

Signing the Constitution, September 17, 1787

BY JAMES P. HODGES
FOR THE BEACON

A great story today is the Constitution. Everybody talks about it but I'm not sure many really understand it.

It is one of George Washington's great accomplishments.

He was the guiding figure. He was elected unanimously as President of the convention. He knew most of the delegates and was respected by all.

"Who wrote the Constitution?"
"We the people of the United States."
Why?

"In order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare and secure the blessing of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity"

To do what?
"To ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America."

The above words in parenthesis are the exact text of the preamble to our Constitution.

This story of how our constitution

was written is not well known but is one of most important in all our history. When we won independence from Great Britain, the peace treaty specified us as 13 individual countries.

We were loosely bound together under the Articles of Confederation. We were known as the United States of America in Congress Assembled.

Each country was a sovereign nation. To pass any law in Congress required the unanimous approval of all 13 countries. Consequently little got done except the notable passage of the Northwest Ordinance. It established the five mid western states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin.

Each state sent mediocre delegates to Congress for their best men preferred to serve within their own borders.

Each state printed their own money and levied custom duties on each other.

In a word they competed more with each other than cooperated.

Washington worried that now with no common enemy, there was no incentive for countries to work together.

The sovereign countries were jealous

of each other, often quarreling and bickering just like siblings in a dysfunctional family.

Washington, always thinking long terms by looking out into the future, felt for us to succeed among the world's nations or even exist as a nation we must unite. If we didn't, foreign powers could come in and swallow us up individually for each alone would be too weak to resist.

So he urged states to send delegates to a convention to write a constitution to replace the Articles.

All sent delegates except for Rhode Island.

That summer of 1787 were the most important four months in American history.

Elected Constitutional Convention president by unanimous vote, Washington guided it to a successful conclusion.

A few months before the Convention he had asked his young friend James Madison, a scholar if ever there was one, to research all previous forms of republican government to prepare an agenda that delegates could use as a model.

All meetings, particularly those of this magnitude, must have an agenda to follow or would stray off on

a tangent.

His plan was called the Virginia plan and 55 delegates met in Philadelphia in May, but only 39 remained to sign on September 19, 1787.

Historians agree that George Washington's guiding hand influenced the delegates to write the Constitution. Even so it was a miracle that they agreed upon the terms.

The Articles of Confederation governing America from 1781 to 1789 had required 13 votes to do anything. Anyone who ever served on a committee knows how difficult it is to get everyone to agree on even simple matters.

The delegates determined there would be no more of that 100 percent approval nonsense. Here was a document of immense importance too valuable not to approve. We required only nine states to ratify to make it effective for those who did.

The result was that each delegate displayed civic virtue and sacrificed personal desires for good of the country. At the end 39 delegates signed representing all the states but Rhode Island.

The Constitution was then sent out

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to the states for ratification. Delaware approved first so is known as the first state.

Some states approved conditionally for they felt the document didn't adequately protect the citizen's rights. The bill of rights, the first ten amendments, passed in George Washington's first administration, satisfied them.

Our written constitution is the oldest in the world because the delegates had been foresighted and provided for it to be amended by vote.

Other constitutions, such as the French and Russians, had been written in stone. Their framers, perhaps

thinking they were wiser than those who would follow, made no provision for internal change. So when change occurred it had to be by violent overthrow; by the ballot.

Our change is by the vote, the ballot, thus no bloodshed to make a change. We've amended our constitution 27 times.

The framers established a Bicameral legislature. A House of Representatives whose membership would be based on population; a Senate of two representatives from each state.

Both bodies must agree to any law so small states interests were protected.

The earlier Articles of Confederation had no executive office. Washing-

ton, as General of the Army had fulfilled that role during the war.

At first under the strategy of providing checks and balances, the framers considered making the presidency a three-man office, one from each geographical area. They voted it down as being too cumbersome. They also established a Supreme Court. Each of the three branches would be a check on the others.

To nominate and vote on the president each state would vote for elector college representatives. Ben Franklin said at first he didn't know if the sun on back of George Washington's chair was a rising or setting sun but when the Constitution was finally written he judged it to be a ris-

ing sun.

The framers, justly, should be proud of themselves for they wrote the best constitution in history. Americans under its provisions have been the freest and best-governed people in the world.

George Washington was the indispensable man in the founding of our country.

He was elected our first president unanimously by Electoral College. Since only 11 states had ratified he was president of only 11 states but Rhode Island and North Carolina joined by ratifying within the next two years.

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