

National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminars and Institutes for School Teachers

George Washington and His Legacy: Myths, Symbols, and Reality

A Federal Man: George Washington at the Constitutional Convention

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In a letter dated August 29, 1788, George Washington wrote, “It [the U.S. Constitution] approached nearer to perfection than any government hitherto instituted among men.” The fact that George Washington supported the Constitution upon its adoption on September 17, 1787 was significant because the Constitution would now be subjected to a ratification process where all of the states would be able to weigh in on this proposed form of government and where there was much opposition. In *George Washington: Ordinary Man, Extraordinary Leader*, Jones writes, “Washington’s contribution to the success of the Constitutional Convention lay principally in his being there; that he attended, presided, and signed the result of the convention convinced countless Americans of the value of the new Constitution.” Many Americans would be persuaded to support the Constitution because General Washington, the hero of the War for Independence and the father of his country, supported it. It is evident in Washington’s own writings that he considered a strong central government vital in uniting the states and their people into one country. However, during the convention in Philadelphia from May 25 to September 17, 1787 Washington only spoke twice, once at the beginning on a point of detail and once at the end regarding the minimum size of electoral districts in the House of Representatives. Even though Washington was made president of the convention he relinquished this role to another each day and took his seat with the rest of the Virginia delegation where he listened to the debate and discussion. One of the only ways to understand what Washington was thinking during the Constitutional Convention is to read letters that he wrote to others while the Convention was happening. These letters do not reveal what was actually going on at the convention since the delegates swore to keep the proceedings secret until they finished their task, but the letters do give some insight as to what Washington thought the country’s problems were and how the problems might be solved.

Bibliography

- Jones, Robert F. “Interlude on the Potomac, 1784-1789.” Chap. 4 in *George Washington: Ordinary Man, Extraordinary Leader*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2002.
- Lucas, Stephen. *The Quotable George Washington*. Madison House, 1999.

LESSON PLAN

Grade Level / Course

10-12 / United States History, American Government

Overview

George Washington knew that his role as president of the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 could have a profound influence on the type of government the states would eventually adopt. Should more power reside with the individual States, or should more power be vested in the central government? This was a key question the delegates debated during what came to be known as the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

Objectives

Students will:

- understand the opposing views, concerning the strength of a centralized government, at the Constitutional Convention.
- analyze letters Washington wrote during the Constitutional Convention to understand his views regarding a centralized government.
- understand Washington's role at the Constitutional Convention and how that influenced his ability to shape the final outcome.

Documents (The following documents are attached to the end of the lesson)

Washington, George. "George Washington to David Stuart, July 1, 1787." TeachingAmericanHistory.org. <<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1861>>. Accessed June 22, 2009.

Washington, George. "George Washington to Henry Knox, August 19, 1787." TeachingAmericanHistory.org. <<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1863>>. Accessed June 22, 2009.

Washington, George. "Letter to Alexander Hamilton, July 10, 1787." TeachingAmericanHistory.org. <<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=338>>. Accessed June 22, 2009.

Recommended Time (Number of class periods / time of class periods)

Two class periods / 50 minutes each

Activity Outline

- I. Context (Have the students answer the following questions for all documents in the Activity)
 - a. When was this document written?
 - b. Where was this document written?
 - c. Who wrote this document?
 - d. What type of document is this?
 - e. What is the purpose of this document?
 - f. Who is the audience for this document?

II. Warm-Up

- a. Display Howard Chandler Christy's painting Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States (<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/christy/>).
- b. Ask students what scene this painting depicts and have them identify specific individuals in the painting.
- c. Then, ask them to determine which individual in the painting seems to be the most important and have them explain why.

III. Activity

After discussing Washington's role at the Constitutional Convention in the Warm-Up activity, divide students into groups of three. Give each student in the group one of the three letters to read and analyze. Have each individual student answer the "Context" questions above and then share their letter and answers with their group. In addition to having each student answer the "Context" questions regarding their letter, each group needs to be able to come up with an answer to the following question based on all three letters: "What kind of government did Washington want for the United States?" When all of the groups are finished discuss, as an entire class, Washington's views. Have the students complete an exit slip before they leave class on what they learned about Washington's role and his views at the Constitutional Convention.

IV. Extensions

Have students go to Howard Chandler Christy's painting Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States (<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/christy/>) and research other members of the Constitutional Convention to find out their views on government power and how it should be divided.

Documents

George Washington to David Stuart

George Washington
July 1, 1787

Philadelphia July 1st. 1787.

Rhode Island, from our last Accts sill persevere in that impolitic — unjust —and one might add without much impropriety scandalous conduct, which seems to have marked all her public Councils of late; — Consequently, no Representation is yet here from thence. New Hampshire, tho' Delegates have been appointed, is also unrepresented — various causes have been assigned —whether well, or ill founded I shall not take upon me to decide —The fact however is that they are not here. Political contests, and want of Money, are amidst the reasons assigned for the non attendance of the members.

As the rules of the Convention prevent me from relating any of the proceedings of it, and the gazettes contain more fully than I could detail other occurrences of public nature, I have little to communicate to you on the article of News. Happy indeed would it be if the Convention shall be able to recommend such a firm and permanent Government for this Union, as all who live under it may be secure in their lives, liberty and property, and thrice happy would it be, if such a recommendation should obtain. Every body wishes — every body expects some thing from the Convention — but what will be the final result of its deliberation, the book of fate must disclose — Persuaded I am that the primary cause of all our disorders lies in the different State Governments, and in the tenacity of that power which pervades the whole of

their systems. Whilst independent sovereignty is so ardently contended for, whilst the local views of each State and separate interests by which they are too much govern'd will not yield to a more enlarged scale of politics; incompatibility in the laws of different States, and disrespect to those of the general government must render the situation of this great Country weak, inefficient and disgraceful. It has already done so, —almost to the final dissolution of it — weak at home and disregarded abroad is our present condition, and contemptible enough it is.

Entirely unnecessary was it, to offer any apology for the sentiments you were so obliging as to offer me — I have had no wish more ardent (thro' the whole progress of this business) than that of knowing what kind of Government is best calculated for us to live under. No doubt there will be a diversity of sentiment on this important subject; and to inform the Judgment, it is necessary to hear all arguments that can be advanced. To please all is impossible, and to attempt it would be vain; the only way therefore is, under all the views in which it can be placed — and with a due consideration to circumstances —habits —&cc. &cc. to form such a government as will bear the scrutinizing eye of criticism and trust it to the good sense and patriotism of the people to carry it into effect. —Demagogue, — men who are unwilling to lose any of their state consequence —and interested characters in each, will oppose any general government: but let these be regarded rightly, and Justice it is to be hoped will at length prevail.

Source: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1861>

Letter to Alexander Hamilton

George Washington
July 10, 1787

Philadelphia, July 10, 1787.

Dear Sir: I thank you for your Communication of the 3d. When I refer you to the state of the Councils which prevailed at the period you left this City, and add, that they are now, if possible, in a worse train than ever; you will find but little ground on which the hope of a good establishment can be formed. In a word, I almost despair of seeing a favourable issue to the proceedings of our Convention, and do therefore repent having had any agency in the business.

The Men who oppose a strong and energetic government are, in my opinion, narrow minded politicians, or are under the influence of local views. The apprehension expressed by them that the people will not accede to the form proposed is the ostensible, not the real cause of the opposition; but admitting that the present sentiment is as they prognosticate, the question ought nevertheless to be, is it, or is it not, the best form? If the former, recommended it, and it will assuredly obtain mauger opposition. I am sorry you went away. I wish you were back. The crisis is equally important and alarming, and no opposition under such circumstances should discourage exertions till the signature is fixed. I will not, at this time trouble you with more than my best wishes and sincere regards. I am &c.

Source: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=338>

George Washington to Henry Knox

George Washington
August 19, 1787

Philadelphia. August 19 1787

By slow, I wish I could add, and sure movements, the business of the Convention progresses but to say when it will end, or what will be the result, is more than I dare venture to do and therefore shall hazard no opinion thereon. If some thing good does not proceed from the Cession the defects cannot with propriety be charged to the hurry with which the business has been conducted, notwithstanding which many things may be forgot — some of them not well digested — and others from the contrariety of sentiments with which such a body is pervaded become a mere nihility yet I wish a disposition may be found in Congress, the several State Legislatures — and the community at large to adopt the Government which may be agreed on in Convention because I am fully persuaded it is the best that can be obtained at the present moment under such diversity of ideas as prevail.

Source: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1863>