

From VOA Learning English, this is THE MAKING OF A NATION – American history in Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

The United States became a nation in 1776. Less than a century later, in the 1860s, it was nearly torn apart. A civil war took place, the only one in the nation's history. States from the North and the South fought against each other. The conflict involved the right of the South to leave the Union and deal with issues -- especially the issue of slavery -- its own way.



This week in our series, we examine how the Constitution survived this very troubled time in American history.

The Civil War was fought from 1861 to 1865. Six hundred thousand men were killed or wounded. In the end, the slaves were freed, and the Union was saved.

Abraham Lincoln was president during the Civil War. He said the southern states did not have the right to leave the Union. Lincoln firmly believed that the Union was permanent under the Constitution. In fact, he noted that one of the reasons for establishing the Constitution was to form a more perfect Union. His main goal was to save what the Constitution had created.

One cannot truly understand the United States without understanding its Constitution. The document describes America's system of government and guarantees the rights of its citizens. The power of the Constitution is greater than any president, court or legislature.

In the coming weeks, we will tell the story of the United States Constitution, including the drama of its birth in Philadelphia in 1787. Before we do, however, we want to look at how the document provides for change without changing the basic system of government.

If you ask Americans about their Constitution, probably the first thing they will talk about is the Bill of Rights. These are the first ten changes to the Constitution. These ten amendments have the most direct effect on people's lives.

The Bill of Rights guarantees freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of the press. In fact, all of those and more, including the right to peaceful assembly, are contained just in the first amendment. The second one states, "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." The fourth amendment protects against unreasonable searches and seizures. Other amendments say that people in criminal cases cannot be forced to make statements against themselves, and have a right to a speedy and public trial by a jury.

The Bill of Rights also deals with the separation of powers between the federal government and the states. In the words of the tenth amendment: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." In other words, powers belong to the states unless the Constitution gives them to the federal government or prevents the states from having them.

The Bill of Rights was not part of the document signed at the convention in Philadelphia in 1787. The delegates believed that political freedoms were basic human rights. Some of the delegates thought it was unnecessary to express these rights in a Constitution.

Most Americans, however, wanted their rights guaranteed in writing. This is why most states approved the new Constitution only on the condition that a Bill of Rights would be added. This was done, and the amendments became law in 1791.

One early amendment involved the method of choosing a president and vice president. In America's first presidential elections, whoever received the most votes became president. The candidate who received the second highest number of votes became vice president.

The Constitution was changed after separate political parties developed. Then, ballots began to list the names of separate candidates for president and vice president.

There were no other amendments for 60 years.

The next one was born in the blood of the civil war. During the war, President Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation. That document freed the slaves in the states that were rebelling against the Union. Later, the thirteenth amendment banned slavery everywhere in the country. But Lincoln never lived to see it; he was shot a week after the South surrendered.

The Fourteenth Amendment, approved in 1868, said no state could limit the rights of any citizen. And the Fifteenth, approved two years later, said a person's right to vote could not be denied because of his race, color, or former condition of slavery.

By the 1890s, the federal government needed more money than it was receiving from taxes on imports. It wanted to establish a tax on earnings. It took 20 years to win approval for the Sixteenth Amendment. The amendment permits the government to collect income taxes.

Another amendment proposed in the early 1900s was designed to change the method of electing United States Senators. For more than 100 years, senators were elected by the legislatures of their states. The Seventeenth Amendment, approved in 1913, gave the people the right to elect senators directly.

In 1919, the states approved an amendment to ban the production, transportation and sale of alcohol. Alcohol was prohibited. It could not be produced or sold legally anywhere in the United States.

The amendment, however, did not stop the flow of alcohol. Criminal organizations found many ways to produce and sell it illegally.

Finally, after 13 years, Americans decided that Prohibition had failed. It caused more problems than it solved. So, in 1933, the states approved another constitutional amendment to end the ban on alcohol.

Other amendments in the twentieth century include one that gives women the right to vote. It became part of the Constitution in 1920.

Another amendment limits a president to two four-year terms in office. And the Twenty-Sixth Amendment gives the right to vote to all persons who are at least 18 years old.

The Twenty-Seventh Amendment has one of the strangest stories of any amendment to the United States Constitution. This amendment establishes a rule for increasing the pay of senators and representatives. It says there

must be an election between the time Congress votes to increase its pay and the time the pay raise goes into effect.

The amendment was first proposed in 1789. Like all amendments, it needed to be approved by three-fourths of the states. This did not happen until 1992. So, one of the first amendments to be proposed was the last amendment to become law.

The twenty-seven amendments added to the Constitution have not changed the basic system of government in the United States. The government still has three separate and equal parts: the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the judicial branch. The three parts balance each other. No part is greater than another.

The first American states had no strong central government when they fought their war of independence from Britain in 1776. They cooperated under an agreement called the Articles of Confederation. The agreement provided for a Congress. But the Congress had few powers.

Each state governed itself. When the war ended, the states owed millions of dollars to their soldiers. They also owed money to European nations that had supported the Americans against Britain.

The new United States had no national money to pay the debts. There was an American dollar. But not everyone used it. And it did not have the same value everywhere.

The situation led to economic ruin for many people. They could not pay the money they owed. They lost their property. They were put in prison. Militant groups took action to help them. They interfered with tax collectors. They terrorized judges and burned court buildings.

The situation was especially bad in the northeast part of the country. In Massachusetts, a group led by a former soldier tried to seize guns and ammunition from the state military force.

Shays' Rebellion, as it was called, was stopped. But from north to south, Americans were increasingly worried and frightened. Would the violence continue? Would the situation get worse?

Many Americans distrusted the idea of a strong central government. After all, they had just fought a war to end British rule. Yet Americans of different ages, education, and social groups felt that something had to be done. If not, the new nation would fail before it had a chance to succeed.

These were the opinions and feelings that led, in time, to the writing of the United States Constitution. And that will be our story in the coming weeks of THE MAKING OF A NATION.

You can find our series online with transcripts, MP3s, podcasts and pictures at [voaspecialenglish.com](http://voaspecialenglish.com). You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter at VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week for THE MAKING OF A NATION -- American history in VOA Special English.