

Publius and an American Identity

by Jesse Kohn



the U.S. Constitution

The first constitution of the United States, the Articles of Confederation, was ratified in 1781. Still tangled up in war with Great Britain, America was in transition, both literally and symbolically striving to define itself and carve out an independent identity. Under the Articles of Confederation, the thirteen states in the union enjoyed a high level of independence; each functioned like a country of its own. A very weak federal Congress yoked the states together. Though Congress oversaw the country's foreign affairs and regulated its currency, its power was severely restricted by the fact that it could not enforce its regulations or consign troops. These powers, like most powers in the union, belonged to the state governments, and for this reason the process of acting as one nation in foreign affairs was slow and arduous. The nation was like a body whose left arm wanted one thing and whose right arm wanted another.

When the war with Great Britain ended in 1783, the need to construct a national identity that would integrate the different limbs of the national body became pressing. In 1787, delegates from all of the thirteen states were invited to take part in a convention in Philadelphia aimed at developing this

identity.

Fifty-five delegates convened on May 25, 1787. Only one state failed to send representatives—Rhode Island, which feared interference from a powerful central government in its economy. Although George Washington initially had fears that the convention would not achieve its goals, he eventually agreed to preside over it. It was generally acknowledged by the statesman that things needed to change if the new nation was going to find its place in international affairs.

Although Congress had brought together the convention with the intention of adding amendments to the Articles of Confederation, before long the delegates began deliberating a whole new constitution. And after months of debate, a new constitution began to take shape. Under it, the central government would be divided into three branches, each branch checking and balancing the power of the others. There would be an executive branch, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch. By September 17, 1787, the United States Constitution had been drafted, and it was signed by thirty-nine of the fifty-five delegates.

Creating the Constitution, however, was only half the battle. In order for it to be ratified, it had to be approved by nine of the thirteen states. James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay collaborated on eighty-five essays, signing them with the pseudonym "Publius." These essays, known as "The Federalist Papers," were published in newspapers across the states. They detailed how the new government would function, and they argued for the people's support. The American people were split between the Federalists, who supported the Constitution, and the Anti-Federalists, who opposed the Constitution because they thought it gave too much power to a central government.

Before the year ended, five states had agreed to ratify the Constitution. However, a group of states, led by Massachusetts, was against the new Constitution because, they claimed, it failed to protect certain basic rights, such as freedom of speech, religion, and the press. A compromise was thus proposed. The dissenting states would agree to ratify the Constitution if additional amendments would immediately be proposed to address what they felt was lacking. Massachusetts, Maryland, and South Carolina thus ratified the document. And on June 21, 1788, New Hampshire ratified the Constitution as well; it was the ninth state to do so.

With the approval of nine states, the Constitution could be ratified officially. The new government began on March 4, 1789, and the following month George Washington became the nation's first president. The states that hadn't yet granted their approval gradually submitted, but it wasn't until May 29, 1790, that Rhode Island, the final state holding out, finally ratified the Constitution.

As per the compromise that was struck with several of the states, including Massachusetts, nineteen amendments were proposed in the summer of 1789. Ten of the amendments were adopted by Congress, and they became known as the Bill of Rights. These rights and the Constitution they amended came to represent the identity of the nation. And since the ratification of these ten amendments, seventeen more have been adopted. The Constitution unites and integrates America's many-minded limbs, and even today, new amendments can be added to it to reflect the ever-changing nation and its people.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What were the Articles of Confederation?

- A. a convention of fifty-five delegates in Philadelphia
- B. the first constitution of the United States
- C. a collection of essays supporting the Constitution
- D. a group that opposed the Constitution

2. What does the author compare the states to?

- A. Great Britain
- B. a weak federal Congress
- C. different limbs of a body
- D. George Washington

3. Amendments were key to getting the Constitution ratified.

What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

- A. Three more states ratified the Constitution when promised that amendments protecting certain rights would be proposed.
- B. Nineteen amendments to the Constitution were proposed in the summer of 1789.
- C. Rhode Island finally ratified the Constitution on May 29, 1790.
- D. James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay collaborated on eighty-five essays supporting the Constitution.

4. How can the process of creating and ratifying the Constitution be described?

- A. It became easy once "The Federalist Papers" were published.
- B. It began at a convention in Great Britain.
- C. It was a confusing, unsuccessful process.
- D. It was a challenging, controversial process.

5. What is the main idea of this text?

- A. Madison, Hamilton, and Jay wrote "The Federalist Papers" under the pseudonym "Publius."
- B. The American people were split between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists.
- C. The Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution.
- D. The Constitution created a new central government and unified the states.

6. Read these sentences from the text.

"A group of states claimed the Constitution failed to protect certain basic rights. A compromise was thus proposed. The dissenting states would agree to ratify the Constitution if additional amendments would immediately be proposed to address what they felt was lacking."

As used in the text, what does the word "compromise" mean?

- A. shortcut
- B. gathering
- C. agreement
- D. puzzle

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

The convention was organized with the intent of amending the Articles of Confederation. _____, the delegates created an entirely new constitution.

- A. Earlier
- B. Instead
- C. For instance
- D. As an illustration

8. America was "in transition" when the Articles of Confederation were ratified. What was it striving to do at that time?

9. Why was it difficult for the United States to act as one nation under the Articles of Confederation?

10. How did the Constitution change the United States?

Support your answer with evidence from the text.
