

Lesson Twenty-Eight

Amending the Constitution

LESSON IDEA

To show how the fear of federal power was squelched by the election of George Washington as President and the adoption of the Bill of Rights' restrictive amendments.

PREPARATION

Make copies of the Bill of Rights for each family member. Have a dictionary handy, and a copy of Your Rugged Constitution.

LIKE A NEWBORN CALF struggling to stand for the first time on four wobbly legs, in 1788 the new U.S. federal government began the transformation from mere words and concepts to a working body of lawmakers, executives, and judges. North Carolina and Rhode Island remained reticent about ratifying the Constitution, but each of the 11 states that had ratified by then began formulating procedures for electing Senators and Representatives, as well as the presidential electors who would choose the first President.

Does anyone know how the presidential electoral system worked in that initial election? [If not, ask a family member to look it up in Your Rugged Constitution, pages 114–116, and explain it to the entire family during the next evening's dinner hour.]

The choice for President was unanimous. George Washington captured every electoral vote. Even Patrick Henry, the politically powerful Virginian who viewed the Constitution as a danger to freedom, voted for him. Only one man was not wholeheartedly in favor of the result: Washington himself. He had repeatedly told friends that he had "no wish which aspires beyond the humble and happy lot of living and dying a private citizen on my own farm."

Anxious as he was to see the new government rise on the foundation of the Constitution, he had no apparent desire to become the first American President. He had served his country and its citi-

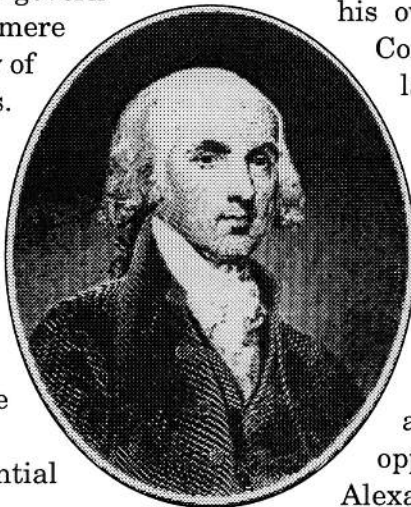
zens almost continuously since age 16. During the Revolutionary War, he had accepted the prodigious task of building an army, and for eight long years had kept it on its feet until victory was achieved.

The constant exposure to bad weather and inferior food, as well as endless days and months of fatigue, had aged him considerably. Financially, his resources were exhausted. As Commander-in-Chief of the American forces he had received no salary, but had drawn money for expenses from his own accounts in the hope that the Continental Congress would repay him later. With the war won and the Constitution ratified, he yearned for retirement to his Virginia home, where he could straighten out his business affairs and lead a quiet life.

But his friends and admirers gave him no peace. Letters flowed to Mount Vernon urging him to accept the presidency should the opportunity arise. The appeal from Alexander Hamilton, his former aide, was typical: "In a matter so essential . . . a citizen of so much consequence as yourself . . . has no option but to lend his services if called for."

Newspapers continually mentioned his name, and none other, as President-to-be. The July 4th celebration in 1788 became, in large part, a general call for his election. As the public demand grew, Washington reluctantly postponed his retirement plans and prepared to accept the inevitable.

ONE FACTOR that may have drawn him into public service once again was fear of what the anti-Federalists who opposed the Constitution might do to the new government were they elected to Congress in large numbers. James Madison, a fellow Virginian and ardent Federalist, had warned that the anti-Federalists



James Madison
"Father of the Constitution"

