

From VOA Learning English, welcome to THE MAKING OF A NATION – American history in Special English. I’m Steve Ember. This week in our series, we continue the story of the United States Constitution.

In May of 1787, a group of America's early leaders met in the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They planned to amend the Articles of Confederation. That document established a loose union of the 13 states. Instead, they wrote a completely new constitution. It created America's system of government and recognized the rights of its citizens.

That Constitution, with other amendments added over the years, is still the law of the land.

The delegates agreed to start the convention as soon as seven states were represented. On May 25th, they finally began. They gathered in the same room where America's Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776.

The first important decision was choosing a president for the convention. Several of the delegates urged the others to choose George Washington. Washington was the most famous man in America. He had led the forces that won the war for independence from Britain. The delegates agreed. Washington was their choice.

George Washington officially opened the convention with a short speech. He thanked the delegates for naming him president of the convention. But he said the honor was too great. He asked the delegates to forgive him if he made mistakes. After all, he said, he had never been chairman of a meeting before.

With those words, George Washington sat down. Here are two actors playing George Washington and James Madison. They discuss Washington’s role in writing the Constitution.

WASHINGTON: “As for that document, I merely stood back and let the learned gentlemen do their work. I believe I spoke only once in convention, and that to a minor point.”

MADISON: “I believe you do yourself an injustice, sir. As president of the convention, you led the way.”

Washington did lead the way, but it was not a straight path. From the beginning, the delegates agreed that they had the right to change their decisions. This was the rule.

The convention did not just discuss a proposal, vote on it, and move on to other issues. Any delegate could ask to again discuss any proposal or any decision. And they often did. The same speeches that were made the first time were made again. So days, even weeks, passed between discussions of the same proposal.

The delegates also agreed on a rule of secrecy. Guards were placed at the doors of the State House. Newspaper reporters were not allowed inside. And the delegates were not allowed to discuss convention business in public.

The secrecy rule led people to think all kinds of things about the convention. This was true especially in Europe. There, most people believed the convention was discussing how America could be ruled by a king. Europeans said a republican government worked in a small country, such as Switzerland. But it would not work, they said, in a land as large as America.

At the time of the convention, Thomas Jefferson was serving as America's representative to France. When he learned of the secrecy rule, he was angry. He believed strongly in freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

More than 40 years later, James Madison explained the decision behind the secrecy rule.

Madison said that if the convention had been open to the public, no delegate would ever have changed his mind after speaking on an issue. To do so would mean he was wrong the first time he spoke. And no delegate would be willing to admit to the public that he had made a mistake.

This was Madison's reasoning. If the meetings had been open, he said, the convention would have failed.

Another rule helped the delegates speak freely. They used a method of debate known as the committee of the whole. It was useful then and it is still used today in legislatures. Votes taken in the committee are not recorded as final votes. The committee of the whole provides a way for people to discuss ideas and vote, but also to change their minds.

To have the Philadelphia convention become a committee of the whole, the delegates needed to elect a chairman of the committee. They chose Nathaniel Gorham, a judge from Massachusetts.

Each morning at ten o'clock, the convention met and declared that it was sitting as a committee of the whole. George Washington then left the president's chair. Nathaniel Gorham took his place.

Just before four o'clock in the afternoon, the committee of the whole declared it was sitting again as a convention. Gorham would step down. Washington would take the chair and declare that the convention would meet again the next morning.

This process was repeated each day.

Because of these rules, the story of the Philadelphia convention would be difficult to understand if we told about events day-by-day. So, we will put the calendar and the clock away, and tell how each major issue was debated and settled.

On May 29th, the delegates heard what was called the Virginia Plan. This was the plan of government prepared by James Madison and other delegates from Virginia.

The Virginia Plan did more than suggest changes to the Articles of Confederation. It was, in fact, a plan for a completely new central government.

Immediately, the 33-year-old governor of Virginia, Edmund Randolph, proposed an amendment. The Virginia Plan, he noted, spoke of a federal union of states. But such a federation would not work, he said. Instead, Randolph suggested that the central government should be a national government. It should contain a supreme legislature, executive and judiciary.

For a few moments, there was complete silence. Many of the delegates seemed frozen in their chairs. Did they hear correctly?

Most of them did not question the idea of a government with three separate branches. Several states already had such a system. But to create a central government that was "national" and "supreme." What did these words mean exactly? What was the difference?

The delegates debated the meaning of the words -- federal, national and supreme -- for many days. Both James Madison and a Pennsylvania delegate, Governor Morris, tried to explain.

Madison said a federal government acts on states. A national government acts directly on the people.

Morris gave this explanation. A federal government is simply an agreement based on the good faith of those involved. A national government has a complete system of operation and its own powers.

Governor Morris pointed out that one day the delegates meeting in Philadelphia would be dead. Their children and grandchildren, he said, would stop thinking of themselves as citizens of Pennsylvania or New York or North Carolina. Instead, they would think of themselves as citizens of the United States.

Morris said the states had to take second place to a national government with supreme power.

Other delegates presented their own plans for discussion.

Alexander Hamilton of New York suggested giving the national government almost unlimited powers.

Hamilton's ideas were not popular. After Hamilton's five-hour speech, one delegate said, "Hamilton is praised by everybody. He is supported by no one."

New Jersey also offered a plan. An actor playing James Madison at a museum in Washington, DC says that plan was not popular either.

MADISON: And William Patterson unveiled the New Jersey Plan, calling for one house of equal representation. I knew that Delaware, Rhode Island, and the other small states would never go along with that.”

Delegates voted to reject the New Jersey Plan. They did not even vote on Hamilton's plan. From that time, all their discussions were about the plan presented by Virginia.

For more than three months, delegates would debate each part, vote on it, then debate it again. The Virginia Plan formed the basis of discussion at the convention in Philadelphia. In the end, it formed the basis of the United States Constitution.

But there was still more to debate in writing the constitution, including the job of an executive branch to enforce the laws. That will be our story next week.