

TRANSCRIPT  
A MORE PERFECT UNION: GEORGE WASHINGTON  
AND THE MAKING OF THE CONSTITUTION

[Narrator] History is filled with stories of rebellion and revolution, oppressor and oppressed. But for every dictator overthrown and noble victory achieved, too many revolutions have succumbed to either the siren call of new tyrants or descended into bloody chaos. So how is it that the United States, formed from its own eight-year war, managed to avoid these common pitfalls? How is it that no American king stepped forward to be crowned? That 13 fractious states chose to unify rather than go their separate ways?

It was largely due to the leadership of a small group of visionaries who understood the lessons of the past and sought a new representative form of government, leaders like George Washington who were capable of compromise while pursuing a more perfect union.

The American revolutionaries declared that government existed to protect fundamental rights, and when those rights were violated, that government could be overthrown. But what should fill the void? A government made too powerful could lead to tyranny, but without power to protect the rule of law and the liberties of the people, anarchy. The trick was finding the right balance. During the War for Independence, the colonies had united under the Articles of Confederation. The bond formed under the Articles was weak at best.

The Confederation Congress had no power to tax or coordinate foreign policy. The states, retaining much of their original sovereignty, even had their own separate currencies. Though the Americans had secured their independence under the Articles, it was increasingly evident that this weak government was no match for the diverging interests and priorities of the individual states. It was a union in name only.

Though he had led the Americans to victory, General George Washington was unsure about the lasting stability of this new American nation. If the citizens did not find a way to set aside their regional interests for the greater good, America risked civil war or being picked apart by foreign powers. But he had relinquished his command and resumed a private life at Mount Vernon. "Now," he said, "it was the choice of the people, whether they will be respectable and prosperous, or contemptible and miserable as a nation."

But his advice was ignored. The states were in debt from the war and acted with increasing self-interest. Some responded by printing paper money, causing rampant inflation. Others raised taxes on farmers, throwing them in jail when they could not pay. Without power to tax or enforce law, the Confederation Congress could do little but watch. It was so weak, it did not even have the power to enforce the peace treaty with Great Britain, whose forces lingered menacingly in American territory. Foreign policy consisted of begging for new loans to pay existing debts. By 1786, the Union was unraveling.

Amending the Articles of Confederation required unanimous support of the 13 states, an impossible hurdle. To a growing number of the nation's political and intellectual leaders, a new, lasting solution was needed: a new national constitution. But without widespread public support, could there really be any chance of reform?

For the Constitutional Convention to have any chance of success, they needed the leadership of the only man known and trusted throughout the states. They needed George Washington.

But Washington was reluctant to leave Mount Vernon and risk his hard-won reputation in a cause that was less than certain. "That it is necessary to revise and amend the Articles of Confederation, I entertain no doubt," he uttered. "But what may be the consequences of such an attempt is doubtful." In the fall of 1786, angry mobs of farmers, led by the Revolutionary War veteran Daniel Shays, went on a march through Massachusetts, protesting high taxes, closing courthouses and threatening the armory in Springfield.

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Ultimately, Shays Rebellion was brought to a bloody halt, but the fear of further uprisings convinced Congress that action was needed. They called for a national convention to be held in Philadelphia in 1787. "There are combustibles in every state which a spark may set fire to," Washington exclaimed. He agreed to attend the convention, concluding that, "Reform of the present system is indispensable." He would wager his hard-earned reputation on the hope that the convention would succeed, not in revising the Articles of Confederation, but in drafting a new constitution that would create a truly national government.

Throughout May 1787, delegates from all over the union arrived in Philadelphia. Luminaries like Benjamin Franklin and rising stars like Alexander Hamilton were in attendance. There were seven former governors, including Virginia's Edmund Randolph and jurists like Pennsylvania's James Wilson. And there were relative newcomers like James Madison. Eventually, 55 men would serve at the convention. And chairing this body, George Washington.

Together, they had won the war. Now, they needed to secure the peace. Foreign powers had predicted the American experiment would fail. This convention sought to prove the world wrong. The delegates agreed that they would write a new constitution. It was risky. They were only authorized by Congress to suggest amendments to the existing Articles of Confederation. To proceed, they would work in secret. Windows were shuttered despite the summer heat, and oaths of secrecy were taken. It was thanks to James Madison's diligent note taking that we even know what took place.

There was little unity over many of the most important questions confronting the delegates. Smaller states, which had enjoyed equal representation in the existing government, feared they would lose sovereignty to the dominance of the larger states. Delaware's Gunning Bedford warned that the small states would find some foreign ally if their autonomy was threatened. The larger states wanted representation based on population. James Wilson reminded the delegates, "Can we forget for whom we are forming a government? Is it for men or for the imaginary beings called states?"

As the debate went on, two delegates from New York walked out, believing the convention had exceeded its mandate. If others left, the convention might collapse. Overseeing the debate, Washington grew anxious for a solution. Then Roger Sherman of Connecticut arrived with a proposal. It would come to be known as The Great Compromise. Sherman proposed a legislature split into two bodies. One would allocate representatives based on a state's population. The other would treat states as equals. Here was the birth of the House of Representatives and Senate. The Great Compromise broke the deadlock between large and small states, but left them with a new, troubling question.

The next challenge: how would enslaved people be counted for purposes of representation and taxation? In 1787, slavery existed in every state except Massachusetts. But the institution was most heavily concentrated on the plantations and farms of the southern states. This painful reality raised the question of how should states determine population. More to the point, who counts as a person?

The southern state delegations, led by Charles Pickney and Pierce Butler, sought to have slaves counted as part of their population, even though they were considered to be property by their owners. The Southern delegates threatened to oppose any actions that would limit or constrain slavery.

TRANSCRIPT  
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Some Northern delegates were incredulous. Once again, faced with the threat of a mass defection and a doomed convention, the delegates reached yet another compromise. They agreed to count all slaves, for purposes of representation, as 3/5 of a person. Looking back through time, this 3/5 decision looks like a moral failure. But to the delegates, many who assumed that slavery was already fading away, this compromise was deemed necessary if the Constitutional Convention was to have any chance of success.

Of course, what the delegates could not see is that this new constitution left millions in bondage and failed to extinguish the slow fuse that would ignite in bloody civil war 70 years later.

The last challenge: would the American people accept a powerful executive? The Articles of Confederation lacked one. Each state could overrule the others. There was nobody to transcend states' interests and represent the nation's. Hamilton and Madison argued a powerful, national leader was necessary. Madison's proposal, the Virginia Plan, offered a powerful, single executive balanced by a representative legislature and a judiciary. Others, including Edmund Randolph, questioned the nature of this executive, worrying that too much power in the hands of one person could lead to monarchy.

Even Benjamin Franklin expressed concern. Though he expected Washington would likely be the first to serve as the chief executive, he worried that nobody knows what soon may come afterwards. But in the end, the proposal for a single executive carried, based largely on the hope that one man would lead the new government; George Washington.

The public had been kept in the dark for months. What had the greatest minds of their country, their beloved General Washington, conceived? By the time the Constitution was ready for signing, 42 of the original 55 delegates remained in Philadelphia. Washington signed first, followed by the rest. Three delegates, George Mason, Elbridge Gerry and Edmund Randolph refused to sign, protesting the lack of a bill of rights.

What they signed contained a mere seven articles, seven pieces that together formed a new government. The first three defined the branches of government, creating checks and balances between them. Three more outlined the relationship between the states and the federal government, along with the process for making amendments. And the seventh established rules by which the new Constitution could be adopted.

The reaction was mixed. The Confederation Congress briefly considered censuring the delegates for exceeding their original mandate. But they concluded something needed to be done, and that this new constitution was the best option. The states were called upon to form conventions to ratify or reject the new charter. At least nine states had to approve for it to take effect; any less, and the Constitution would be dead. Rival factions quickly formed.

Some favored the new Constitution as a necessity. They became known as Federalists. Others, like the Patriot Patrick Henry, were skeptical. The Constitution had no guarantee of individual rights, like a free press and protections against unlawful prosecution. And they feared the executive could become a tyrant.

Together, they were known as Anti-Federalists. In states where Federalists held sway, ratification came quickly. Delaware was first, voting unanimously in favor on December 7th. Five more states followed over the next two months, but six states were far from the nine required. Even worse, the largest and most powerful states, New York and Virginia, were deadlocked. Could there really be a United States without New York and Virginia?

TRANSCRIPT  
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In Virginia, Patrick Henry and George Mason were the most vocal opponents of ratification, fearing its lack of safeguards for individual liberty. James Madison, with the quiet support of Washington, argued fervently in support of the Constitution. Two more states voted to ratify. Just one was needed for the Constitution, the new federal government, to be born. Who would be the ninth? Could New York be convinced to ratify? Could Virginia? Or would the United States be born in pieces? Would Washington suffer the indignity of seeing his native state reject the constitution he worked so hard to conceive?

On June 25, 1788, Virginia's votes were cast. It was two days before the news reached Mount Vernon. Virginia's convention has compromised. They asked that a bill of rights be added to the Constitution, and they had voted to ratify by a margin of just 10 votes. Unbeknownst to them, just four days earlier, New Hampshire had become the ninth state to ratify. They had ensured the United States would be born. Now, by its vote, Virginia had ensured the United States would live.

Though he had remained publicly silent in the debate, the public's faith in George Washington's role at the Constitutional Convention played a vital role in Virginia's ascent. "They assured," wrote James Monroe, in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, "that Washington's influence carried the government." The new government now a certainty, and with the endorsement of Virginia, the remaining states, including New York, voted in favor. Rhode Island would be the last hold out, joining the Union in 1790.

After ratification, the question now turned toward just who would lead this new government. It seemed a foregone conclusion that George Washington would be its first president. He had presided over the Constitutional Convention. He was trusted, beloved. Many had agreed to support ratifying the new charter because they believed Washington would assume a leadership role. But he was eager for a life of tranquility at his Mount Vernon estate. Letters from leaders throughout the states began to arrive, urging him to reconsider. No other man could bind the fractious nation together. Duty overcame desire.

To deny the call, he realized, would see the country shipwrecked in sight of the port. He decided he would re-enter public life if the voters wanted him. On April 14, 1789, the answer came by way of a messenger from Congress. It had taken several months to complete the tally. George Washington had been elected president by unanimous vote of the electors.

His leadership carried a nation ahead and into a realm unknown to humankind. There were rights to be guaranteed, a presidency to be defined and a nation to be built from a collection of feuding states. There were rivalries to be healed and compromises to be made to ensure the great American experiment continued.

Thanks to the leadership of George Washington and his fellow delegates, the former colonies were truly unified into one United States, equipped with a representative government that was both balanced and empowered to serve the people. Now more than 200 years old, the U.S. Constitution has endured to become the world's oldest representative constitution in existence today. Born of compromise and enhanced through amendments, the Constitution continues to be the democratic bedrock of our more perfect union.