

# CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

## 1787

The year is 1787. It has been 6 years since the War of Independence has ended. You are one of 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. You are here to help amend the Articles of Confederation, which have been the existing government of the United States since the nation declared independence from England.

The Articles of Confederation does not give the national government much power. The nation is weak and the national government cannot raise an army or collect taxes. The states are acting like separate countries. Many delegates feel the national government must have more power, so the states must give up some power.

You have been assigned one of the delegates that attended the Constitutional Convention in 1787. You will debate the same issues that were debated when the nation was formed in Philadelphia.

You should first read the biography sheet you were given in class. You should decide how this delegate would vote on issues at the Convention: Should large or small states have the power in Congress? Should the people have expanded power, or should the government limit their power? How should the leader be chosen? What should the future of slavery be?

Then fill answer the following questions as *you* think your delegate would have answered the questions back in 1787. You will be writing a proposal for one of the issues and submit the idea to the Convention.

Some key points to remember:

- a. You should be able to defend your proposal in debate and convince others to vote for it.
- b. You are one delegate from a certain state. Each state only has one vote, so you must work with other delegates from your state.
- c. Listen, be prepared, speak up and be willing to compromise. Negotiate with other delegates. Remember, the only way to get a law passed is to have 7 states support it.
- d. Write your proposals on the official proposal forms
- e. Seek out others who may think like you. Remember, important decisions are won or lost on the Convention floor but the real discussions go on off the floor as well.

## Issues

1. Should the legislative branch (the branch that makes laws) be unicameral (1 house) or bicameral (2 houses)? A unicameral legislature will pass laws more quickly, while a bicameral includes more opportunities for participation.

Reasons:

If it is unicameral, how should the people be represented in Congress? If it is bicameral, how should each house determine the number of representatives allowed per state?

- i. All states, large and small, should have the same number of representatives
- ii. Large states should have more representatives than small states, based on one vote per so many people in each state

Reasons:

2. When people are counted in states, should slaves be counted? (Note: this only applies if you go with proportional representation)
  - a) No. Slaves are property. Slaves do not own property.
  - b) Yes. Slaves live in most states. They should be counted in the population

Reasons:

3. Should the slave trade (importation from Africa) remain legal? [Slavery itself cannot be discussed]
  - a) The slave trade is wrong, and the Constitution should stop it.
  - b) Each state should have the right to decide about the slave trade. The Constitution should not have a say in the future of the slave trade.
  - c) The slave trade should continue because it is vital to the economic interests of the nation.

Reasons:

## George Washington of Virginia – 1732-1799

George Washington was elected president of the constitutional convention but hardly said a word during the three months it was in session. His presence and approval, however, were very important. He was so respected, honored, and admired that all who talked about the president knew that George Washington would be elected to serve. Indeed, no one voted against him.

Washington had earned this reputation through many years of devoted service to his country. His career started in 1753 with an expedition into western Pennsylvania to warn France not to trespass on land claimed by England. During the French and Indian War, Washington commanded the Virginia militia. Toward the end of the war, Washington retired from military service and devoted himself to his plantation at Mt. Vernon. He increased its size from 2,000 to 8,000 acres. He lived the life of a Virginia planter, with fox hunting, weeklong parties, service in the House of Burgesses, and involvement in local politics.

With passage of the Stamp Act, Washington played a part in defending the colonists' cause. He was elected to serve in the First Continental Congress and was appointed commander-in-chief of American armies in 1775. For the next eight years, Washington served his country through defeat, discouragement, and heavy odds. His army was usually badly equipped and heavily outnumbered; his men were often ill-clad, badly armed, and untrained. Nevertheless, Washington never lost courage. His ability to continue against heavy odds, more than his military genius, eventually inspired the Continental Army to victory.

When, in the closing days of the war, Washington was told that some of his officers planned to establish a monarchy with himself as king, he declined, reminding them of their duty and the ideals for which they were fighting. Soon afterwards, he took leave of his forces and returned to the planter's life he loved so well. But his country called him into service again, first to the convention and then as president. Washington died in 1799, only three years after retiring from public life.

His mere presence at the convention helped assure its success. He had also been involved in the moves to bring the convention about. He supported a strong government and was much opposed to the Articles of Confederation. They did not give the national government enough power. He also warned the convention to do what was right, not merely "to please the people." The more detailed aspects of his views are not known. However, he probably agreed with Madison on most important issues.

When Washington died in 1799, his estate was valued at \$530,000, mostly in land and slaves. The slaves were to be freed upon the death of his wife. During his life, Washington had a great desire to buy land. He owned property in at least six different states. During his service in the Army, Washington was usually broke because he accepted no salary for his services, only expenses. Washington was also short on cash because he was always borrowing money to buy more land. He was said to be the richest man in America. If this claim is not true, it is certain that there were few who had more wealth.

## **Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania – 1706-1790**

With the possible exception of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin was the best-known man in America. Born in poverty and mostly self-educated, Franklin gained a worldwide reputation as an inventor, scientist, and diplomat. He learned printing from his brother; later, his *Poor Richard's Almanac* was read over the whole nation. His public career started in 1754, when he proposed his Albany Plan of Union, the first proposal for colonial unity.

Franklin served his colony, his state, and his country, first as an agent from Pennsylvania to Parliament and later as America's ambassador to England and to France. His diplomacy in England helped postpone the Revolution, while his work at home helped bring the colonies closer to declaring their independence. In Philadelphia in 1776, after a ten-year absence, Franklin helped write the Declaration of Independence. Later, he helped write the Pennsylvania Constitution, considered to be the most democratic in the colonies. As an ambassador to France, he helped cement the alliance that brought French help to the American Revolution. Five years later, he helped negotiate the treaty with England that ended the war.

Back in Pennsylvania, Franklin was elected governor; two years later he served at the convention, which made the dream of unity, first proposed in 1749, become a reality. He died in 1790, honored by the whole nation.

At the convention, Franklin served as a compromiser, using his wit and wisdom to calm angry tempers and bring people together. He was very important in obtaining the compromise that created the Congress, with a House of Representatives based on population, and a Senate giving each state two votes.

Franklin also favored bringing the spirit of democracy to our Constitution. He, more than most men in Philadelphia, trusted the common people and spoke of their "public spirit." He favored giving Congress power to impeach the president for malpractice and neglect of duty.

He wished to make the national government supreme, giving it the power to veto laws passed by the states.

When asked, after the Constitution was written, whether it was a republic (democracy) or a monarchy, he is supposed to have said, "a republic...if you can keep it."

## **Abraham Baldwin of Georgia – 1754-1807**

Born in 1754 in Guilford, Connecticut, Abraham Baldwin attended Yale, where he studied the classics. He graduated at age 17. He remained at Yale for several more years, however, studying law and tutoring.

Baldwin's public career began in Georgia, where he had gone in 1784. He was known to have a pleasant personality and a great deal of charm. It was enough to get him elected to the Georgia state legislature only three months after arriving in his newly adopted state. For the next 22 years, Baldwin served Georgia as a state legislator, in the Continental Congress, at the constitutional convention, in the House of Representatives, and in the U.S. Senate. It was his proud boast as he lay dying in 1807 that the two previous days were the only two he had missed in his long career as a public servant. Baldwin was known for having founded the University of Georgia. Baldwin was a simple but forceful speaker at the convention and later in the U.S. Congress. His major contribution in Congress was to serve on the committee that drew up the Bill of Rights. As a national legislator, Baldwin defended states' rights. This was somewhat out of character from his role in the convention, where he favored a strong national government.

One area in which Baldwin wanted to avoid too much national power was slavery. He considered this issue "of a local nature." Though he argued that Georgia, if left to its own devices, "may probably put an end to this evil," he was strongly against the national government's having a say in this matter.

In another area, Baldwin again seemed to favor property rights more than human rights. While discussing the establishment of two houses in the legislative branch, Baldwin spoke in favor of having the second "represent property," adding "some reference should be made to the relative wealth of the constituents."

Little information is available concerning Baldwin's finances. We do know, however, that he had enough money to go to Yale, educate his six half-brothers and -sisters, and pay the debts of his father's estate when the old man died. He made his living by practicing law in Savannah, Georgia, where he was considered one of the shrewdest and most able lawyers in the state. He owned several thousand dollars worth of bonds under the Articles of Confederation, which he later traded for public securities. He continued to buy U.S. Treasury notes after the formation of the new government.

## **David Brearley of New Jersey – 1745-1790**

Brearley was a college dropout who started to practice law at age 22. He became active in protests against the British and gained considerable fame in New Jersey by denouncing British policies. Arrested by the British for treason, Brearley was freed by an angry mob. Later he joined the colonial militia, starting as a captain and raising to the rank of colonel. In 1776, he helped his state write a new constitution. Shortly before his death in 1790, Brearley became a federal judge.

Brearley's main concern at the convention was to have each state represented equally in the new Congress. This was particularly important to him because New Jersey was a small state and in danger of being outvoted by the larger states.

Brearley was also interested in giving more power to the national government. Much of his time at the convention was spent writing the clauses that give the government its power today.

Brearley was not a wealthy man. During most of his life, he supported himself with the small salary of a government official.

## John Dickinson of Delaware—1732-1808

Dickinson was born to a family wealthy enough to afford private tutors and an English education for their son. He began his protests against British policies by denouncing the Stamp Act. He became famous all over the colonies for opposing taxation. Nevertheless, he voted against Independence in 1776 and refused to sign the Declaration. Later he enlisted in the army and served as a foot soldier. He moved from Pennsylvania to Delaware and helped write its constitution. Later, Dickinson headed the committee that wrote the Articles of Confederation but wanted to give the government much more power than it had. At different times in his career, he was elected president (governor) of Delaware and of Pennsylvania.

Dickinson had the reputation of a great scholar and a very successful lawyer. He was not known as a good speaker.

In politics, Dickinson's views were extreme. He wanted the national government to be much stronger and the states to be far weaker. He thought there was a danger that the states would swallow the national government.

Dickinson admired England and thought that a "limited monarchy" was one of the best forms of government in the world. A king, Dickinson thought, would be able to do what he thought was best for the country without having to worry whether the people agreed. In addition, Dickinson wanted a Senate, like the English House of Lords. Dickinson thought the president would be kept honest if Congress had the power to remove him for misconduct or neglect in office.

Coming from a small state, Dickinson liked the rule that all states had one vote in Congress.

Dickinson did not trust the people of the country. He was afraid they would support bad laws, like issuing paper money. He wanted only people with property to vote.

Dickinson thought that slavery was bad and the national government should make sure that no more slaves would be brought into the country.

Money had a way of sticking to John Dickinson. He was born rich, married rich, earned a lot of money in his law practice, and made successful investments in real estate in three different states.

## **Oliver Ellsworth of Connecticut – 1745-1807**

Ellsworth had the good fortune of being born to a well-to-do Connecticut family. He attended Princeton College and graduated in 1766. He taught school and served as a minister before starting a law practice in 1771. During his first year in law, he was so poor he had to walk 20 miles each way to Hartford because he could not afford a horse. Later, however, he married the daughter of a well-known family and moved his office to Hartford. He was soon considered one of Connecticut's best lawyers.

During the Revolution, Ellsworth represented Connecticut in the Continental Congress for six years. After the convention, Oliver Ellsworth was appointed U.S. senator. In 1796, he was appointed to the Supreme Court and later became chief justice.

Ellsworth was known for his habit of talking to himself, his use of snuff, and his absent-mindedness. Once he became so lost in thought that he completely neglected a visitor to his house whom he had invited. Ellsworth was also known for his ability to speak out in debate and his attention to his responsibilities.

With Roger Sherman, Ellsworth was in favor of having two branches of Congress, a Senate to represent the states, and a House of Representatives to represent the people.

Although he wanted to divide power between the state and national governments, Ellsworth was afraid that a strong national government would not be a good government. He thought the large states in the country were the worst governed.

Ellsworth did not trust the people of the country to make important decisions. He wanted the state legislatures – not the people in the states – to decide whether the Constitution would be accepted. He wanted electors chosen by the people, rather than the people themselves, to elect a president. And he wanted the president to serve for six years because he did not want elections too frequently. He did not trust the people to choose their senators, but, he thought they could be trusted to elect the House of Representatives.

Ellsworth personally opposed slavery but did not want to end the slave trade because he thought every state should make such a decision for itself.

Besides being a successful lawyer, Ellsworth was a good businessman, often buying and selling real estate at a profit. He once bought government bonds for \$530 that he later cashed in for \$5,985.



## **Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts – 1774-1814**

Gerry was born to well-to-do parents who were merchants. He was educated at Harvard and learned politics from Samuel Adams.

Gerry was active in protests against British policies while serving in the Massachusetts General Assembly. When the British marched to Lexington in 1775, they were after Gerry as well as his friend Sam Adams. Elbridge Gerry escaped capture by hiding in a cornfield dressed in his nightclothes. The next year, Gerry represented Massachusetts in the Continental Congress. He was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and later served again in the General Assembly.

Gerry was one of the three delegates to the convention who refused to sign the Constitution. He worked in Massachusetts to defeat it. Despite this opposition, Gerry later served as a representative from Massachusetts and an ambassador to France. He also became governor of Massachusetts and died while serving his country as vice-president.

Gerry was known to be a man of great honesty and good manners. He was not known for giving great speeches, but was known for his manners and love of country.

After Shays' Rebellion, Gerry changed his views of the common people. At one time he had spoken in favor of democratic principles. But the rebellion of Massachusetts farmers against their own government convinced Gerry that the people were not trustworthy. "The evils we experience," Gerry told the convention, "stem from too much democracy." "Perhaps," Gerry thought, "a limited monarchy would be the best government."

However, Gerry was not completely comfortable with these anti-democratic ideas. In keeping with democratic principles, Gerry believed in having elections every year to allow the people to control their government. He also was very much in favor of impeaching (getting rid of) the president if he failed to follow the Constitution. He was also in favor of a bill of rights, and he would do nothing in the Constitution to permit any kind of slavery. He was also against giving the Senate too much power, because senators were chosen for six years.

Elbridge Gerry was against giving the national government too much power. He would give it the power to prevent states' creating paper money. But he was worried that the national government would interfere too much with the state governments. In the end, he opposed the Constitution because it gave too much power to the national government and did not contain enough democratic sections.

Gerry probably would have benefited greatly by an increase in the power of the national government. His shipping business depended on a country strong enough to prevent others from interfering with its trade. Gerry's investment in western lands would have paid him better if the national government were strong enough to drive the Indians off. The \$50,000 he had used to buy government bonds would also have been worth more if the national government were strong enough to pay back the bond-holders. But Gerry was a man of principle, and his principles told him to oppose the Constitution.

## **Nathaniel Gorham of Massachusetts – 1738-1796**

A fourth-generation American, Gorham was born to a poor family. He attended school in Boston. He went to work at age 15 as an apprentice to a merchant. Six years later, Gorham went into business for himself and did very well. When the British captured Charlestown, Gorham was wiped out and had to start all over. He made another fortune by pirating from British ships and speculating. But Gorham bought more western land than he could pay for and went bankrupt when he was unable to sell it at a decent price.

Starting in politics as a member of a town meeting, Gorham quickly rose to the Massachusetts House of Representatives. He served there as speaker for three years and later served as one of the Massachusetts delegates to the Continental Congress, where he briefly held the position of president.

The last eight years of his life, Gorham spent trying to pay off a six million dollar debt caused by his purchase of western lands. He was never able to sell the land or pay off his debts. He died in 1796 without ever setting foot on the property that caused him so much pain.

Gorham was known as a man of good sense but not much education. He was an agreeable person with a pleasing manner.

In politics, Gorham was connected to the party that opposed Sam Adams, John Hancock, and Elbridge Gerry. He favored a much stronger national government, one strong enough to force its will on every state. Such a government, Gorham thought, would be able to "do justice" throughout the country.

Gorham also believed in democracy. He did not want only people with property to vote. He favored a four-year term for senators. Gorham, however, would allow slaves to be imported until 1808. He also did not think the country needed a bill of rights, because the representatives of the people in Congress would not take away the rights of the common man.

## Alexander Hamilton of New York – 1755-1804

Few Americans worked so hard for America and accomplished more than Alexander Hamilton. He was born in the West Indies to unmarried parents. At age 13, with little education, he started to work as an accountant. He attracted the attention of some wealthy Americans, who brought him to New York. He spent two years finishing his high school education and then attended what is today Columbia University. Here he started a debate society and wrote pamphlets against England. At age 21, Hamilton quit school and became commander of an artillery company. Later, George Washington recognized his talent and used Hamilton as his personal secretary and aid. Hamilton tired of serving Washington, for whom he did not have much respect, and asked to have his own command. Finally granted his wish, Hamilton distinguished himself in the last battle of the war by storming the British positions at Yorktown. During and immediately after the war, Hamilton found time to earn a degree in law and to woo and marry wealthy Elizabeth Schuyler.

As early as 1781, Alexander Hamilton suggested increasing the strength of the national government. His legal abilities and social connections soon made him one of the best-known lawyers in the state. He was elected to serve as a member of the Continental Congress. Here he devoted his efforts to calling the constitutional convention.

Even though Hamilton's views were too extreme for the other delegates at the convention, he had a major influence. He worked hard to have the government made stronger and later to get people to vote in favor of the Constitution.

After the convention, Hamilton served as the nation's first secretary of the treasury. From this position, Hamilton had a great influence over the policies of the government, even in other areas than his own. He became a leader of the Federalist party. Long after he retired from government, he still controlled the actions of many of his followers in Congress and in the president's cabinet.

After returning to New York, Hamilton was continuously frustrated by the activities of an opposition leader, Aaron Burr. The feud between Hamilton and Burr became so bitter that they eventually decided to settle it with a duel. Hamilton accepted Burr's challenge even though he could not shoot. It has been said that Hamilton wanted to prove himself by the military code of that day, so he could eventually gain respect of the army and lead America in a war against France. Whatever his hopes were, they ended at the duel. Burr's bullet found its mark, and Hamilton, only 49, died of the wound.

Hamilton, brilliant as he was, was also vain and sometimes disagreeable. But, he could be charming, had one of the best minds in the country, and was an extremely hard worker.

Of all the delegates at the convention, none spoke more openly in favor of a strong national government and against democracy. He thought little of the common man, who he believed "seldom judged or determined right." He favored having a king. To balance the power of the king, Hamilton wanted a House of Representatives elected by the people for two-year terms. He also wished to have a Senate that would serve for life.

Hamilton was equally extreme on the powers of the national government. He would, if he could, completely eliminate the state governments. Governors appointed by the president would rule over the states. He also opposed a bill of rights.

Hamilton so devoted himself to public service that he completely neglected his personal and family finances. Despite his high legal fees, despite his wealthy wife and excellent social connections, Hamilton was usually in debt. Many of his father-in-law's friends made money as a result of Hamilton's policies. He himself thought what was good for the wealthy was good for the country. But Hamilton never profited personally and died in debt.

## Rufus King of Massachusetts — 1755-1827

Born in what today is Maine, Rufus King was the son of a wealthy farmer-businessman. He went to Harvard College and practiced law in Newburyport, Massachusetts. King interrupted his law practice to serve as a Brigadier General in the Revolution. In 1784, he was elected to represent Massachusetts in the Congress under the Articles of Confederation. He is best known in this period for introducing a bill to prevent slavery in the Northwest Territory.

In 1786, King married the only daughter of a very wealthy New York merchant. He spent the next summer representing Massachusetts at the constitutional convention; shortly afterwards he settled in New York, where, with the exception of his foreign service, he lived all of his life. He spoke frequently at the convention, was an ardent nationalist, favored a long term for the U.S. president, once defended Alexander Hamilton's preference for making the U.S. a monarchy, and opposed the continued importation of slaves. Despite his aristocratic views, King enjoyed an excellent reputation and great popularity in New York. He was known for his personal charm, horsemanship, intellect, and handsome face.

In his political life after the convention, King was an ally of Alexander Hamilton and a leader in the Federalist party. He ran twice for vice-president but was soundly defeated. His continued tenure as senator from New York, were twice interrupted when King served as ambassador to England — once under President John Adams, and the second time under Adams' son, John Quincy Adams. He became ill shortly after his arrival for his second tour in England and came back to the United States, where he died at the age of 72.

Rufus King was outspoken on four major issues before the convention. He believed in a plan of representation according to population, in increasing the powers of the national government, in maintaining checks and balances, and stopping the importation of slaves. It was not surprising that King, who came from a large state, favored representation according to population. But his vehemence and the strength of his arguments were highly unusual. He did not want to hear of a compromise and declared himself "full of astonishment that we should be ready to sacrifice the substantial good (from his proportional representation plan) to the phantom of State sovereignty."

When the question arose as to just how much power the government should have, King said "(t)he only criterion of determining what is federal and what is national is this, those acts which are the government of the states *only* are purely federal, those which are the government of the Citizens of the individual States, are national and not federal."

Another area where King expressed his views dealt with the subject of democracy and checks and balances. He thought the "three great departments of government should be separate and independent: the Executive and the Judiciary should be so as well as the Legislative: that the Executive should be so equally with the Judiciary." King wanted the president to be free to be reelected but also thought he should be impeachable. The mode of electing the president "would be a group of electors, chosen by the people for that purpose."

King also had strong views on allowing the importation of slaves. Their admission into the country, King said, "was a most grating circumstance" to his mind. His opposition was in part motivated by the fact that all of the states should be bound to defend one another, and slavery made the states weaker and increased the danger of a rebellion.

Rufus King never lacked for money. His father, who supplied the Boston market with much of its lumber, owned 3,000 acres of land. Though shared with brothers and sisters, this property proved a valuable inheritance. King added to that through his marriage. King speculated in public securities in amounts up to \$10,000 — quite a tidy sum in those days. He also bought up U.S. bank stock when it became available in 1791. He became the director of the first Bank of the United States.

## John Langdon of New Hampshire – 1741-1819

Born on his family's farm in 1741 as the youngest of six children, Langdon was apprenticed to a merchant as a young man. He soon shipped out to sea, but quickly came to investing his own money in trade. By the time the Revolution hurt American commerce, Langdon had laid the foundation for his fortune.

Four months before the Battle of Lexington, he led a group of colonists who seized 100 barrels of British gunpowder in Portsmouth. When a few years later the British headed from Canada to New York, John Langdon publicly pledged \$1,000 in cash, another \$3,000 on account, and 77 hogsheads of rum to help furnish a military campaign against the enemy. Claiming this money would mean nothing if the British won, Langdon quit his post as speaker of the New Hampshire House of Representatives. He shouldered his musket and led a unit of the New Hampshire militia – as a captain in the Battle of Bennington and later as a colonel at Saratoga. Upon his return, he was appointed to represent New Hampshire at the Continental Congress. Here he used his commercial skills to outfit the U.S. Navy.

John Langdon not only paid his own way to the constitutional convention because of New Hampshire's shortage of state funds, but also paid for the only other New Hampshire representative to come. Though he missed several weeks, Langdon nevertheless played a significant role at the convention. In general he favored granting far more power to the national government than he later wanted it to exercise. He worked for ratification by delaying the vote in New Hampshire until his pro-Constitution views had prevailed. His later service included stints as governor of New Hampshire and as a U.S. senator. He turned down an opportunity to serve Thomas Jefferson as secretary of the Navy and to run for vice-president. He died a wealthy and much revered man at age 78.

Because Langdon arrived late at the convention, he missed some votes on the representation issue. However, when it came to voting on how the president should be elected, he joined Delaware as the only small states that thought the president should be elected by both houses of Congress. This system gave Delaware many fewer votes than the states with larger populations.

On most issues, Langdon was a staunch nationalist. On the issue of allowing states to coin money, Langdon was overwhelmingly opposed. He said he'd "rather make George Washington King of America" than allow the states to coin their own money. Langdon was not impressed with states' rights advocates. Langdon agreed with Pinckney of South Carolina that Congress should have the power to "negative (veto) all laws passed by the several States interfering in the opinion of the Legislature with the General Interests and harmony of the union."

On the issue of democracy and checks and balances, Langdon did express support for an electoral system for indirect voting for president. He also wanted to make no efforts to limit the number of voters. On that issue he agreed with Wilson that they were "providing a Constitution for future generations." In addition, Langdon argued that too "many Exclusions would make the system unacceptable to the people."

On slavery, Langdon was "strenuous for giving the power to the General Government" to stop the slave trade. He "could not with good conscience leave it with the States who could then go on with the traffic of slavery, without being restrained by the opinions here given that they will themselves cease to import slaves."

Despite his humble beginnings, Langdon became one of New Hampshire's wealthiest men. He bought U.S. and state bonds – sometimes at very low prices. When these were paid off in full, Langdon made good money. Later he invested in the Bank of the United States and advised his state to do so.

## John Lansing of New York — 1754-1829

John Lansing was known as a fine and generous host, who was always ready to entertain all men of good taste. This included his political opponents. He was not known for his great knowledge of law. Nevertheless, he started practicing law at age 21, served as a military aide during the war, served several terms in the New York State Assembly, twice as speaker, and was several times elected to serve as mayor of Albany. After the convention, Lansing was chief justice of the New York State Supreme Court. He stayed in politics until age 60. He disappeared mysteriously some ten years later after leaving his hotel room in New York City to mail a letter. He was never seen again.

John Lansing was sent to the convention because his views on states' rights and democracy were just the opposite of Alexander Hamilton's. Lansing had instructions only to amend the Articles of Confederation. He opposed the new Constitution because it tended to "consolidate the United States into one government." Lansing favored a plan of government in which each state would have one vote. Although he would give the national government power to regulate trade, enforce treaties, and raise money, he did not wish to go much further than that.

Even though he opposed the Constitution, Lansing would have amended it by adding a bill of rights.

One of the richest men in his party, Lansing owned over 40,000 acres. He had a very successful law practice and owned more than \$7,000 worth of securities.



## James Madison of Virginia – 1751-1836

In some ways, all of James Madison's life was a preparation for the constitutional convention. Madison was born in a wealthy family, the oldest of ten children. He was tutored at home and then attended Princeton College. Here he studied very hard. He came home after graduating to tutor his younger brothers and sisters. In 1774, he became active in the protests against England; two years later he helped write the Virginia Constitution. Later he served as an advisor to Governor Patrick Henry and then as a delegate to the Continental Congress. Here he was one of the most outspoken champions for a stronger national government. Back in Virginia, he opposed paper money and favored a system of public education. He later worked to revise the old Articles of Confederation and write the Constitution.

At the convention, Madison knew more than anyone else about the history of ancient and modern governments. He also knew most of the important people of his day. At the very beginning of the convention, he was behind a move to change the articles radically. He was responsible for the Virginia Plan introduced by Governor Randolph. Madison spoke more than all but two delegates to the convention and took the only set of good notes that we have today. After the convention was over, he helped write essays that did much to have the Constitution ratified. Madison was known as the "father of the Constitution."

After the convention, Madison was elected to the House of Representatives. Here he sided with his friend Thomas Jefferson, working against Alexander Hamilton and George Washington. With Jefferson, Madison organized the Democratic party. Later, he became the fourth president of the United States.

Madison worked so hard that he became known as a "political monk." His wife, the famous and charming Dolley Madison, became one of the most loved hostesses in Washington; Madison did not marry until late in life because he was too involved in politics.

In favor of a strong central government, Madison was afraid the states would be taken over by special-interest groups. These he called factions. There were factions of debtors, creditors, landlords, landless people, farmers, manufacturers, and so forth. The faction Madison feared most was the faction consisting of the majority of the people. The smaller factions could be out-voted; the majority would be far harder to stop.

To prevent a faction consisting of most of the people from taking over the government, Madison had several ideas. First, he would extend the government over the whole country. While factions might get together to control a single state, it is unlikely that they would gain control over the entire nation. Second, he would let only people who owned property free and clear to vote. Third, he would have the senators hold office for nine years. Fourth, he would allow the national government the power to veto or cancel any law passed by the states. Finally, he would have the president serve for seven years.

Madison, being from Virginia, was in favor of giving more power to the states with more people. He wanted the Senate elected by the House of Representatives, and the president chosen by both House and Senate, not the people. Even though he owned slaves, Madison was against admitting in the Constitution the idea that there "could be property in man." Had he the power, Madison would have ended slavery immediately.

James Madison's main interest was politics. He spent little time tending to his farm or to his law practice. Most of his income came from the poor salaries given public officials and gifts from family or loans from friends; he left a very small estate when he died in 1836.

## **Luther Martin of Maryland – 1748-1826**

One of the most interesting characters to attend the convention, Luther Martin had quite a reputation. He was known for his love of alcohol, long speeches, spending money, and states' rights. Born to a poor family with nine children, Martin somehow got to Princeton. He graduated at age 18 and then taught school while studying law. He was a great success at the law, earning over \$1,000 per year. He soon attracted the attention of powerful politicians and was appointed attorney general for the state of Maryland. With some exceptions, Martin held that job for 30 years. He was also active in the opposition to England. He was one of the few men at the convention who favored paper money and laws making it easier for debtors to pay what they owed. At the convention, Martin spoke for hours at a time, boring his colleagues. After returning to Maryland, he opposed the Constitution. He made many strong speeches denouncing the delegates, claiming that they were only interested in increasing their own power.

As attorney general for Maryland, Luther successfully defended Aaron Burr (who had shot Hamilton) against treason. He continued his fight against strong government by opposing the Bank of the United States in 1819. He lost the case to have it declared unconstitutional. Luther Martin died in 1826 at the home of Aaron Burr.

At the convention, Martin opposed every single proposal to increase the strength of the federal government. He arrived late but immediately threw himself into the struggle to prevent "the large States from having all power in their hands." He thought the only excuse to have a national government was to protect the state governments. He thought the states were by nature equal to each other.

Because he believed in the rights of the states and in the rights of the individual, Martin wanted each state to have an equal vote in Congress. He also did not want to give the national government any more power. And he wanted to protect the liberties of the people with a bill of rights.

Although he himself owned six slaves, who were house servants, Luther Martin opposed slavery. He opposed slavery as "inconsistent with the principles of the revolution and dishonorable to the American character."

Because he lost the battles on the issues he considered so important, Martin decided that the other delegates "did not consider that either states or men had any rights at all." He also thought they were only interested in their own profits and advancement. Nor did he hesitate to condemn these men.

Luther Martin was equally good at spending money as he was in making it. With the money earned from his law practice and in salt mines, he invested in homes left vacant by people (Tories) who sympathized with England. As attorney general for the state of Maryland, he enjoyed prosecuting Tories who had left for England and stripping them of their properties.



## George Mason of Virginia – 1725-1792

One of the older men at the convention, George Mason was born rich and improved his position by marriage. He spent most of his life taking care of his huge plantation of 5,000 acres and 300 slaves. Unlike most Virginians, Mason took care of his property himself and did not hire overseers to run it for him. Also unlike most of the delegates, Mason preferred private life to public service. He quit serving in the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1769 because he was tired of its "blathers." Later, he turned down an appointment to the U.S. Senate.

Despite Mason's love of privacy, he was an important man in Virginia politics for over 30 years. He was a neighbor of George Washington and a friend of Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and other famous Virginians. He often acted as host for a small group of men who planned political campaigns that influenced our history. A brilliant writer, Mason wrote many famous documents, including a Declaration of Rights, and protests against the slave trade.

Mason ended a ten-year political retirement by attending the constitutional convention. Here he played an important role but later opposed the Constitution he helped write. He swore he'd rather chop off his hand than sign the Constitution. After the convention, he retired to his plantation and kept out of politics until his death in 1792.

About 60 years old at the time of the convention, Mason was considered an excellent speaker and politician.

At the convention, Mason feared the other delegates would steer too far away from democracy and toward monarchy. Mason wanted to include a bill of rights in the Constitution but was defeated in his attempts. He also wanted to limit the power of the president. In keeping with his democratic principles, Mason also opposed the slave trade. He argued strongly against slavery because it has a bad effect on the masters and "would bring the judgment of heaven" on the country.

Mason also had an undemocratic side. He favored six-year terms for senators to protect "the right of property" and wanted to limit the right to vote. He thought people with property, with money, or with children should be allowed to vote, because it was some evidence that they had a "permanent common interest with the Society."

Mason wanted a national government not too strong and not too weak. In the end, the Constitution did not suit him. He was upset that it might be able to deprive the states of all of their powers. He did not think that it restricted the powers of Congress enough. He also opposed the Constitution because he thought it gave too much power to the president and included a Senate that too closely resembled a House of Lords.

Upon his death, George Mason's huge estate included 15,000 acres in Virginia and 60,000 acres in Kentucky, 300 slaves, and debts of \$30,000 owed to him.

## **Gouverneur Morris of Pennsylvania – 1752-1816**

Born to one of the richest families in New York, Gouverneur Morris had one brother who signed the Declaration of Independence and another who became a major general in the British army. His father was dead, and his mother sided openly with the British. Morris himself often feared that the Revolution would turn into mob violence. Nevertheless, he served the colonists' cause. He played a leading role in the Continental Congress, where he was known for defending George Washington every time the commander-in-chief came under attack.

At the constitutional convention, Morris was one of the most talkative delegates. As chairman of the Committee on Style, he wrote the final draft of the Constitution. After the convention, Morris served as ambassador to France. He was replaced because he openly sided with the King after the French Revolution started. Morris then spent the next ten years in Europe. He was selected to serve in the Senate after his return. He was married in 1809. He died at his family estate, six years later.

Despite the lack of one leg and a severely burned arm, Morris was popular with women. Few delegates had more wit and charm than Gouverneur Morris.

Like Hamilton, Morris was outspoken in his anti-democratic opinions. He was particularly worried that the masses of people whom he called "the ignorant and the dependent" would eventually become a majority. To prevent them from controlling the country, Morris wanted senators to serve lifelong terms, like the Lords in England. He would not have paid the senators, so none but the rich would serve.

Morris would also have made the president independent of the people. Therefore it would not have been possible to impeach him.

Like Hamilton, Morris also wanted a strong national government. He thought that the states were the "bane of the country." He wanted to "take out the teeth of these serpents." Therefore, he proposed that the national government have power to make laws "in all cases for the general interest of the Union."

On the issue of slavery, Morris was surprisingly democratic. He opposed slavery, which he thought wicked and the curse of heaven.

Since Morris was not the eldest son, he inherited \$2,000 instead of the family estate. He made enough money in his law practice to eventually buy the estate, but he never was able to earn enough money to clear it of all debts owed. Despite the large amounts Morris owed others, he lived his life in high style.

## **William Paterson of New Jersey—1745-1806**

During his long career, William Paterson served his state in all levels of government. He started on a town committee during the Revolution, became a state senator, the state attorney general, a U.S. senator, and New Jersey's governor.

The son of an Irish immigrant, Paterson came to the colonies in 1747. His father settled around Princeton and earned enough money to send his son to the local college. William graduated in 1763, studied law, and passed the bar exam five years later. He started in politics to protest England's policies, eventually became the state's attorney general, and returned to private practice, where he did very well.

At the convention, Paterson impressed others with his ability to speak and his understanding of the issues. On June 15, 1787 he laid the New Jersey plan before the convention. It called for each state having one vote, as under the Articles, but Paterson was willing to create a much stronger government than previously existed.

He wanted all acts passed by Congress to become "the Supreme law" of the states. He believed the president should have the power to enforce these laws. After the compromise that gave the small states equal power in the Senate was reached, Paterson was willing to further strengthen the national government. He was pleased, he later wrote his wife, to support the Constitution.

Paterson's major investment was an estate that had belonged to a sympathizer with England. The treaty with England that ended the Revolution called for such estates to be returned to the original owners. New Jersey was very reluctant to enforce that part of the treaty. A strong national government might make the states return such properties; and this would have hurt Paterson.

## William Pierce of Georgia – 1740-1789

Not much is known of William Pierce's early life. His birth state is sometimes given as Virginia and other times as Georgia. His public career began in 1776 when he became a captain in the Continental Army. He received a congressional special award for his services in 1782.

Pierce had a great deal of trouble in business. One company he owned failed. The second company was paid for with the dowry he received from his wife. This business was badly hurt by a sudden decline in prices. Chosen in 1786 to represent Georgia in the Continental Congress, Pierce instead spent most of his time tending to business affairs in New York. He later left the constitutional convention in 1787 to return to his failing business in New York. Although Pierce was able to save the business, he never escaped from his great debts. He died in 1789, still deeply in debt.

William Pierce is probably best known for a series of descriptions he wrote about the other delegates to the convention. Not much is known about his political views. He came from a small state and favored giving every state an equal vote in Congress. He thought that "state distinctions" should be sacrificed for the general government. He eventually agreed with the compromise that created a Senate chosen by the states and a House of Representatives chosen by the people. He favored three-year terms for senators, rather than the six proposed. It may be assumed that he was more inclined to democratic solutions to most problems than many of his fellow delegates.

## Charles Pinckney of South Carolina — 1758-1822

The son of a wealthy plantation owner, Charles Pinckney expected to study law in England. The beginnings of the Revolution prevented that, however. Instead, Pinckney finished his studies earlier. At age 21, he began to practice law and was elected to the state legislature. The next year he was captured while serving as an officer in defense of his city, Charleston. After his release in 1781, Pinckney went back to his law practice. Three years later he represented South Carolina in the Continental Congress. He came to the constitutional convention as its youngest member. In fact, he lied about his real age. After playing an important part in the convention, Pinckney went on to become governor of South Carolina and a U.S. senator, representative, and ambassador.

Handsome, intelligent, and self-confident, Pinckney was well read and hard working. He knew something about every subject that might arise in conversation.

Pinckney wanted to be sure that the wealthy people would control the government. He proposed that the president have at least \$100,000; judges and representatives, somewhat less. Senators should be appointed by the state to serve for life. The people could not be trusted to elect the president; this would be done by Congress. An election by the people, Pinckney thought, "will be led by a few active and designing men."

The president should serve a seven-year term. He should not fear that the legislature could impeach him, because this would weaken him. "If he opposes a favorite law," said Pinckney, "the two Houses will combine against him."

Pinckney wanted the national government to be strong. The states should be kept in their place. The national government should be able to veto any state law it considers improper, for any reason.

Pinckney wanted representation in Congress on the basis of population. He opposed any plan that would give the states an equal vote even in one branch of the legislature. He opposed any plan that would prohibit the slave trade. He also wanted a provision to insure the return of slaves who escaped to the North.

Charles Pinckney favored a bill of rights and proposed one before the convention. Freedom of the press, freedom from having troops quartered in private homes, and no armies in time of peace were among the rights listed in his proposal.

Charles Pinckney could earn \$5,000 a year when he practiced law, a very good income in those days. Despite the fact that he only spent a small part of his time practicing law, Pinckney earned enough to buy over 100 slaves, a very lavish town house in Charleston, a plantation, and \$14,000 in government securities.

## Edmund Randolph of Virginia – 1753-1813

Born to a well-known Virginia family of lawyer-politicians, Edmund Randolph kept the family tradition. He attended the College of William and Mary, where he did very well. He then studied law under his father. The Revolution split the Randolph family. The father, mother, and two sisters remained loyal to England and left Virginia soon after the war began. An uncle, Peyton Randolph, was the president of the Continental Congress. Edmund, then 23, stayed in the colonies and served in the convention that wrote the new Virginia constitution. Governor Patrick Henry appointed Randolph attorney general. While he held that position, he also represented Virginia in the Continental Congress. In 1786, he became governor. As the leader of the Virginia delegation to the convention, Randolph presented the Virginia Plan. It called for a much stronger national government; a House of Representatives elected by the people, with the largest number of votes going to the large states; and the Senate and the president elected by the House.

Even though the Constitution eventually included many ideas resembling those from Randolph's Virginia Plan, he did not favor the Constitution. But, after receiving a letter from George Washington, Randolph worked to have it ratified. Later, he served under Washington as attorney general and then secretary of state. He resigned when accused of passing secrets to the French ambassador; he claimed to be innocent. He retired to practicing law.

Edmund Randolph opened the main business of the convention with a long speech criticizing the Articles of Confederation. He blamed all the problems with paper money and trade on the weakness of that constitution. Later, he also blamed the problems of the country on "folies of democracy." To correct these evils, Randolph wanted a balanced government. A democratic House of Representatives should be balanced against an aristocratic Senate. Randolph also favored a balance between national and state governments. He wanted the national government to have the power to defend itself, but he did not want to give it too much power at the expense of the states. Though regretting slavery, Randolph thought it necessary to protect property in slaves.

When the Constitution was finally written, Randolph did not feel it met his test as a balanced government. He feared it would give the national government too much power. Washington convinced Randolph to support the Constitution, which he eventually did. Randolph played an important part in getting the Constitution ratified in Virginia.

While in public office, Randolph sometimes complained that his father had not handed a fortune down to him. When he finally got his Uncle Peyton's estate, it was so burdened with debts that it did not help Randolph very much. After retiring from public life, he did very well. He died leaving an estate of 7,000 acres, 200 slaves, several houses, and about \$80,000.

## **George Read of Delaware – 1733-1798**

One of six sons of a very wealthy father, George Read received an excellent education. He started practicing law at age 20. Ten years later he was appointed state attorney general. He was later elected to the Delaware General Assembly. Here he spoke out against British policy. Later he served in the First and Second Continental Congresses and tried to avoid war with England. He voted against independence in 1776, but signed the Declaration. Later he served his state as governor, senator, representative, and chief justice.

Read was not known for any great talent as a speaker or lawyer, but was known as a good and pleasant man. George Read came to the convention with instructions not to change the rule of each state having one vote. Later he wrote to John Dickinson to hurry to Philadelphia and oppose the large states from swallowing the small.

Despite his opposition to representation by population, Read favored making the national government more powerful. He wanted to give it the power to veto laws passed by the states. He hoped that the people's attachment to their states would be "extinguished."

Some of Read's other views were similar to those expressed by Dickinson and Hamilton. He wanted senators, like judges, to hold their seats for life. He wanted to give the president the right to appoint the senators. The president, furthermore, should have the power to veto laws passed by Congress, and Congress should not have the right to override his veto. This would make the U.S. president more powerful than the King of England. In fact, Read's entire plan for government was copied from the English system.

George Read gave up his inheritance from his father because he felt that he had already benefited enough from it by the excellent education it bought for him. Although he never earned a great deal from his law practice, he was able to live in splendor in a large mansion overlooking the Delaware River. He invested small sums of money in government bonds.

## John Rutledge of South Carolina—1739-1800

John Rutledge was one of the best and most successful lawyers in the whole country. He was tutored at home and sent to England for his education in law. He returned to Charleston in 1760 and began practicing law. In 1763 he won all 52 cases he tried. After that he could ask the highest fees, earning about \$40,000 a year from his practice. Before the Revolution, John Rutledge owned five plantations, over 240 slaves, and nine different pieces of town property.

In politics John Rutledge was equally successful. He was elected to the South Carolina Assembly at age 22, appointed attorney general three years later, and South Carolina delegate to the Stamp Act Congress in 1765. He also served in the Continental Congress, played a major role in writing the state constitution, and became governor of South Carolina. He resigned because some changes made in the constitution were too democratic for his taste. The English confiscated his property to punish him for siding with the colonists. For some reason, he failed to recover his property or to continue his law practice after the war.

After the constitutional convention, Rutledge served as a member of the Supreme Court. After the death of his wife in 1792, Rutledge was broken in health and spirit and did little in the way of public service.

At the convention, Rutledge argued that office holders should own large amounts of property. He did not apply the same rule to voters, because he feared "this would make an enemy of all who would be excluded." Rutledge proposed that the president serve a seven-year term, that he be eligible for re-election, and that he be subject to impeachment.

In defending the slave trade, Rutledge argued that "religion and humanity have nothing to do with it." "Interest alone," he claimed, "is the governing principle with Nations." He told the North that they too would benefit by the slave trade, for slaves were shipped in boats supplied by the North. Later, Rutledge told the convention that North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia would never approve the Constitution if it took away their right to import slaves.

Rutledge also opposed giving the national government the power to veto laws passed by states. "If nothing else," he argued, "this alone would damn and ought to damn the Constitution." Furthermore, Rutledge proposed a bill of rights, stating that he was in favor of prohibiting a bill of attainder (conviction of a crime by an act of the legislature), *ex post facto* laws (laws passed after an act is committed, making it a crime), and the suspension of *habeas corpus* (putting people in jail without due cause).



## Roger Sherman of Connecticut – 1721-1793

A "jack and master of all trades" is the best description for Roger Sherman. Born to a farming family in Newton, Massachusetts, Sherman at one time in his life was a farmer, shoemaker, surveyor, storekeeper, landowner, printer, lawyer, and always a politician. At one time he held five public offices. He had little formal education and taught himself everything he had to know. Sherman entered politics in 1755 when he was elected to Connecticut's General Assembly. Later he was appointed to the governor's council and served in the Continental Congress. Sherman was one of the few Americans who signed the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the U.S. Constitution. He also revised Connecticut's laws, served as mayor of New Haven, and represented Connecticut in Congress. He died in 1793, shortly after his appointment to the U.S. Senate.

Sherman had a clear head, was an able politician, and was extremely capable of accomplishing anything he set out to do. Sherman is best known for having brought about, along with Franklin, the compromise that gave the United States its two houses of Congress. The House of Representatives, based on population, favored the large states. The Senate, where each state had equal votes, favored the small states.

Sherman favored increasing the power of the national government while protecting the rights of the states. He wanted to give Congress the power to make laws in all cases that would affect the whole country but allow the states to handle all cases that affected only them. The problem, of course, was to figure out what came under each of those headings.

Sherman favored frequent elections to "preserve the good behavior of the rulers." He thought that the people should not vote directly for their rulers because "they lack information and are likely to be misled."

Although Sherman opposed slavery, he did not want to end the slave trade for fear that the Southern states would not accept the Constitution. He believed the government should protect people's rights but thought a bill of rights was unnecessary. He believed that the states would protect the rights of the people.

Sherman was never really wealthy. His eldest sons were failures in business, and Sherman spent a lot of money bailing them out. He spent a great deal of money buying government bonds. They were repaid only the year before his death. In the meantime, Sherman stayed out of debtors' prison mainly because of his reputation for honesty and help from his daughters. Much of his land in New Milford was sold because he could not pay taxes due on it.

## **Hugh Williamson of North Carolina – 1735-1819**

Hugh Williamson was a minister for three years before going to Europe, where he studied medicine. There he traveled and wrote on a number of different subjects, including American rights, comets, and electric eels.

Williamson personally saw the Boston Tea Party while waiting to sail on a ship to England. When he arrived in London, he told Benjamin Franklin what had happened. Returning to America, he practiced medicine in North Carolina. With his brother, he started a business trading with the French West Indies. This was closed by the British. During the war, Williamson became surgeon general of the North Carolina militia. He took an active part in inoculating the soldiers against smallpox and improving health and sanitary conditions.

Williamson entered politics in 1782, serving in the state legislature. He was later picked to represent North Carolina in the Continental Congress. Here he played an active role, trying to give the government more power.

After the convention, Williamson worked hard to have the Constitution accepted in North Carolina. Later he served two terms as a representative in Congress, before retiring from politics to write. Among his works is a two-volume history of North Carolina.

Williamson was considered a man of talent and education, with a good sense of humor and the manners of a gentleman.

Like Benjamin Franklin, Williamson was both a democrat and a nationalist. He was against putting any kind of restriction on the right to vote. He wanted to limit the power of the president by allowing two-thirds of Congress to override his veto. He also wanted to have the president impeached for malpractice or neglect of duty. He had more faith in a House of Representatives elected by the people than in a Senate appointed by the state legislatures. He wanted a bill of rights in the Constitution to guarantee the right of trial by jury.

Although personally against slavery, Williamson had to represent his state on that issue. He feared that North Carolina would not join the Union if it was forced to stop importing slaves. He thought it wrong to force a state to do anything that wasn't absolutely necessary.

Although Williamson wanted to make the national government more powerful, he would not allow it to veto laws passed by the states.

Williamson made enough money in his medical career to invest large amounts in western lands. He also bought government bonds. Both of these investments would be helped by the establishment of "an efficient national government."

## **James Wilson of Pennsylvania – 1742-1798**

James Wilson was the only member of the convention to die while fleeing from men to whom he owed money. He was a success as a lawyer, politician, and scholar, but he was a miserable failure as a businessman. Unfortunately, his bad business sense brought about his downfall.

Wilson was born in Scotland, where he received an excellent education. He came to this country at the age of 23. Here he supported himself by tutoring while he studied law under the famous John Dickinson. In 1767 he moved west, won some important land claim cases, and began to buy land on his own account.

An early supporter of America's rights against England, Wilson won fame by writing a pamphlet that argued for the colonists' rights. He was appointed to serve in the Continental Congress, where he spoke in favor of making peace with England. Only a last-minute switch by Wilson put Pennsylvania in favor of independence. Shortly afterwards, Wilson was forced out of Congress because he opposed the democratic new constitution of the state. He moved to Philadelphia, where he did legal work for those who favored England. This so angered the patriots that a mob attacked his house. Later, he gained favor again and was elected to serve in the Continental Congress.

Wilson played a leading role at the convention. As a reward for his efforts, he was chosen to serve on the Supreme Court, but he could not enter certain states because he was wanted for bad debts. He was finally driven from Pennsylvania to avoid debtors' prison; he died in North Carolina.

Wilson was as cautious in politics as he was reckless in finances. Nevertheless, most of his positions favored democracy and a stronger national government. Although he liked the English system with its House of Lords, Wilson was in favor of senators being elected directly by the people. He also was one of the few delegates who was in favor of the president being elected by the people and not a specially chosen group of electors. He wanted the president to serve for only three years and would not have made him eligible for reelection. Nevertheless, Wilson wanted the president to be powerful enough to veto any law passed by Congress. Congress would not be given the right to override the veto.

Wilson also favored making the national government much stronger. He was not afraid that the national government would destroy the states. Instead, he feared that the states would destroy the national government. Wilson favored giving the national government power to veto any law passed by the states. This he considered to be of utmost importance. Because he wanted the national government to be so powerful, Wilson opposed limiting its power with a bill of rights.