

LIBERTY FUND PRESENTS

A Design for Liberty:

The American Constitution



Teacher's Guide for the Film

INTRODUCING THE FILM:

The Constitution of the United States of America, our fundamental law, was completed and signed by George Washington and thirty-eight other Founding Fathers on September 17, 1787. That moment had been long in the making. Eleven years earlier the American people had declared their independence from Great Britain and had gone to war to secure the blessings of liberty for themselves and their posterity. Winning the war was difficult enough; providing adequate protection for liberty proved to be even more so. Under its first frame of government, the Articles of Confederation, the nation experienced one crisis after another. Dissolution of the Union and even anarchy—in which no one's freedom would be secure—seemed to many to be impending. In these circumstances, delegates to the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in May of 1787. Four months later they had drafted the document which has lived for two hundred years as both the symbol of, and the design for, liberty in America.

ABOUT THE FILM: VISUAL

This film tells the story of America's trials and tribulations from the signing of the Declaration of Independence to the signing of the Constitution. Visually, the movie brings the story to life and introduces the viewer to what eighteenth-century America actually looked like. There are shots of artifacts, such as the Liberty Bell, money of the time, clothing, weaponry, recruiting posters, and etchings by Paul Revere. There are scenes of several of the many historic sites that carefully have been preserved or restored, such as Mount Vernon, churches, homes, Valley Forge, Independence Hall, and portions of the town of Malden, Massachusetts. To depict the Patriots themselves and the historical events, the film draws upon the rich storehouse of paintings by great American artists of the time. These include:

JOHN TRUMBULL, CONNECTICUT (1756-1843)

Trumbull served during the Revolutionary War as a mapmaker on the staff of General Washington. In 1780 he went to London to study art but was imprisoned in retaliation for the execution of Major John Andre. When he was released and returned home, he began, at the urging of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, to paint scenes of the Revolutionary War. In 1818 Congress commissioned him to do four large paintings for the rotunda of the Capitol.

JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY, MASSACHUSETTS (1738-1815)

Copley went to London in 1774 and lived in England the rest of his life, being honored with election to the Royal Academy. His best and most famous works, however, are all scenes of the Boston of his youth.

CHARLES WILSON PEALE, MARYLAND

(1741-1827)

Peale served in the Philadelphia militia during the War, after which he opened a portrait gallery of Revolutionary heroes. He founded the Peale Museum in Independence Hall—the oldest art museum in America—and altogether, he painted more than 1100 portraits of contemporary Americans.

In addition, the film employs a number of shots of contemporary broadsides, pamphlets, and newspapers, including cartoons. The use of newspapers dramatizes an important fact about the United States of the time: that Americans, though scattered along the fringes of a wilderness, were a literate people (the literacy rate, in at least some of the colonies, was close to 90 percent, the highest in the world) who closely followed public events. There were at the time of Independence thirty-seven American newspapers; by the time of the ratification of the Constitution there were upwards of ninety, even though there were only five towns with more than 10,000 people. Thousands of these newspapers have come down to us in almost mint condition, for they were made entirely of rag (usually linen), whereas today's newspapers, made of wood pulp, tend to disintegrate in a matter of weeks.

ABOUT THE FILM: AUDIO

The script for the film was written by distinguished American historians who have devoted many years to study of the vast quantity of newspapers, public records, speeches, diaries, and personal correspondence which are preserved in such repositories as the National Archives, the Library of Congress, state and local historical societies, and state and local archives. The narrative thread of the story is in the words of these historians, but most of the script is in the form of direct quotations from Americans of the time. In short, the participants in the events described are speaking to the audience in their own words. In the order of their first appearance, they are:

THOMAS JEFFERSON, VIRGINIA

(1743-1826)

Jefferson, sometimes called the Father of American Liberty, was the author of the Declaration of Independence, governor of his state, and American minister to France. After the adoption of the Constitution, he became the first Secretary of State, the second vice-president, and the third president. He, like John Adams, died on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration, July 4, 1826. He indicated the achievements for which he wished to be remembered by having carved upon his tombstone that he had been "author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and father of the University of Virginia."

DAVID RAMSAY, SOUTH CAROLINA
(1749-1815)

After studying medicine under Benjamin Rush, Ramsay established a successful practice in Charleston, serving also in the state legislature and the Continental Congress. It was as a historian, however, that he earned his greatest fame, publishing a two-volume history of the Revolution in South Carolina (1785), a two-volume general history of the period (1789), a popular biography of Washington (1807), and several other works. He was shot and killed by a maniac shortly before the publication of his three-volume history of the United States.

JOSEPH WARREN, MASSACHUSETTS
(1741-1775)

Warren was one of the most outspoken leaders of the American cause before Independence. It was he who dispatched Paul Revere and William Dawes on their famous ride to notify Patriots in Lexington and Concord that British forces were being sent against them. On June 14, 1775, he was appointed major general of the American troops in Massachusetts, three days later he was killed at the Battle of Bunker Hill (Breed's Hill).

OLIVER ELLSWORTH, CONNECTICUT
(1745-1807)

Ellsworth, a Hartford Lawyer, had served six years in the Continental Congress before his appointment as a member of the Constitutional Convention. He was one of the more influential men in the convention, and, in the First Congress under the Constitution, he was the principal author of the Judiciary Act of 1789, which established the foundations of the federal court system that has existed ever since. He was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court from 1796-1801.

FISHER AMES, MASSACHUSETTS
(1758-1808)

Ames first attracted wide public notice when, at the age of twenty-nine, he proved to be the most eloquent and persuasive defender of the Constitution in the Massachusetts ratifying convention. He was subsequently elected to the House of Representatives where for four terms he was the strongest champion of the policies of Washington and Hamilton. It was he who, in 1789, provided the final working of the First Amendment's protection of freedom of speech, press, and religion, though he soon became an arch-enemy of the Amendment's main author, James Madison. His health was broken by a lung disease, and after a long illness he died on July 4, 1808.

JOHN DICKINSON, DELAWARE/PENNSYLVANIA
(1732-1808)

Dickinson was generally recognized as the foremost leader of the resistance to British violations of American rights after 1767, when he published a

tract called *Letters of a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (in which he developed the principles that were coined into the slogan, “No taxation without representation”). In 1776 he refused to sign the Declaration of Independence, but he immediately joined the Continental army and subsequently served the nation in a variety of capacities. In 1787, as a member of the Constitutional Convention, he helped to bring about some of the crucial compromises that made the Constitution possible.

RICHARD HENRY LEE, VIRGINIA
(1732-1794)

It was Lee, a fiery Patriot, who proposed the resolution (June 7, 1776) calling for a declaration of independence. He was one of those who thought the Constitutional Convention unnecessary and refused to attend it. He then opposed the ratification of the Constitution. Upon the organization of the new government, however, he served in the Senate where he was one of the more vocal advocates for the addition of a Bill of Rights.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON, NEW YORK
(1757-1804)

It is worth pointing out to viewers—who might think of the Founders as old graybeards—that Hamilton was a Patriot pamphleteer at seventeen, was Washington’s aide-de-camp at twenty, was a hero at Yorktown at twenty-four, and was only thirty at the time of the Constitutional Convention. With Madison and Dickinson, he was most responsible for the calling of the Convention, though he played only a minor role in it. His greatest contributions came afterward, as author with Madison and John Jay of the *Federalist Papers*, the best explanation of the Constitution ever written; and then as the first Secretary of the Treasury, in which office he, more than any other man, transformed the Constitution from a general blueprint into a living form of government.

JOHN ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS
(1735-1826)

Adams, one of the earliest and most articulate advocates of independence, became a political ally of Thomas Jefferson, and their friendship opened over the next decade. During most of that time, both men were in diplomatic service in Europe which prevented either from taking part in the Constitutional Convention. Though Adams’ one term as president (1797-1801) and Jefferson’s two terms (1801-1809), they were bitter political enemies, but afterward, they resumed their friendship in a famous correspondence which was an exchange of ideas based on their awesome knowledge and love of history and philosophy. Adams’ wife, Abigail, shared that knowledge and love, as did his children. When Adams and Jefferson died, Adams’ son, John Quincy Adams was serving as the sixth president of the United States.

BENJAMIN RUSH, PENNSYLVANIA
(1745-1813)

Rush, a physician and reformer, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a surgeon in the Continental Army. He subsequently became a crusader against slavery, liquor, tobacco, and capital punishment and a champion of free public schools. He is known for his heroic (if largely futile) services during the devastating epidemic of yellow fever that struck Philadelphia during the 1790s and for his authorship in 1812 of the first, and for many years the only, American textbook on psychiatry.

GEORGE WASHINGTON, VIRGINIA
(1732-1799)

Washington was truly the "Father of His Country": without his services as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, as president of the Constitutional Convention, and as first President of the United States, the country could scarcely have been born and hardly have survived. People followed Washington for many reasons. Not the least of these was that he looked like a leader of men: tall, splendidly formed, "the finest horseman of the age," he carried himself with a grace and dignity that marked him as the general even to those who had never seen him before. Another reason was that he appeared to lead a charmed life; he repeatedly braved enemy fire, and bullets pierced his clothes and cut horses from beneath him, but he was never wounded. Most importantly, he proved again and again that he could be trusted with power, that he was a man of unimpeachable integrity, that he always placed the interests of the nation first. In the eyes of almost everyone, Washington symbolized what was best in the American character.

RUFUS KING, MASSACHUSETTS
(1755-1827)

King, the son of a Loyalist, was nonetheless a Patriot himself. He served in the Continental Congress from 1784 to 1787, in which capacity he introduced the measure prohibiting slavery in the Northwest Territory. At first he opposed the idea of a constitutional convention, fearing that it would give "aristocrats" opportunity to subvert American liberty, but Shays' Rebellion shocked him, and it was he who introduced the resolution in Congress calling for the Convention. He was active in framing the Constitution and in promoting its ratification. Afterward he served in the Senate and as American minister to Britain. In 1816 he was the unsuccessful, and last, Federalist candidate for the presidency.

JAMES MADISON, VIRGINIA
(1751-1836)

Madison is often called the "Father of the Constitution," and though that designation overstates the case, he was one of the most important delegates in the Convention. He kept careful minutes of the debates, and his journal is

the best source we have in regard to the framing. As co-author of the Federalist Papers, he was instrumental in bringing about ratification, and then in the First Congress, he proposed the amendments which became the Bill of Rights. A small, frail, sickly man, Madison was extremely learned; and, despite his infirmities, he served eight years in the House of Representatives, eight as Secretary of State, and eight as President. He outlived all the other Framers.

JOEL BARLOW, CONNECTICUT
(1754-1812)

Barlow was one of the “Hartford Wits,” a group of young writers who set out to create a distinctive American literature. His main contribution, to that end, was a nine-volume poem called *The Vision of Columbus* in which he prophesied rising glory for the United States. He went abroad in 1788 and remained for nearly twenty years, sometimes in a diplomatic capacity. On his return home he participated in public life, and in 1811, President Madison sent him to France to negotiate a commercial treaty. He accompanied the French armies in the invasion of Russia and froze to death during Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow.

GEORGE MASON, VIRGINIA
(1725-1792)

Mason is best known as the author of the 1776 Virginia Bill of Rights, the first example of a bill of rights as we understand the concept. A man who much preferred private life to public life, Mason nonetheless answered when duty called and thereby earned prestige in Virginia that was not far below Washington’s. He believed firmly in 1787 that the Union must be strengthened, and he participated in the Convention for that reason. But he also believed that the Convention went too far. Accordingly, he refused to sign the Constitution and opposed its ratification. However, the adoption of the Bill of Rights overcame most of his misgivings.

LEADING A DISCUSSION

One of the most helpful parts of any film showing is the discussion that follows. You may want to use these discussion guides as the basis for your talk.

1. In the film, John Dickinson draws his definition of liberty from the Bible: “They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid.” Other definitions were also offered. How would you define liberty?
2. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote that all people “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” He derived this idea from the English philosopher John Locke, who insisted that people have “natural” rights to life, liberty and property. What are

rights? What rights do you have? Where do they come from? What duties and responsibilities do they carry with them?

3. The Founding Fathers created a republican form of government which John Adams defined as a government of laws, not of men. Why do we need laws? Does liberty mean that you can do anything you want to do? Can there be liberty without law? What can you do if you think a law is bad, unfair, unjust, or unconstitutional?
4. A republican form of government requires virtuous citizens, and George Washington served as a model of the virtuous citizen. Do we have such people in government today? Do we still have the duty, as citizens, to be virtuous so that we may all enjoy liberty? Whose job is it to teach the citizens to be virtuous—the family? the church? the school? the government? the news media?
5. The film defines the Constitution as “a fundamental law governing government itself.” James Madison described the problem that the Founders had faced. “In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men,” he wrote in Federalist number 51, “the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed, and in the next place oblige it to control itself.” In what ways does the Constitution seek to achieve this?
6. A Massachusetts Patriot is quoted as saying that, “Half our learning is from the epitaphs on the tombstones of the ancient republics.” The founders informed their actions through careful study of history, philosophy, and theology. What can we as students today learn from their history and heritage? What lessons should we pass on to our children and our children’s children?

SELECTED READINGS ON THE CONSTITUTION

The Framing of the Constitution of the United States, Max Farrand, (1913), (Yale, pap. 1962).

The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787, 4 volumes, Max Farrand, ed., (1911,1937), (Yale, pap. 1967).

E Pluribus Unum: The Formation of the American Republic, 1776-1790, Forrest McDonald, (Liberty Press, 1965).

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The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787, Gordon S. Wood, (University of North Carolina, 1969).

Consensus and Continuity, Benjamin E. Wright, Jr., (Norton, 1967).