

The importance of compromise in resolving some of the critical issues facing Washington and the other delegates at the Constitutional Convention can be seen in the following:

1. The Need for Compromise
2. The Great Compromise
3. Slavery Compromises

1. The Need for Compromise

Some scholars have mistakenly argued that delegates to the Constitutional Convention were involved in a plot to design a government from which they could profit. The fact is that the delegates themselves and the states that they represented had widely different interests. It would have been impossible to form a government solely for their individual benefit even if that had been their goal. The thirteen states stretched across diverse geographic regions and had equally diverse economic interests. Large and small states had different interests. There were delegates who wanted to put an end to the institution of slavery and other delegates who wanted to protect it. To further complicate things, issues would overlap. For example, there were both large and small states opposed to slavery while there were also large and small states that supported slavery.

In spite of their differences, Washington and some of the other Founders had become convinced of the need for a strong national government. Washington had experienced first hand the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation during the Revolutionary War. Since Congress had no power to tax under the Articles, Washington's army often went without food, clothing and shelter. The soldiers fought for long periods with no pay. After the war, problems under the weak national government had continued. A crisis developed in 1786 when a veteran of the Revolutionary War named Daniel Shays led a rebellion of Massachusetts farmers against the state government. The economic problems created by the Articles had made it difficult for farmers to pay their taxes and debts. Farms were being seized and the farmers were sometimes thrown into debtor's prison. Shays led attacks on local courthouses, destroying records in an attempt to stop the foreclosures. The rebels even threatened to capture a federal arsenal at Springfield. The Massachusetts militia finally stopped Shays' Rebellion (there was no national army under the Articles), but Washington and others realized that the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation had to be remedied.

The weak national government under the Articles was the result of the thirteen states trying to protect their own power. The Articles created a loose confederation in which each state kept most of its own power, including the ability to raise money through taxes. To make matters worse, most Americans at the time identified more closely with their particular state than with the nation as whole. For example, a person would more likely call himself a Virginian or New Yorker rather than an American. So the stakes were high and the differences were great when the delegates met in Philadelphia in 1787 for the Constitutional Convention.

2. The Great Compromise

George Washington and the Virginia delegation arrived in Philadelphia early. While they waited for the other delegates, they prepared a new plan for the government. When the convention began, Edmund Randolph and James Madison put forward the Virginia Plan that called for a government much like the one we have today. There would be three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial. The legislative branch would be made up of two houses; however, unlike our national government today, representation in both houses would be based upon a state's population. This plan differed from the Articles of Confederation that gave each state one vote in Congress regardless of its population.

Smaller states like Delaware and New Jersey objected to the Virginia Plan saying that the large states would easily outvote them in Congress if the number of votes were based on population. After weeks of debate, William Patterson of New Jersey put forth a plan that called for three branches including a legislature with only one house where each state would have one vote. The New Jersey Plan with a single house legislature and equal representation was more like Congress under the Articles.

The convention was deadlocked and appeared ready to fall apart when Roger Sherman proposed a compromise. Sherman's proposal has come to be known as the Great Compromise. It called for a Congress with two houses (also known as "bicameralism") – the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Senate would give equal representation to all of the states. Each state would have two senators that would be chosen by the state legislature. This part of the plan satisfied the small states. The House of Representatives would base representation on a state's population (one representative for every 30,000 people in the state) and members would be elected by all of the voters in the state. This element satisfied the more populous large states. Delegates at the Constitutional Convention narrowly approved Sherman's

compromise on July 16, 1787.

3. Slavery Compromises

Since representation in the House of Representatives was to be based on population, a debate arose over whether slaves should be counted in a state's population. According to James Madison's diary, the issue of slavery was the most divisive subject at the convention. While many of the Founding Fathers including George Washington viewed slavery as inconsistent with the principles of the Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, they knew that there was little chance of abolishing slavery at the time. After all, if those opposed to slavery insisted on its abolition, slave states could have walked out of the convention and formed their own nation with a pro-slavery constitution. So the issue of slavery would require compromise if the United States were to survive. Washington and the other Founders hoped that slavery could be eliminated from the United States once a strong union was formed.

The compromise that settled the issue of how to count slaves for purposes of representation in the House came to be known as the Three-fifths Compromise. It is sometimes wrongly said that the compromise meant the founders considered slaves as only partial human beings. In fact, the compromise had nothing to do with the human worth of the individual slave. States with slaves wanted to count all of their slaves in the state's population because that would yield more representatives in Congress. The opponents of slavery, noting that slaves had no rights of citizenship including the vote, argued that slaves should not be counted at all for purposes of representation. In the end, the compromise was to count three-fifths of the state's slaves in the total population. In other words, for every five slaves, three of would be added to the population count used to determine representation in the House of Representatives.

The delegates also disagreed over the slave trade. By the time of the Constitutional Convention in 1789, some northern states had already outlawed slavery within their state borders. These states wanted a ban on the slave trade included in the Constitution. Southern slave states objected to a ban claiming that the slave trade was important to their agricultural economy. Finally, the two sides compromised agreeing to allow the slave trade to continue for twenty years after which time the Congress could regulate it. After 1808, Congress could abolish the slave trade and it did. In fact, by 1798 every state had already outlawed the slave trade on its own anyway (although South Carolina reinstated it in 1803) and eight of the thirteen states abolished slavery during the founding era.

Slavery, like other thorny issues at the convention, required thoughtful men to develop creative compromises. These compromises preserved the American experiment in self-government that citizens of the United States still enjoy today.

Discussion Questions:

1. What differences between the thirteen states made compromise necessary?
2. What caused Shays' Rebellion?
3. Why did the small states object to the Virginia Plan?
4. Describe the structure of the government created by the Great Compromise.
5. What probably would have happened if opponents of slavery at the Constitutional Convention had insisted on abolition?
6. How many states abolished slavery during the founding era?