It must be admitted that a free people are the proper guardians of their rights and liberties; that the greatest men may err, and that their errors are sometimes of the greatest magnitude.

—Elbridge Gerry, 1787

The delegates were exhausted. For four long, hot months in Philadelphia, representatives of twelve of the American states had discussed, debated, and negotiated as they hammered out a new constitution for the country. It was now the 15th day of September 1787, and the delegates were putting the finishing touches on the document. As the day’s proceedings came to a close, Virginia delegates Edmund Randolph and George Mason voiced their objections to the Constitution. Then Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts stood to speak. There was a murmur among the delegates. Gerry was a difficult man who had seemingly objected during the proceedings to every proposal that he did not put forth. What would he say now? Gerry announced that he would withhold his signature from the document. He listed several flaws in the Constitution, which he said that he could overlook if the rights of the citizens were made secure under this proposed government. But these rights were not guaranteed, Gerry warned. He argued that the Congress as designed was too powerful, and he called for a second convention to revise the document. Several delegates groaned and muttered in frustration as Gerry returned to his seat.

Background
The son of a wealthy shipping magnate, Elbridge Gerry was born in Marblehead, Massachusetts, in 1744. After graduating from Harvard in 1762, he joined the family business. He soon came to see firsthand how British economic policy hurt American merchants. Gerry began to sympathize with the American patriot movement, which openly opposed British policy toward the colonies. In 1770, he supported a successful boycott of British tea. Gerry soon became well known among Marblehead’s citizens, who sent him to the colonial legislature two years later. There Gerry met Samuel Adams, the well-respected patriot leader from Boston, Massachusetts.

Revolution and Declaration
Adams recruited Gerry for the patriot movement. In 1774, Gerry became convinced that the colonies needed to declare independence. Marblehead’s citizens appointed Gerry to Massachusetts’ Committee of Correspondence. This committee mustered support and spread information for the patriot cause. The colonists soon realized that war with the mother country was likely. In the Massachusetts legislature, Gerry helped Adams and John Hancock oversee military preparations. He used his shipping connections to import gunpowder and other military supplies. He also loaned money—interest free—to the cause.

Gerry was selected to attend the Continental Congress in 1775. There he worked tirelessly to convince delegates to declare independence. In the process, he won the respect of fellow delegates like John Adams, cousin of Samuel Adams. The future president declared, “If every Man here was a Gerry, the Liberties of America would be safe against the Gates of Earth and Hell.”
But Gerry was also a stubborn and difficult man. He lacked a sense of humor and seemed to enjoy arguing. He often irritated even his allies, including John Adams, who complained that Gerry’s “obstinacy . . . will risk great things to secure small ones.” In 1779, Gerry stormed out of the Continental Congress in a rage after a dispute about payments for suppliers of the Continental Army. He would not return for three years.

**Constitutional Convention**

During his service in the Continental Congress, Gerry had signed the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation. After the Revolutionary War, Gerry served from 1783–1785 in the new Congress created by the Articles. In 1786, he left Congress and served in the Massachusetts legislature. The following year, the citizens of Massachusetts chose Gerry as a delegate to the national convention in Philadelphia that had been called to revise the Articles of Confederation.

At the convention, Gerry at first adopted a moderate stance between nationalists, who favored a strong central government, and states’ rights advocates. He chaired the committee that forged the Great Compromise. This agreement provided for equal representation of the states in the Senate and proportional representation in the House of Representatives. But Gerry again was combative and, in the words of a fellow delegate, “objected to everything he did not propose.”

Soon, Gerry began to fear that the national government was being given too much power. He worried that Congress in particular would be able to trample on the rights of the people and of the states. Gerry suggested that provisions be added to the Constitution limiting Congress’ authority. Two of these passed—namely, the prohibitions against ex post facto laws and bills of attainder. Gerry also insisted, along with George Mason, that a bill of rights be added to the document. The convention voted down this idea.

On September 15, 1787, as the Philadelphia Convention drew to a close, Gerry announced that he could not sign the Constitution. He believed it would create an all-powerful central government. He sent the Massachusetts legislature a letter outlining his reasons for this decision. Gerry and the Virginians George Mason and Edmund Randolph were the only delegates who stayed until the end of the convention but did not sign the Constitution.

Despite his refusal to approve the document, Gerry did not speak against it. He believed the Constitution was necessary to prevent the union of the states from falling apart. During the ratification debates in Massachusetts, he argued that the state should approve the Constitution only on the condition that amendments would be added as soon as possible. Massachusetts ratified the Constitution but also attached a list of recommended amendments.

**Congressman, Peace Commissioner, Governor, and Vice President**

Once the Constitution was approved in 1788, Gerry supported the new government. He was elected to the United States House of Representatives the following year. To the surprise of many, he supported Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton’s plan to create a national bank. This measure strengthened the federal government. Gerry left Congress and returned home in 1793 to care for his sick wife and children.

In 1797, John Adams chose Gerry as one of a three-member delegation to negotiate with the French government. Tensions between the United States and Napoleonic France were high. France was at war with much of Europe at the time. Napoleon refused to allow American ships to travel to European ports. Private ships licensed by the French government attacked and sank many American merchant ships. Adams hoped that Gerry, along with Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and John Marshall, could resolve the situation.
Tensions increased when three French officials—who became known as “X, Y, and Z” among American officials in order to guard their identity—demanded a bribe from the Americans before they would open negotiations. The American delegation was outraged. Pinckney and Marshall immediately left for the United States. But Gerry, hoping to continue the negotiations and avert a war between the two countries, stayed behind. Members of the Federalist Party in Congress criticized Gerry for his action, especially his alleged partiality to France. Finally, President Adams ordered Gerry to return to the United States. The event became known as the “X, Y, Z Affair,” and it tarnished Gerry’s reputation.

Spurned by the anti-French Federalists, Gerry turned to the Democratic-Republican (or simply, Republican) Party. He was elected governor of Massachusetts in 1810 and 1811 under the banner of this party. At the end of his second term in office, Gerry approved a controversial redistricting plan. The plan created new, irregularly shaped congressional voting districts designed to give Republicans an advantage in the elections for state senate. Angry Federalists dubbed the tactic “gerrymandering,” for the awkward, salamander-like shape of one of the districts. The term is still used today to describe the drawing of districts to favor one party.

Many Massachusetts voters resented the governor’s attempt to gerrymander the state’s districts. Gerry may have lost the 1812 gubernatorial race because of his political gamesmanship. His political career, however, was not over. That same year, President James Madison selected him to run as his vice president. Gerry accepted the offer.

Madison and Gerry were victorious in the election of 1812. By the time Gerry assumed his new post, the United States was at war with Great Britain. One of Gerry’s duties as vice president was to preside over the Senate. That body, like the American public, was sharply divided between pro-war Republicans and anti-war Federalists. Gerry was already in poor health—one observer described him as an “old skeleton”—and the political battles took their toll on him. In November 1814, Gerry collapsed and died on his way to the Senate.

Reading Comprehension Questions
1. Which historical documents did Gerry sign?
2. What did Gerry think about the Constitution when the delegates at Philadelphia completed the final version of the document? What stance did he take during the ratification debates in Massachusetts?
3. How did the term “gerrymandering” evolve?

Critical Thinking Questions
4. Gerry sometimes failed to consider carefully the consequences of his actions. Give an example of an instance in which Gerry could have chosen to act differently and thereby avoid the negative consequences of his action.
5. Imagine that you are a boyhood friend of Elbridge Gerry and that you are about to introduce him to John Adams at the Continental Congress. What can you tell Adams privately about Gerry in regard to his politics and personality before the two meet?
BY HIS OWN HAND: ELBRIDGE GERRY AND GERRYMANDERING

Fictional Map of Political Affiliations in Massachusetts around 1810

Legend
F = Group of Federalist voters
R = Group of Republican voters

Founders and the Constitution: In Their Own Words—Volume 1
By the time the delegates to the Constitutional Convention had gathered in Philadelphia in 1787, the American people had been accustomed for more than one hundred and fifty years to having most of their affairs managed first within the colonies and then in independent states. It was not surprising that the Articles of Confederation, the initial constitutional system for “The United States of America,” affirmed in its first article the general “sovereignty, freedom and independence” of the states. Beyond historical precedence, the commitment to state sovereignty drew support from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theorists such as Jean Jacques Rousseau who argued that the habits and virtues needed by a self-governing people can be cultivated only in small republics. In short, history and theory seemed to be on the side of a confederation of small American republics or states.

If the American people were inclined to favor state sovereignty, they also were interested in comfortable preservation—that is, in the enjoyment of both “safety and happiness,” to borrow from the Declaration of Independence. By the mid-1780s, it was clear to many Americans that state sovereignty created obstacles to comfortable preservation, not the least being the impediments to a smooth-functioning commercial system. Concerns about the effects on the country of competing fiscal and commercial policies in the different states led to the Annapolis Convention of 1786. While the delegates to this convention did not come up with a specific plan for fixing the commercial system, they petitioned the confederation congress to arrange for a constitutional convention that would reconsider the Articles of Confederation with the aim of improving interstate commerce.

James Madison, one of seven delegates chosen to represent Virginia at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, prepared a document on the history of confederacies during the months preceding the meeting. Events such as Shays’s Rebellion in Massachusetts and disputes over the commercial use of the Potomac River, along with his study of history, convinced him that a system based on state sovereignty was destined to fail. Madison worked with other members of the Virginia delegation on a plan for a basically national, rather than confederal, system of government. In addition to provisions for separate legislative, executive, and judicial branches, the “Virginia Plan” would have empowered Congress “to negative all laws passed by the several States, contravening in the opinion of the National Legislature the articles of Union; and to call forth the force of the Union against any member of the Union failing to fulfill its duty under the articles thereof.” The Virginia Plan proposed a national government that would be legally and functionally supreme over the states.

According to Madison, only a national system would be capable of protecting the fundamental interests and rights of the American people. Other delegates at the convention disagreed. Roger Sherman of Connecticut, for example, argued that “the objects of Union . . . were few” and that “the people are more happy [sic] in small than in large States.” Sherman was not alone in preferring a confederation of small republics to a national or unitary political system. Madison understood that he had to expose the weaknesses of the confederal model to save the Virginia Plan. Sherman helped him out on June 6 by conceding that some states were too small and, hence, subject to factious violence. Madison seized upon this argument. He responded that “faction & oppression” had “prevailed in the largest as well as the smallest” states, although less in the former than the latter.

The teaching for Madison was clear: large republics are more likely to provide “security for private rights, and the steady dispensation of Justice,” than small republics. This argument hit home with the delegates. Madison convinced them that what they wanted most from government, that is, protection for rights or republican liberty, could
best be achieved in a national system. Small republics, he argued, were actually bad for republican liberty, being hotbeds of factious division and violence. He summed up his position bluntly: “The only remedy is to enlarge the sphere, & thereby divide the community into so great a number of interests & parties, that in the 1st. place a majority will not be likely at the same moment to have a common interest separate from that of the whole or of the minority; and in the 2d. place, that in case they shd. have such an interest, they may not be apt to unite in the pursuit of it.” Here was the outline of the famous defense of the large republic that appears in Madison's Federalist Paper No. 10.

In the end, the delegates at the Constitutional Convention settled on a plan that combined national and confederal elements. To quote Federalist Paper No. 39: the proposed system “in strictness” was “neither national nor a federal Constitution, but a composition of both.” Madison's June 6 speech, however, insured that the new “compound” republic would have a national as opposed to a confederal tilt. This innovative governmental model, what came to be called the “federal” model, represented one of America's great contributions to the science of politics according to Madison. The model's national elements were evident not only in the creation of separate executive and judicial departments as well as proportional representation in the House of Representatives, but in the supremacy clause that affirmed that the Constitution as well as national laws enacted under its authority would constitute the supreme law of the land. The confederal elements appeared in the provision for equal state representation in the United States Senate (a feature especially desired by the small states) and state participation in the ratification of amendments. The addition of the 10th Amendment in 1791 provided added protection for state interests (“The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people”).

The defenders of the confederal model continued their attacks on the new system during the ratification debates that followed the convention. Patrick Henry of Virginia, for example, accused the delegates to the Federal Convention of violating their authorization by proposing to establish a “consolidated” government based on the consent of the people, rather than the states. For Henry, the new constitutional system would endanger the rights and privileges of the people along with the “sovereignty” of the states. Richard Henry Lee, one of the Anti-Federalists, shared Henry's fear that a large republic would not be hospitable to liberty and natural rights. Like many other opponents of the Constitution, Lee also argued that republican liberty can be preserved only by a virtuous citizenry and that only small republics are capable of nurturing civic and moral virtues.

The fact that the document that issued from the Federal Convention did not include a bill of rights seemed to lend support to the charge by Patrick Henry and others that the proposed governmental system would promote neither the happiness nor the liberty of the people. In fact, several delegates to the convention, including George Mason of Virginia and Eldridge Gerry of Massachusetts, were sufficiently troubled by the absence of a bill of rights that they departed without adding their signatures to the document. Gerry also worried that the new government would not adequately represent the people and that its powers were not well defined. When it was clear that the opponents of the plan would not accept the argument that the framework set out by the delegates provided for a limited government of enumerated powers that would be incapable of emasculating natural rights and liberties, an agreement was reached during the ratification period to add amendments that would guarantee, among other things, freedom of speech and religion, trial by one's peers, and protection against unreasonable searches and seizures.

The federal system or compound republic crafted by the Framers was an ingenious response to the demand for both effective or competent government on the one side, and rights-sensitive government on the other. The decision to divide power among (federalism) and within (checks and balances) several governments positioned the American people to enjoy the benefits of a large republic (e.g., strong defense against foreign encroachments, national system of commerce, etc.) while still retaining significant control over their day-to-day affairs within the states. The states, and not the national government, were entrusted with the “police powers,” that is, the
authority to protect the health, morals, safety and welfare of the people. It is worth noting that Madison was quite content to entrust the police powers to the states—he never desired that the United States have a unitary system of government.

Ratification of the Constitution in 1791 hardly put an end to the debate between the advocates of state sovereignty or small republicanism and the proponents of national sovereignty and the large republic. The concerns of James Madison and Patrick Henry, for example, are never far from the surface of contemporary debates about the power of the federal government to impose regulations on the states under the Constitution’s commerce clause or the Fourteenth Amendment. There is considerable evidence, however, that the tension between these positions not only adds vitality to the constitutional system, but has been critically important to the advancement of both national security and equality in the enjoyment of fundamental rights. The federal arrangement that was crafted by the delegates at the Federal Convention of 1787 has long been recognized as one of the principal models of a modern democratic system of government.

David E. Marion, Ph.D.
Hampden-Sydney College

Suggestions for Further Reading
Thomas Jefferson accurately represented the convictions of his fellow colonists when he observed in the Declaration of Independence that a government, to be considered legitimate, must be based on the consent of the people and respect their natural rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Along with other leading members of the founding generation, Jefferson understood that these principles dictated that the government be given only limited powers that, ideally, are carefully described in written charters or constitutions.

Modern theorists like John Locke and the Baron de Montesquieu had been making the case for limited government and separation of powers during the century prior to the American Revolution. Colonial Americans were quite familiar with Locke’s argument from his *Two Treatises of Government* that “Absolute Arbitrary Power, or Governing without settled standing Laws, can neither of them consist with the ends of Society and Government....” Locke added that the reason people “quit the freedom of the state of Nature [is] to preserve their Lives, Liberties and Fortunes.” Civil society has no higher end than to provide for the safety and happiness of the people, and this is best done under a system of known rules or laws that apply equally to “the Rich and Poor, . . . the Favorite at Court, and the Country Man at plough.” For his part, Montesquieu argued that only where governmental power is limited in scope, and then parcelled out among different departments, will people be free from oppression. Constitutional government, for modern natural rights theorists, should be limited government dedicated to the comfortable preservation of the people—that is, to their security, freedom, and prosperity.

John Adams echoed the beliefs of many Americans when he argued that only by creating a balance of forces within the government could the people hope to escape despotism and misery. An unchecked legislature, he observed, would be capable not only of making tyrannical laws, but of executing them in a tyrannical manner as well. In his famous draft of a constitution for the commonwealth of Massachusetts, Adams declared that the “legislative, executive and judicial power shall be placed in separate departments, to the end that it might be a government of laws, and not of men.” This document, along with his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, containing a strong case for checks and balances in government, were well known to the delegates who attended the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

James Wilson, one of the foremost legal scholars of the founding period and a delegate from Pennsylvania at the Constitutional Convention, agreed with Adams’ insistence that the power of government should be divided to the end of advancing the peace and happiness of the people. In the words of Wilson, “In government, the perfection of the whole depends on the balance of the parts, and the balance of the parts consists in the independent exercise of their separate powers, and, when their powers are separately exercised, then in their mutual influence and operation on one another. Each part acts and is acted upon, supports and is supported, regulates and is regulated by the rest.”

Both the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution of the United States provided for governments with limited powers. As John Jay had discovered as America’s secretary of foreign affairs, the power of the central government was severely limited under the Articles and, hence, could be trusted to a unitary legislative department. Fear of governmental tyranny and a desire to preserve the power enjoyed by the new states resulted in the creation of a central government that could not effectively oversee interstate commerce or do other things that were critical to ensuring the safety and happiness of the people. In a letter to Edmund Randolph at the end of 1786, George Washington bemoaned the “awful situation of our affairs” which he attributed to “the want of sufficient power...
in the federal head.” Washington quickly joined the movement to create a new governmental system that was equal to “the exigencies of Union,” to quote from the instructions given the delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

The Constitution of 1787 grew out of a plan drafted largely by James Madison during the winter and spring before the Convention. The “Virginia Plan” proposed a central government that was supreme over the states. Evidence that the national government was to be entrusted with considerable power could be found in the provisions for a bicameral legislature and independent executive and judicial departments.

The delegates who attended the Constitutional Convention were sufficiently versed in modern political theory to understand that they would have to divide the power of the national government if they intended to entrust it with real authority over the lives of the people and the states. They understood the dangers of imparting considerable political power to a unitary sovereign. In this connection, there was never any doubt in their minds that they should create a government of “delegated and enumerated” powers, that is, that the government should only be entrusted with specified (enumerated) powers that derived directly from the people. While they worried about the “turbulence and follies” of democracy, they recognized that government had to be based on the consent of the people to be legitimate.

The Virginia Plan anticipated the bicameral legislature and independent executive and judicial departments found in the United States Constitution today. Building on Madison’s model, the delegates assigned responsibilities to the departments based on their peculiar characteristics. The six-year term of senators, for example, seemed to make this a proper institution to involve in foreign policy (e.g., ratification of treaties) since senators would have more time than members of the House of Representatives to acquaint themselves with international affairs and their longer terms and larger constituencies (entire states) also would give them more freedom to attend to matters other than the immediate interests of constituents back home. The House of Representatives was entrusted with the important power to initiate revenue (taxation) bills precisely because the members of this chamber are tied so closely to the people by short terms and small districts.

In addition to matching powers and governmental responsibilities, the delegates were careful to position each department to “check and balance” the other departments. Examples are the executive’s veto power, the congressional impeachment power, and the judicial review power entrusted to the Supreme Court, the only national court formally established by the Constitution. Although in good Lockean fashion the legislative department was designed to be the preeminent department, it was still subjected to checks by the other branches of the government. Separation of powers as well as the system of checks and balances were devices for reducing the threat of governmental tyranny, not excluding legislative tyranny.

However, the constitutional arrangement, put into its final wording by Gouverneur Morris, was not driven entirely by a desire to eliminate the threat of tyrannical government. The system of separated and divided powers also was intended to promote competence in government. The president can employ his veto not only to check legislative action that he considers irresponsible, but to provoke Congress to improve a legislative enactment. The Senate can use its authority to ratify presidential nominations of cabinet officers or judges to ensure that qualified candidates are named to fill these positions.

Writing in Federalist No. 9, Alexander Hamilton identified the principle of separated and divided powers, along with checks and balances, as among the inventions of the new science of politics that had made republican government defensible. Madison described in Federalist No. 51 the benefits of the governmental arrangement represented in the new Constitution: “In the compound republic of America, the power surrendered by the people is first divided between two distinct governments, and then the portion allotted to each subdivided among distinct and separate departments. Hence a double security arises to the rights of the people. The different governments will control each other, at the same time that each will be controlled by itself.” Significantly, Anti-Federalists as well as Federalists agreed that governmental powers should be limited and that these powers should be subject to internal as well as external checks.

**Limited Government**
It is important to emphasize that the Framers settled on an arrangement that divided yet blended the legislative, executive, and judicial powers. This facilitates interdepartmental checking while promoting mature deliberation. Their aim was to create a decent and competent democracy, something beyond mere non-tyrannical government. They placed the whole of the government, and even the people, under constitutional limitations. The Constitution is the supreme law of the land, not the enactments of Congress or the order of the president or the momentary will of the people. As Chief Justice Marshall declared in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), “The distinction between a government with limited and unlimited powers is abolished, if those limits do not confine the persons on whom they are imposed, and if acts prohibited and acts allowed, are of equal obligation.” Even the desires of the people are held in check by the Constitution. The political system still meets the criteria of democratic government, however, since the people hold the power, through their representatives, to amend the Constitution.

The paradigm of constitutional government embraced by the American people in 1787, that is, limited government based on the consent of the people and committed to the protection of fundamental rights, has become the dominant model throughout the world. The rhetoric of rights, whether couched in the language of natural rights or human rights, is universally appealing. Also universally accepted is the argument that rights are most secure when governmental powers are limited in scope and subject to internal and external checks.

David E. Marion, Ph.D.
Hampden-Sydney College

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**Suggestions for Further Reading**


