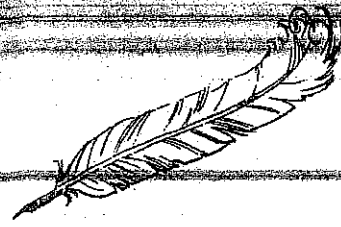


Message to Children

The Constitution for Kids

by Cathy Travis



Ever wonder what adults are talking about when they say things about the government? Or what it means when people say something is "constitutional"? Here's a way for you to set the adults straight.

When our country got started, there was a group of men called the "Founders." The Founders were people whose families came to this part of the world from Europe almost one hundred years before. They liked this place more than Europe, and they had a war to be independent.

They wanted to write down the rules and directions for a new and fair government, so they wrote the Constitution. These rules that they wrote down have been our guidelines (directions) for how to run the country for over two centuries. Just like we have rules for football, basketball or soccer, we have rules for running the government.

You may wonder what the rules are that everybody always seems to talk about and where they can be found. These are our rules, all in the U.S. Constitution. It has seven parts called Articles, some longer and harder to understand than others, plus twenty-seven additions called Amendments. Some of these amendments are also long and hard to understand.

On the left-hand side of the page are the actual words of the U.S. Constitution from 1787, so if somebody doesn't believe you, you can show them the words used in the real thing. There may still be some hard words in the translation on the right-hand side; they are listed in the back to tell you what they mean.

This is a wonderful country, and it is important for everyone to know what the rules are. If more people know these rules, our country will be a better place. And, the more people understand these rules, the more likely they are to participate in our government. If you know your rights, the Constitution will always work for you.

Help teach the adults what the Constitution actually says.

Cathy Travis

1787 — September 17, the Continental Congress adopts the Constitution of the United States.

1787 — September 28, the Constitution goes to the states for approval.

1788 — June 21, New Hampshire becomes the ninth state to ratify the new Constitution, making its adoption official.

1788 — July 2, Continental Congress steps aside for the new government. The U.S. Constitution begins governing.

Fast Fact

The U.S. Constitution is the shortest, and the oldest Constitution, of any government in the world.



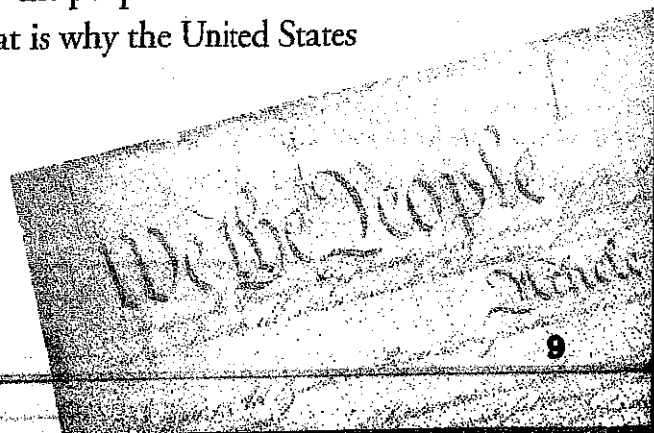
When the meetings of the Constitutional Convention followed strict rules of conduct, to make sure that everyone's opinion was heard.

The Declaration of Independence was signed. This meeting is known as the Constitutional Convention. At the convention, leaders drafted a new governing document called the Constitution.

Great experiment

The Constitution outlines a great experiment—the United States of America. In 1787, when the Constitution was written, the United States was only eleven years old. It was founded on the ideas of freedom and equality. The United States would not have rulers that got their position because they belonged to a particular family or had a great deal of money. Instead, leaders would be elected by the people of the nation. In those days, this was an unusual idea. That is why the United States is a kind of experiment.

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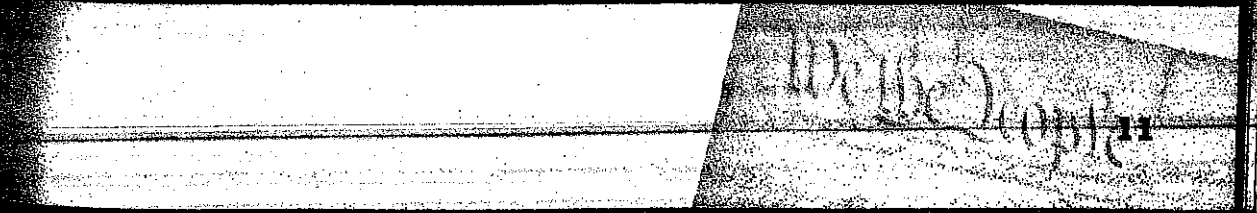


... of a federal government

... all of the delegates agreed that the convention should write a new constitution. This was because some of them, representing the feelings of their legislatures, feared a strong central government. The states had agreed to the Articles of Confederation earlier for this very reason—it gave the states more power than it gave the general government. Now, the delegates feared that state powers would be taken away and given to a federal government. Some of them even walked out on the convention in disgust.

The Constitution Convention met in the Assembly Room at Independence Hall, also known as the Philadelphia State House. The room has been **restored** to the way it looked in 1787.

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After the Revolutionary War most people in America were glad that they were no longer British. Still, they were not ready to call themselves Americans. The last thing they wanted was to become a nation. They were citizens of their own separate states, just as they had always been: each state different, each state proud of its own character, each state quick to poke fun at other states. To Southerners, New Englanders might be “no-account Yankees.” To New Englanders, Pennsylvanians might be “lousy Buckskins.” But to everyone the states themselves were all important. “Sovereign states,” they called them. They loved the sound of “sovereign” because it meant that they were their own bosses.

George Washington, however, scoffed at the idea of “sovereign states.” He knew that the states could not be truly independent for long and survive. Ever since the Declaration of Independence had been signed, people had referred to the country as the United States of America. It was about time, he thought, for them to act and feel united.

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In September 1774, when the First Continental Congress met, the common concern was Great Britain. Two years later, after the Declaration of Independence had been signed, the concern was that the country needed some kind of government. Not a fully developed government because of course they had their states. All they wanted were some basic rules to hold them together to do whatever needed to be done. So the Congress wrote the Articles of Confederation which outlined rules for a "firm league of friendship." In practice, however, the states did not always feel a firm need to follow any rules.

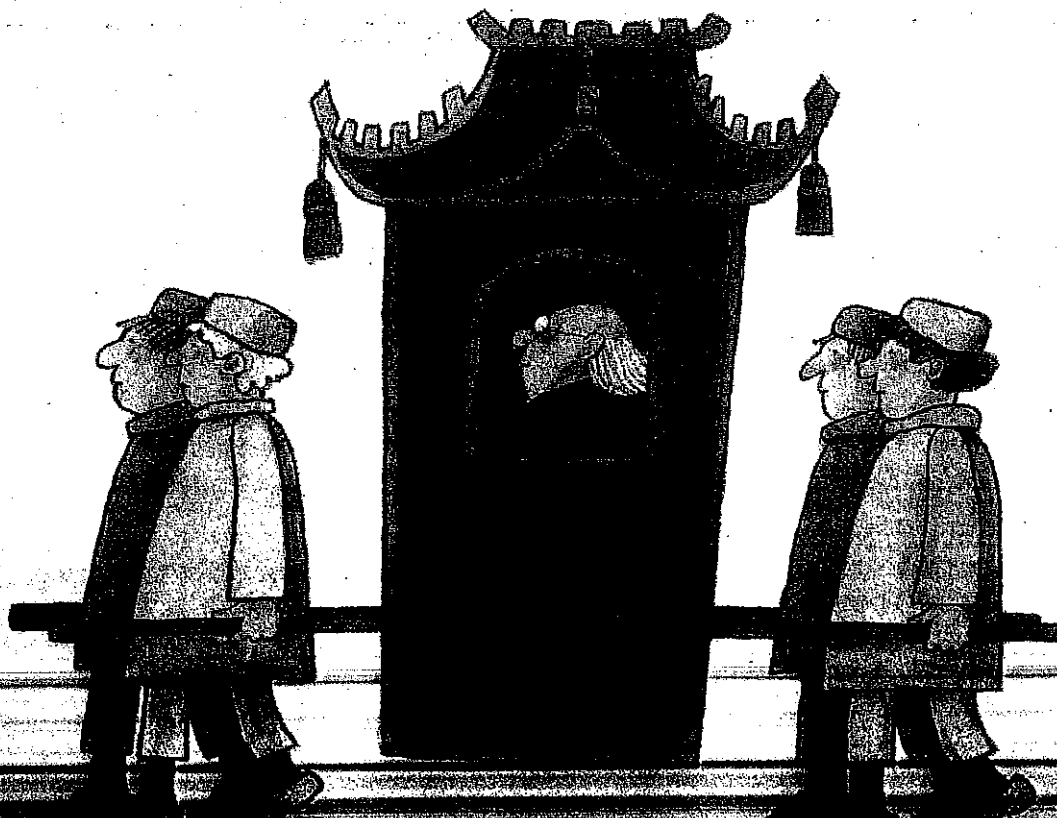
The Congress, for instance, could ask the states to contribute money to pay the country's debts, but if the states didn't feel like contributing, no one could make them. Congress could declare war but it couldn't fight unless the states felt like supplying soldiers. The trouble was that their president had no definite powers and the country had no overall legal system. So although the Congress could make all the rules it wanted, it couldn't enforce any of them. Much of the time the states didn't even bother to send delegates to the meetings.

By 1786, it was becoming obvious that changes were needed. People were in debt, a few states were printing paper money that was all but worthless, and in the midst of this disorder some people could see that America would fall apart if it didn't have a sound central government with power to act for all the states. George Washington, of course, was one who had felt strongly about this for a long time. Alexander Hamilton was another. Born and brought up in the Caribbean Islands, he had

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It was May 25th before delegates from enough states showed up. They blamed their delays on the weather, muddy roads, personal business, lack of money. Delegates from New Hampshire couldn't scrape up enough money to come until late July, but even so, they beat John Francis Mercer of Maryland. He sauntered into the State House on August 6th.

The most colorful arrival was that of Benjamin Franklin who at eighty-one was the oldest of the delegates. Because he experienced so much pain when he was bounced about in a carriage, Franklin came to the convention in a Chinese sedan chair carried by four prisoners from the Philadelphia jail. (He lived in the city so they didn't have far to carry him.)



They knew that there would be many arguments in this room, but they agreed that they didn't want the whole country listening in and taking sides. They would keep the proceedings a secret. So before every meeting the door was locked. Sentries were stationed in the hall. And even though it turned out to be a hot summer, the windows were kept closed. Why should they risk eavesdroppers? Members were not supposed to write gossipy letters home. Nor to answer nosy questions. Nor to discuss their business with outsiders. Benjamin Franklin was the one who had to be watched. He meant no harm but he did love to talk, especially at parties, so if he seemed about to spill the beans, another delegate was ready to leap into the conversation and change the subject.

For fifty-five men to keep a secret for four months was an accomplishment in itself. But they did. Of course this didn't prevent rumors from starting. Once it was rumored that the convention was planning to invite the second son of George the Third to become King of America. The delegates were furious. They might not be able to say what they were going to do, but they had no trouble saying what they were *not* going to do. And they were not inviting the second or third son of George the Third or of anyone else to be King of America.

