Richard Henry Lee

Handout A—Richard Henry Lee (1732–1794)

1. Lee was an outspoken opponent of the international slave trade. His first official act in the Virginia House of Burgesses was to introduce a bill that proposed “to lay so heavy a duty on the importation of slaves as to put an end to that iniquitous and disgraceful traffic within the colony of Virginia.” Lee also condemned the institution of slavery itself. Blacks, Lee declared, were “equally entitled to liberty and freedom by the great law of nature.” He warned that slaves would rebel if they “observed their masters possessed of a liberty denied to them.” Nevertheless, Lee did not free any of his slaves. He simply could not afford to do so.

2. On June 7, 1776, Lee introduced a resolution that declared “that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States.” This led to the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. Lee’s resolution was adopted by Congress on July 2, 1776.

3. In the Federal Farmer, Lee criticized the Constitution’s centralization of powers in the federal government and its lack of a bill of rights. He warned that the Constitution would destroy the states and create a “consolidated” government in which all power was dangerously concentrated in one place. Lee wished instead to preserve a federal system, in which power is divided between the national and state governments.

4. Answers will vary. Some students may say that Lee did not want anyone to know he was the author of the Federal Farmer. Anonymous authorship was a common tactic of political pamphleteers at the time. This was a way to keep people focused on the arguments and not the author of the pamphlet. Some students may suggest that the pseudonym “Federal Farmer” reflects Lee’s identity as a plantation owner who favored the principle of federalism. Lee probably also wished to imply that the views expressed in the pamphlet were held by all virtuous farmers of America.

5. Answers will vary. Some students may agree with Lee that no constitutional procedures or laws can stop corrupt officeholders from doing evil. Others may disagree with Lee and argue that a well-designed constitution can reign in evil-doers by pitting the interest of one against the other. (Madison famously expressed this latter idea in Federalist No. 51, in which he argued that “ambition must be made to counteract ambition.”)

Handout B—Vocabulary and Context Questions

1. Vocabulary
   a. united
   b. vicinity
   c. incapable of being taken away
   d. openly, clearly
   e. discovered, found out
   f. determined
   g. supports, buttresses

2. Context
   a. The document was written in 1787–1788.
   b. The document was written in Virginia.
   c. Richard Henry Lee is the author of the document.
   d. The document is a series of essays/letters.
   e. The purpose of the document was to convince Americans not to ratify the Constitution.
   f. The audience was Americans in every state.
Handout C—In His Own Words:
Richard Henry Lee on the Constitution
a. Statements of Lee’s principles: Excerpts B, C, D, F, G, I
b. Criticisms of the proposed Constitution: Excerpts A, E, H, J

Topic/main idea of each excerpt:
A The Constitution will place too much power in the central government.
B The two ingredients for good government are representation of the people and trial by jury.
C People’s rights cannot be taken away and should be the foundation of the Constitution.
D “Wise and honest” administration of government is more important than the form of government; constitutions should not give men the opportunity to do evil.
E The Constitution gives Congress unlimited power to tax.
F Liberty is the freedom to enjoy life and work without too many restrictions by the government.
G All power lies with the people.
H The proposed government will grow too large and too powerful.
I Virtue and good laws are mutually supportive.
J The proposed government will be run by a few men.

JAMES MADISON

Handout A—James Madison (1751–1836)
1. Madison pressed for a meeting of the states to discuss amending the Articles of Confederation. He prepared his ideas for a new Constitution even before the states met. Many of Madison’s ideas were embodied in the Virginia Plan, which the final version of the constitution closely resembled. Madison played a major role in the debates as the convention proceeded. He spoke often in support of his ideas and designed compromises to break gridlocks. After the convention, Madison joined with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay in composing the Federalist Papers, a series of newspaper essays that defended the Constitution. He also took a leading role in support of the Constitution at the Virginia Ratifying Convention. As a member of the House of Representatives, he guided a bill of rights through Congress.

2. Madison believed that it was crucial to separate power within the central government. This system of checks and balances would prevent any faction from seizing control of the government. Similarly, the proper division of power between the national and state governments, a novel concept called “federalism,” would preclude the dangerous concentration of power in any one place.

3. First, he argued that the rights of the people were already implied in the Constitution; second, he worried that any such listing of rights would surely omit some rights held by the people; and third, he believed that written lists of rights were not effective in protecting the liberty of the people.

4. Madison would have been deeply disappointed because he had worked so hard to fashion a new constitution for the United States. He likely would have been concerned that the nation was in danger of collapse. Perhaps he would have tried to organize another convention or at least would have tried to have the Articles of Confederation amended.

5. Answers will vary.

Handout B—Vocabulary and Context Questions
1. Vocabulary
a. motivated
b. contrary, opposed