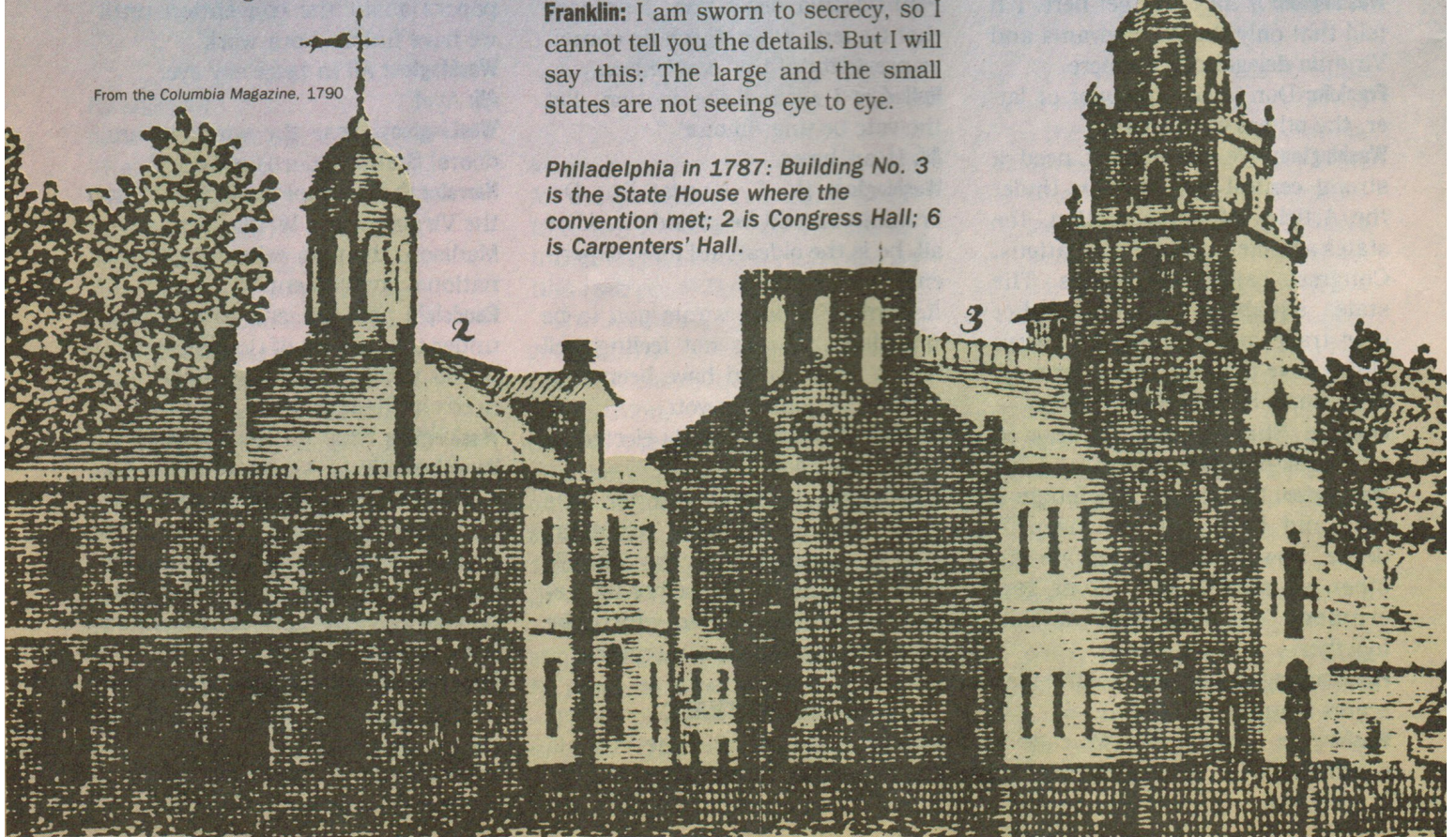
Sherman: This compromise should satisfy both the large and small states. Why not have two houses of Congress, as the Virginia Plan calls for? In the Senate, each state will have two votes. In the House, voting will be based on state population.

Paterson: That sounds reasonable.

Gerry: Just a minute. Will Southern states be allowed to count slaves as part of their population?

Rutledge: Of course slaves should be counted! Their labor is worth just

From the *Columbia Magazine*, 1790



as much as that of free men.

Gerry: But you in the South treat blacks as property. If the South can count slaves, the North should be able to count its cattle and horses!

Davie: If we cannot count our slaves, this convention will be at an end. We will walk out!

Narrator F: The convention turns into an uproar. Finally, James Wilson asks to speak.

Wilson: I suggest the three-fifths rule. States shall count in their population all free white citizens and three-fifths of all others [slaves].

Narrator F: The three-fifths rule passes. Then the delegates approve the Great Compromise: Each state will have two votes in the Senate. In the House, representation will be by state population.

SCENE SEVEN

Narrator G: The Great Compromise soothes feelings. But another dispute breaks out over admitting new states to the Union.

Gerry: Settlers are pouring into the land west of the Allegheny Mountains. Soon they will want to form new states. What will we do?

Sherman: Admit them, of course!

Gerry: But most of the settlers are poor. They will drain our treasury. We should make sure that new states never outnumber the old.

Sherman: But our children and grandchildren may be citizens of those new states. Shouldn't we treat them equally?

G. Morris: The 13 states should keep power in their own hands.

Madison: The new Western states

would never agree to enter a Union that doesn't give them equal rank with the other states.

Mason: Mr. Madison is right. The best policy is to treat the Western settlers as friends, not enemies.

Narrator G: The debate goes on all summer. In the end, the delegates leave it up to Congress to make the rules for admitting new states.

SCENE EIGHT

Narrator H: The convention also must decide how the executive will be chosen. In 1787, all other nations are ruled by kings. It takes 60 ballots for the delegates to decide on a method for electing the President. Just before the convention ends, Mason makes another proposal.

Mason: In keeping with our tradition of liberty, the new Constitution should include a bill of rights.

Gerry: Yes! The people want a bill of rights to guarantee their rights.

Sherman: Why? Eight state constitutions already have a bill of rights.

Mason: But the Constitution will be the supreme law of the land. So a bill of rights should be included!

Sherman: I don't think it is necessary. The Constitution clearly spells out what Congress can do. Why list the things it cannot do?

Mason: I insist on a vote.

Narrator H: The motion is defeated. But during the battle over ratification, demands are made for a bill of rights, which is added in 1791.

SCENE NINE

Narrator I: On September 17, the delegates gather for the last time in the State House. The Constitution is

read aloud. Of the 42 men present, 39 sign the document. As the last delegates sign, Franklin comments to those seated near him:

Franklin: Do you see the picture of the sun painted on the back of General Washington's chair? I confess that often during the convention I looked at that sun without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting. But now I know. The sun is rising on our great nation.

AFTERWORD

The Constitution created a brand-new kind of government. The U.S. had both a national government — and state governments. Neither controlled the other. The national government was given power in such things as war and peace, treaties and trade. The state governments had control over education and other local matters.

To take effect, the Constitution had to be ratified (approved) by nine states. New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify, in June, 1788. On April 30, 1789, George Washington was inaugurated as the first U.S. President. It was a new beginning for the U.S. ☆

YOUR TURN

Word Match

- | | |
|----------------|--------------------|
| — 1. levy | a. change, correct |
| — 2. nominate | b. collect |
| — 3. unanimous | c. supreme |
| — 4. revise | d. name |
| — 5. sovereign | e. consent of all |

Discussion Questions

1. What was a major difference between the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan?
2. What was the Great Compromise?
3. How did the Constitution create a new kind of government?

