



Signing of the Constitution 1787

The Constitution of the United States is the supreme law of the land. It is also the greatest document ever written in man's struggle for individual freedom. For the Constitution is the guarantee of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—the inalienable rights won in the American Revolution.

Throughout history, people all over the world had been governed by kings, dictators or some other type of ruler who had absolute control over their lives. As a result, people had no voice in how they were governed. They were subjects—thus servants—of the government. The people took part in numerous rebellions, but were usually defeated by their powerful rulers. Even after successful rebellions, the people soon returned to the only type of government they knew—usually a monarchy. For they needed a strong ruler to keep order and so had to sacrifice their individual freedom.

The American Revolution was one of

these rebellions, but it was different from any that had ever occurred before. Although technically British subjects, most Americans had never lived under the direct rule of the king of England. In addition, the leaders of the American Revolution were educated men who relied on logic rather than blind emotion in their struggle for self-government.

Thus, following the Revolution, the people of the 13 United States took a long look at the freedom they had won and decided to develop a plan in which those basic principles of American life would be forever maintained. In framing their government, they adopted what was then a new idea. The people were not to be the subjects of their rulers. Instead, the government must be the servant of the people.

In 1781 the Articles of Confederation were adopted as the basic law of the new nation. It ensured the sovereignty of each

state and made provisions for the elected Congress of the Confederation to run the national government. Reflecting the distrust that the citizens of the new republic had for a strong central government, the Articles were intentionally made weak. And as a result, in the political and economic turmoil that followed the Revolution, the states became less united and more like 13 independent countries. The ineffectiveness of the Articles eventually became apparent to many influential men who began working toward the creation of a new national government. On May 25, 1787, delegates met in Philadelphia for the "sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation." George Washington was elected president of the convention. Revision of the Articles proved to be an impossible task, and the men began developing an entirely different plan of government.

The new government had to be strong enough to serve the needs of its citizens, yet not so strong that it could endanger freedom and liberty. The type of government they had in mind had never been attempted before. But under the guidance of some of the most experienced and patriotic men in America, they set about their task. At Independence Hall, in the heat of the summer, with the windows closed tightly to keep

their discussions secret, the delegates met day after day to draft a workable plan. As they debated, they considered such milestones in the history of self-government and personal rights as the Magna Carta and the Mayflower Compact. Once the idea of a limited government with balanced executive, legislative and judicial branches was agreed upon, the Constitution was written. Its form and wording were based on the state constitutions of Massachusetts and New York. On September 17, 1787, the final draft of the Constitution was signed by the delegates. Over the following few months it was ratified by the people and became the law of the land.

Through the unswerving efforts of those far-sighted men who framed the Constitution, the historic document has endured to become the very foundation of American government. The preamble of the Constitution best describes the goals and values of these dedicated patriots. "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."