

"Wise Men Raised Up"

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Ensign

June 1976

pages 27-32

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In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord said I that he had "raised up ... wise men" for the I" very purpose" of writing the Constitution of A the United States. (D&C 101:80.) President George Albert Smith added, "I am saying to you that to me the Constitution of the United States of America is just as much from my Heavenly Father as the Ten Commandments." (*Conference Report*, April 1948, p. 182.) President Wilford Woodruff, seventy-eight years ago, reported that a tithe of those "wise men," those who had also signed the Declaration of Independence, appeared in the St. George Temple with George Washington at their head, and "demanded" temple ordinances. (*Conference Report*, April 10, 1898, pp.89-90.)

Who were the men who wrote the Constitution? What personal characteristics qualified them for the task of creating a document which the Lord says he "established"? (D&C 101:80.)

We can divide the fifty-five men who attended the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 into three groups. First, there were those who wanted a strong central government; their leaders were James Madison, James Wilson, Gouverneur Morris, Robert Morris (not related), and Alexander Hamilton. They believed that the states had already demonstrated their inability to survive as a loosely knit confederation and that governmental power must be centralized or America would be split into small, warring nations as was Europe.

Second, at the other end of the political continuum were Elbridge Gerry, Roger Sherman, William Patterson, and Luther Martin. This group feared the overpowering control of a strong national government above all else and felt that the states were the only place to trust the bulk of governmental power. They believed that the federal government's chief function should be to protect the United States from foreign nations and wanted to limit the federal government to regulating foreign trade and to maintaining an army.

In the middle was a third group led by George Mason, John Dickinson, Oliver Ellsworth, and John Rutledge. This group wanted a strong central government, but also believed that the states must play an important role in the affairs of their own citizens.

There were two men whose roles in the Convention were so significant that they must be considered separately. One, George Washington, was elected president of the Convention and therefore did not participate in the debates except as a moderating influence. The other was the aged Benjamin Franklin, whose role was to mold divergent opinions into a working compromise.

These men were so revered by their countrymen that their very presence gave the Convention's work a stamp of approval.

Three absent men had a great effect upon those who were there. One, John Adams, then ambassador to England, had just written a two-volume work on the nature of representative government. This book had been carefully read by almost all members of the Convention and had a profound effect upon their thinking. The second was Thomas Jefferson, ambassador to France. Jefferson was a good friend of many men at the Convention and his ideas were often represented in their attitudes. The third was Samuel Adams, whose hatred for a strong centralized government had been a major "cause" of the Revolutionary War.

The wise philosophical differences between delegates are typified by two members, Elbridge Gerry and Robert Morris. Gerry, a close friend of Samuel Adams and James Madison's future vice-president of the United States, feared governmental power. Only four years before, as a member of the Continental Congress, Gerry had nearly ruined his health in a struggle to prevent Morris, then superintendent of finance, from acquiring nearly dictatorial powers in the United States. Now Morris was eager to see the Constitutional Convention create the kind of government that would again provide him and his associates with that power. Gerry feared such power above all else. Each had felt bitter political defeat from the other. Now they faced each other again.

The Philadelphia summer of 1787 was stifling hot. The members of the Constitutional Convention were so determined that their work would be free from outside pressures that one of their first rules prohibited talking with any outsider about Convention proceedings. To prevent some enterprising newspaper reporter from crouching below an open window and taking notes, the doors and windows were locked. No breeze softened the oppressive heat of Constitutional Hall or cooled the rising tempers of its occupants.

Few would have supposed that a worthy document could ever be produced under such difficult circumstances. Yet that was the situation in which the Founding Fathers did their work. Let us now examine the characteristics they had in common which qualified them for their task.

The framers of the Constitution were mostly young men -- aggressive and energetic. Their average age was forty-four. That included Benjamin Franklin, who was eighty-one years old and at least fifteen years the senior to everyone else. Five of the delegates were in their twenties. Many others, including James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, were in their thirties. James Wilson, Luther Martin, and Oliver Ellsworth were between forty-one and forty-five. George Washington and a few others were fifty-five. Only four were sixty or older.

The Founding Fathers were well educated. Of the fifty-five, thirty-one had been to college, and these included all of the active participants. William Samuel Johnson of Columbia and Abraham Baldwin of Georgia were college presidents; James Wilson, George Wythe, and William C. Houston were or had been college professors; and a dozen others had taught grammar school at one time or another. James McClurg and Hugh Williamson were physicians. Four of the delegates had studied law at the prestigious Inns of Court in London.

Yet they were significantly more than scholars—they were men of wisdom. "In no other period of history," writes Edmund Morgan, "would it be possible to find in politics five men of such intellectual stature as Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson; and there were others only slightly less distinguished."¹

His point is well taken. In 1740, a mere generation before the Revolution, the intellectual life of America was dominated by clergymen; by 1840, a generation or so after the Revolution, it would be dominated by scientists and inventors. Only for the brief span of a single lifetime would America's statesmen and her brightest thinkers be the same men.

They had at their fingertips the best wisdom of their age, for they were in constant touch with the exciting minds of the Enlightenment: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume, Pope, Mandeville, Locke, and Adam Smith.

In those days, no education could be considered complete without a thorough background in ancient and modern history. The Founding Fathers were conversant in the history and philosophy of the Bible, the Greek democracies, the Roman republic, and the British constitutional system. Their study and their experience combined to qualify them for their role in the Convention by preparing them to test their theories against the whole history of mankind's struggle for freedom.

The Founding Fathers were men of affairs. They had learned from experience to be down-to-earth, practical men. Most of the Southerners owned large plantations. George Mason, with 5,000 acres, was one of the most prosperous farmers in America. Pierce Butler was both planter and merchant. Their experience with the land had taught them to pay close attention to the myriad daily details of plowing, planting, harvesting, milling, marketing, and the like.

Their Yankee counterparts included many wealthy merchants who had built their success on careful attention to details. Boston's Elbridge Gerry began as a shoemaker and became one of the wealthiest men in Massachusetts. Pennsylvania's Robert Morris had once been a shopkeeper. Yet during the Revolutionary War he proved to be so talented at the art of high finance that he dominated both the politics and the economy of America by the time the Revolution ended.

Most of the Constitutional delegates were lawyers; eight were judges. All were accustomed to making decisions that affected the courses of other men's lives. Each played important and complex roles in society. For example, Benjamin Franklin had often made decisions with international implications. He had associated with kings and generals, spies and pirates. He had little formal education, but he was one of the most learned men in America. He was printer, inventor, politician, wit, scientist, statesman, sage, and all-purpose, public-spirited citizen.

The framers of the Constitution were men of brilliance—but not the ivory-tower sort. They were practical-minded men who understood the enormity of their task and conducted themselves with a studied determination to succeed.

The Convention delegates were natural leaders. A look at their individual careers shows

that each of them had been elevated by his peers to a position of prominence. In their day, many politicians neither campaigned nor actively solicited public office. They believed that an election should be an expression of public trust and were themselves recipients of that kind of trust.

The Founding Fathers were not so much the representatives" as they were the "leaders" of their constituents. For example, a group of Benjamin Harrison's constituents gave him the following "instructions" as he departed for the Continental Congress in 1774: "You assert that there is a fixed intention to invade our rights and privileges; we own that we do not see this clearly, but since you assure us that it is so, we believe the fact." The people, in other words, trusted Harrison implicitly and although they could not share his personal concern, were ready, as they put it, "to support you in every measure you shall think proper to adopt." 2 Imagine such a mandate in our own day!

Harrison was not alone in enjoying nearly absolute confidence. There is probably no better example of trust to be found in history than that bestowed on George Washington.

During the Revolutionary War, Washington had control of the army and may have been able to use its power for his own political gain. Indeed, after the fighting had ended, some men tried to use the army to make Washington king. When Washington learned of this, he went to Newburgh, Connecticut, to speak to the army officers.

Washington was not an orator. Years later when he gave his first inaugural address as president of the United States, he delivered the speech so poorly that few even knew what he said until the next day when it was published in the newspapers. Then it was hailed as a great speech. In Newburgh it was different. When one reads the speech, it does not seem so overwhelming-he simply reminded them that they had been fighting for their freedom and said that he would "spurn" any attempt to distort that freedom. But his simple speech "drew tears" from the war-hardened officers who heard him and dissolved the conspiracy.³

It speaks well of Washington that those who wanted a king trusted his ability to be king but that is only half the story. Several years later, when the new Constitution was being debated, many people feared it gave too much power to the president. One reason they were willing to vote for the ratification of the Constitution was because they knew that Washington would become our first president and believed they could trust him with that much power.

Throughout his career Washington was aware of the significance of the role he played. "It has been a kind of destiny that has thrown me upon this service," he once confided to his wife. "I shall hope that my undertaking it is designed to answer some good purpose."⁴

This is essentially the story of the framers of the Constitution; a kind of destiny had placed them at the helm. Half of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention had been members of the Continental Congress. Nearly half had been officers in the army during the Revolutionary War. Many, as noted, were lawyers and judges. Six had signed the Declaration of independence. Two had signed the Articles of Confederation. Sixteen had been or were later state governors. More than half would be elected to the United States Congress. Two were to become president and one would be vice-president. Two were to be chief justices of the Supreme Court.

As the natural leaders of their society, they found themselves in a remarkably strong position to undertake the task before them.

The Convention delegates had few illusions about human nature. They understood man's petty jealousies and competition for power. They realized the political importance of wealth—that poor men seek power to get rich, and that rich men seek power for power's sake. Above all, they knew that a system of government which permitted any man or group of men to rise to unchecked political dominance would invite a tyranny. They fought the Revolution to throw out one such government; they had no intention of creating another.

Thus, much of the debate at Philadelphia was concerned with the problem of governmental power and how to hold it in check. Some of the delegates believed that the answer lay in keeping power close to the people in the various state governments. Others at the Convention, believing that the common people were politically incompetent, would have trusted all power to the federal government, far removed from popular whims and passions. This group insisted that the government be so constructed that the rich and the wellborn could prevent a popular majority, inflamed by some demagogue, from getting the upper hand. Yet, even they admitted that unchecked power in the hands of the elite, however enlightened or benevolent, would invite usurpation and tyranny.

So the opinion of the Convention struck a kind of balance between those who had no respect for local government and those who could not trust federal power. In the end they worked out a compromise that balanced each part of the society against the other so that neither could get control. That is why the national legislature was made bicameral, with a House of Representatives favoring the common people and a Senate favoring the elite. The same kind of balance was used in a geographic way, offsetting the interests of one state or region by the interests of all others so that no state or region could rise to a position of dominance. It was as though sin and folly were somehow being used to cancel one another out.

The framers of the Constitution thus demonstrated that they were close enough to the hard realities of human life to understand what was going on and deal with it intelligently. This ability contrasted markedly to that of revolutionaries in some other countries whose ideals were too often divorced from the facts of life. The really amazing thing about the Founding Fathers is not that they knew all of this, but that they could know it and somehow retain a measure of innocence and optimism. They had an almost sublime confidence in the power of human reason to overcome the base and mortal within man.

The Founding Fathers were men of vision and hope. George Washington expressed all of their attitudes when he wrote, "In the first place it is a point conceded, that America, under an efficient government, will be the most favorable Country of any in the world for persons of industry and frugality..."⁵ They were all aware that they must not create a government which would stifle the individual enterprise of its people. They believed that America's economic and cultural development depended upon the government they created.

John Adams predicted, "Many hundred years must roll away before we shall be corrupted. Our pure, virtuous public spirited, federative republic will last forever, govern the

globe and introduce the perfection of man." 6

Political freedom does not exist in a vacuum. The framers of the Constitution believed that political freedom would foster excellence in literature, the arts, science, and all other human achievements. Thomas Jefferson may have said it best of all: "We have spent the prime of our lives in procuring [for the youth of America] the blessing of liberty. Let them spend their lives in showing that it [freedom] is the great parent of science and of virtue; and that a nation will be great in both, always in proportion as it is free."

The Framers were religious men-in their own way But we must be careful about making them religious in ways they were not.

There is a tradition among many that the Constitutional Convention began each day with prayer. That is not true. At one point, when their debate was exceedingly hot and Franklin feared that the Convention might fall apart on account of its intensity, he suggested they have a prayer. Since there was no clergyman in the Convention, they would have had to hire an outsider to come in and say the prayer. But Alexander Hamilton pointed out that the Convention had been in session for some time, and if it sent for a preacher, it now would be taken as a public announcement of deadlock or imminent failure. In the end, someone oh-served that the Convention had no money with which to employ a minister anyway, so the matter was dropped and no official prayer was ever pronounced at the Constitutional Convention.

That does not mean, however, that the individual members did not pray. Only a minority of the Founders, such as James McHenry, who was president of the first Bible Society in Baltimore, considered themselves "religious" men in the sense that they attended a church. Most of the Convention's leaders were Deists. These men, like Washington, Madison, and Jefferson, believed that the world had been organized by a Divine Creator. They recognized his majesty and glory as reflected in the order and beauty of his creations, but they did not believe that the organized religions of their time represented the omnipotent power, majesty, or wisdom of this great Creator. Their political enemies often called them atheists, but such a characterization was false and slanderous. These framers of the Constitution saw man's intellect and his ability to act for himself as the surest evidence of the wisdom and power of a Divine Creator. Consequently, they viewed any infringements upon the freedom of that intellect as the most flagrant obstructions of the divine purpose. Thomas Jefferson expressed this philosophy in this single sentence: "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."5

The writings of the Founding Fathers overflow with references to God and the divine nature of man. Freedom was their watchword, and reverence for the individual was their driving principle. In the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord says that he raised up these "wise men" to establish a government which would nurture and defend individual freedom, "that every man may act in doctrine and principle... according to the moral agency which I have given unto him." (D&C 101:78.) The fundamental philosophy of the Founding Fathers was very consistent with that purpose.

The Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith that he had "raised up unto this very

purpose wise men" to write the Constitution which he "suffered to be established and [which] should be maintained for the rights and protection of all flesh." (D&C 101:80,77.)

The creation of such a government was a necessary prerequisite to the restoration of the gospel. There would have been little point in the Lord's establishing his church among people who were not free to accept it. For a thousand years he had carefully prepared the world for the restoration of the gospel, and the American Constitutional Convention was one of the final events in that preparation.

The writing of the Constitution was a miracle. But the miracle was not that the Lord found fifty-five men who understood so well the principles of a representative government. It is unlikely that any one of those men could have written the Constitution as it was in its finished form. The miracle lies in how that great document was produced: The spirit of revelation is the spirit of peace, and there *was* a prevailing spirit of peace among them. It was a miracle that these men-who represented extremely diverse political philosophies and who, in some instances, almost hated each other-sat during that sweltering summer to talk and compromise until they had written a document which is an expression of what the Lord called "just and holy principles." They created a government so well balanced that it prevented any one of its social or geographical factions from getting dominance over the other, a government so strong that it could protect the individual rights of all its citizens and yet so weak that it could not invade their private lives or infringe upon the exercise of their free agency.

FOOTNOTES

I. Edmund S. Morgan, "The American Revolution Considered as an Intellectual Movement," in Morton White and Arthur M. Schlesinger, eds., *Paths of American Thought* (Boston, 1963), p.23.

2. David Hawke, *The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1966), p.491. This was the father of the Benjamin Harrison who became president.

3. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799* (Washington, 1931-44), 26: 222-27.

4. *Ibid.* 3: 293-94.

5. *Ibid.* 29: 520.

6. John Adams, letter to Thomas Jefferson, November 13, 1813. Cited in Hans Kohn, *American Nationalism: An Interpretive Essay* (New York, 1957), p. 13.

7. Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Joseph Willard, 1789, in Andrew A. Lipscomb, ed. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 20 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1905-07), vol.7, p. 32 9.

8. Paul L. Ford, ed. *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1904-5), 9: 460.