

Imagine you are a journalist in 1787, covering a heated debate over the U.S. Constitution.

Choose a key issue – such as the balance of power between large and small states, the role of the executive branch, slavery, etc. – and interview prominent figures on each side. Describe how compromise emerged from this debate, uniting both sides despite their differences. How will this spirit of compromise help build a unified nation, and what can future leaders learn from their ability to find common ground in times of division?

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Issue: Balance of power between state and federal governments

August 25, 1787

Today marks three months of the Constitutional Convention being held in the Pennsylvania State House of Philadelphia. Delegates from northern and southern states have congregated over the past 92 days and partaken in lengthy and heated debates regarding the Articles of Confederation and the future of our young nation. Being our country's current Constitution, the Articles of Confederation has been heavily criticized by Federalists as too weak to adequately support the country while Anti-Federalists have been less critical and prefer amendments rather than a replacement. Since we declared freedom from Great Britain, states have created their own

identities leading to broad disunion and lack of unity amongst the states. This has given rise to the debate on the balance of power between state and federal governments. This week, these debates have intensified. A key leader at the convention, George Mason from Virginia, has been extremely vocal in his worries regarding a Constitution without a Bill of Rights and is a strong representative of Anti-Federalists who worry about the impact excessive federal power could have on states and citizens alike.

Reporter: "In regards to not signing the Constitution, you have made it clear that one of your biggest reasons for doing so is because of your views on federal power and that you believe this new Constitution gives too much power to the central government, is that correct?"

Mason: "Most certainly. Our men have fought too hard against the British powers and our nation's leaders have spent too much time at the Convention to trade one form of tyranny for another. By giving too much power to the federal government, it might prove to be even more disastrous than being governed by a power across the sea. The proximity of its governance could now be in our own backyards, meaning the central government possesses the ability to govern us under even closer eyes, and without a Bill of Rights, what is protecting our people and their states?"

Reporter: "You mention a Bill of Rights, what makes this Bill of Rights so important and why do you feel it's as critical as it is if this new Constitution is to be ratified?"

Mason: "Well to begin, the issue of how much power the federal government will have if this new Constitution is to be passed is larger than just the states, it's about our citizens. A Bill of Rights protects personal liberties such as freedom of speech, religion, and press. These freedoms granted to the people are what make a country a democracy and a democracy is our identity as

the United States. This young nation needs a Bill of Rights. What does an important document such as this do (the Constitution) if we do not have the means to protect our rights and prohibit anyone who attempts to pick apart its contents as a way of justifying his own political agenda? The future of our country is too uncertain without a Bill of Rights and I cannot stand aside when the opportunity to strengthen this great future nation is at hand."

On the other side of the debate stands Federalist, and fellow Virginian, James Madison. Madison and Mason share the quality of having been driving forces behind the Convention except in vastly different ways. A proud Federalist, Madison was prepared for the Constitution regarding all debates against the establishment of a new form of government and was quick to defend the Federalist cause. Any further business regarding the United States seems to be dependent on the ratification of a new Constitution, according to Mr. Madison.

Reporter: "What has made you so confident in the idea that the creation of a new government for the United States is what is best for our nation?"

Madison: "We have seen what the Articles of Confederation have done for our country and quite simply, it has failed. It has not allowed our country to be able to move forth with what we hoped we could do with this newfound freedom. Our Congress cannot raise funds, regulate trade, or conduct foreign policy without the compliance of the states. States have born their own identities and I agree that there is nothing wrong with traits that make a state its own, but we cannot call ourselves the United States of America when states act as though they are of their own nation. This time calls for the unity of a country, not a state, and this new Constitution is the foundation of the said country which we deserve."

Reporter: "What is your response to those who oppose a strong federal government because of the imbalance of power between state and federal governments it poses?"

Madison: "I believe that it is in the best interests of our states if they can realize they are much stronger with a strong federal government than without it. Those who fear a central government must understand that a state is nothing without some foundation, which is to be found in their central government. This new Constitution allows states to flourish and conduct their own business. Think of how weak a state is compared to a country such as Great Britain, the former power of this new nation. How can Georgia, Virginia, or New York compete on a global scale, produce money, or be able to have a support system if there is not a solid federal government? There will be no help in times of need for states if there is no central power, and that is an idea of ruin in itself for the United States."

The question now rests before us: will the Constitution be ratified? And if so, will a Bill of Rights be considered?

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The Bill of Rights was ratified and added to the Constitution in December of 1791 with the author of the first 10 amendments being James Madison himself, and a compromise was finally reached. Madison understood that creating a Bill of Rights was politically imperative. Using his political power in the First Federal Congress, 12 amendments were pushed and 10

were ratified by the states. With a Bill of Rights, Anti-Federalists found peace with the new Constitution because there were now amendments put in place that would protect liberties of not only states, but for the citizens within them. Opponents on the issue understood that there were to be trade-offs for decisions being made as there forever will be in American politics.

Anti-Federalists recognized the Federalist cause and their beloved Constitution and Federalists knew that for unity and future state compliance, a Bill of Rights needed to be added. In different ways, both sides of the argument sought to achieve the same common goal, a stable, free, and democratic nation. By finding a solution that both sides could live with, our political leaders solved an issue bigger than themselves. Putting aside their differences and disagreements, leaders such as Mason and Madison knew the country was made up of both Federalists and Anti-Federalists, not one or the other. A solution was found to satisfy the needs of the entire country, not half.

History tends to repeat itself, in good ways and bad. Americans will experience challenges and triumphs and our political leaders will face difficult decisions, criticism, and praise as a stable and healthy democracy should always produce. Like today's debate of whether we should continue to drill large amounts of oil on American soil or try to find new energy sources that are cleaner and more protective of our environment, with Republicans supporting the former and Democrats the latter, the argument of how much power the federal vs. state governments should have was a political issue leaders and civilians thought should be solved in different ways. Political tensions will always be present in our country as can be seen now as well as in the first thirty years of our independence from Great Britain. However, political leaders today can learn from leadership that stems from the acknowledgement that we are all in this together. A country does not benefit from division. Madison and Mason understood this and

were able to move forward. Like these men, political leaders can learn to be open minded and to love all Americans. We share different beliefs and feelings towards issues for many reasons but we are all united by the love for democracy and the United States and we must accept that the only way forward is together. When all voices are not only heard but listened to, that is when a democracy truly flourishes. What has made the United States so successful has been the ability to find compromise. In all political debates, it is rare to find both sides of the argument fully satisfied. But a middle ground is possible where competing interests are willing to sacrifice for the greater good of their fellow Americans, and that is called compromise.

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