

Lesson Twenty-Four

The Constitutional Convention

LESSON IDEA

To show how delegates from thirteen separate and suspicious states finally agreed upon a unique form of government which would protect the rights of the minorities while being fair to majorities.

PREPARATION

Read the two sections of *Your Rugged Constitution* described in "During The Week" and decide which would be most appropriate for family discussion after the lesson.

THE ATMOSPHERE WAS TENSE and tempers were touchy when delegates began arriving in Philadelphia in May 1787 to decide how the Articles of Confederation should be revised. Some strongly believed that the Articles should be done away with, not revised. Others were determined to accept only minor revisions. Each faction suspected the others of favoring their own states or economic interests at the expense of the country as a whole. Delegates from the Southern States, for example, thought that New Englanders would be interested primarily in protecting their manufacturing interests. Those men from Massachusetts had the same uneasy feeling about Virginians and their plantation culture. Delegates from small states mistrusted those from large ones, fearing that their independence would be threatened by the size and influence of the latter.

Delegates of like mind gathered in small groups. At some dinner tables, the discussion centered on the philosophy of Locke, the history of Greece, and the laws of Rome. At others, debates raged over reforms likely to be accepted by the people and what compromise measures could be safely adopted.

THE CONVENTION, which began on May 25th, could have deteriorated into a fruitless and factious debate. Instead, its success in solving the most vexing problems would make it one of history's major events.

One of the reasons was the unanimous selection

of George Washington as presiding officer. Washington's fairness, patience in hearing all sides of an issue, and skill in preventing serious disagreements from becoming fatal hurdles, guided the delegates through four months of tedious meetings. The final consensus was reached in mid-September.

At the start of the Convention, Washington made a brief but powerful speech. With a few well-chosen words he stopped the talk of weak compromises, and the avoidance of major issues, due to fear of public reaction. It was entirely possible, he warned, "that no plan [of government] we propose will be adopted. Perhaps another dreadful conflict is to be sustained. If, to please the people we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterward defend our work? Let us raise a standard to which the wise and the honest can repair; the event is in the hands of God."

Washington's words reminded delegates of the serious nature of their task.

The first few days of discussion were devoted to establishing rules for the Convention.

It was decided, for instance, to debate in secret until the delegates a final decision was reached. Today, after more than 200 years, many liberals who ridicule the Constitution and suggest replacing it with some type of socialistic alternative, claim that the Philadelphia delegates were rich and selfish men who sought to establish a government that would enable them to increase their wealth at the expense of general citizenry. The secrecy rule, these critics contend, confirms that the delegates were trying to hide their true intentions. This line of reasoning is seriously flawed. Does anyone know why?

[Compare secrecy at the Philadelphia convention with government secrecy of our era, such as efforts by a Democratic Administration to hide evidence relating to scandals involving President Bill Clinton, and earlier efforts by a Republican Administration to hide evidence relating to the Watergate scandal involving President Richard Nixon. The latter secrecy was intended to perma-

