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THE STORY OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES

HELEN PRAVDA

Since earliest history the desire for freedom has been uppermost in the minds of men. The wish for self-government has been the moving force in securing liberty for nations.

In looking up the history of various countries we find that their people all had a desire for independence. The Greeks had the first known form of democratic government, which, though limited, was a step toward the freedom of peoples. Next came the struggles for citizenship in Rome. Here men conceived the first clear idea of justice by legal process. This later became the first far-reaching system of laws governing the rights of peoples and of countries.

Then the barbarians came down from the North, and destroyed everything before them, save this form of legal process. The Roman government fell into ruin for five hundred years under the merciless rule of these barbarians.

Later there was a struggle in England for political freedom, and in 1215 they forced King John to sign the Magna Charta. This document gave to the common people rights which they had heretofore been denied.

In order that this freedom might be maintained, Parliament was born. This was England's first form of truly representative government.

Now that men were gaining political freedom, they also desired religious freedom. This was the hope that drew the Pilgrim Fathers to the free soil of America, where they wished to worship their God in peace. Here in America they found this freedom and established a colony. Gradually other colonies were established, and, feeling the yoke of England's oppression, they fought to make themselves free. On July 4, 1776, Thomas Jefferson and other brave patriots, signed the Declaration of Independence, which severed all relations of the colonists with England.

But after the great victory was won, it was plain to everyone that the new states needed some central government, though most of the people feared to trust one. However, after long discussion, Congress in 1777 finally agreed on a written constitution called the Articles of Confederation. These did not go into effect until four years later. They were used for a while, but soon proved weak and inefficient, and unable to serve the people's needs. The Articles gave Congress the power to make laws and levy taxes, but the trouble was that it could not enforce the laws and collect the taxes. There was no real control and the states soon began to quarrel among themselves. There was also much other trouble resulting from the inefficiency of these Articles. Several attempts were made to amend them so as to give Congress more power. But it was very hard to do this, because the

Articles of Confederation required that all the states must ratify an amendment before it became a law, and there was usually one state which opposed it.

People began to prophesy that the Union would break up altogether. Even Washington wrote, "I predict the worst consequences from a half-starved, limping government, always moving about on crutches, and tottering at every step." He felt, with other wise and patriotic leaders, that the only hope for a lasting union lay in forming a new and better Constitution.

But many of the people did not have courage enough to make a fresh start and create a new constitution, so in 1787 the states sent delegates to Philadelphia to try once more to amend the Articles of Confederation. Many of the leading men of that time were there—Washington, Franklin, Hamilton, Madison, and many others. These delegates set to work to revise the Articles of Confederation. They soon realized, however, that they were so unsatisfactory that it would be a waste of time to try to do anything with them, so they decided to write a new constitution.

There were many questions to be considered before framing this all-important document. One of the first of these was: "Should they create a strong central government, or should they continue as a group of independent states?" Washington, Hamilton, and many others were in favor of a strong central government, but there were some who believed in the ability of the states to govern themselves. There were also several other questions and much difference of opinion, but there was only one thing to be done, and that was to compromise. Everyone must be patient. They must settle things in the best way possible.

And so the convention labored on for several weeks, and the result of these earnest efforts, was a Constitution that stands today, as strong as the day it was written.

The finished work was a great improvement over the Articles of Confederation. The chief gain was that the three different powers of government were distinctly separated. These powers were the legislative, executive and judicial departments. Also, Congress was composed of two houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives, while before it was composed of only one. Now only two senators are chosen from each state and the representatives, according to population. Altogether it was so well planned that all the branches could depend upon one another and work together with the greatest harmony and efficiency.

The new Constitution provided that nine states must ratify it before it went into effect, and on June 21, 1788, New Hampshire, the ninth state, ratified the Constitution, and it then became the supreme law of our land.

Now that our fathers have given us this wonderful Constitution, let us each do our part to preserve it. In our hands lies the future of America. And, if we hold true to the trust which is thus placed upon us, our Constitution shall never fall, and the stars and stripes shall float forever over "the land of the free, and the home of the brave."