

LIBERTY!

Two Great Documents

Two of the world's greatest documents concerning liberty stand as bookends to the American Revolutionary War. They remind us that liberty was what the American Revolution was all about.

The first document, the Declaration of Independence, gave the great moral and political reasons for the American Revolution. It declared that "...all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The Declaration proclaimed that political power -- the power to form a government -- came from the consent of the governed. That means that government had its authority only because the people consented or agreed to give it authority. That was a radical or revolutionary idea in the world. Through the Declaration of Independence the thirteen colonies did away with or dissolved their ties to Great Britain and declared themselves free and independent states.

After the war, the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation led to states having their own types of money, quarreling with neighboring states over boundaries and trade, and other disagreements. In many ways the country was falling apart. Founders like Washington wondered how the principles of the Revolution could be made into a form of government that strengthened the union yet still protected individual liberty.

Eleven years after the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States would enshrine liberty into a new form of government. The Constitution begins with the words "We the people..." From these very first words, the Constitution honors the principles of the Declaration of Independence by saying it is the people who have ordained and established the Constitution.

The delegates to the Constitutional Convention studied and debated what forms of government had worked and failed in human history. The new Constitution was based on several basic principles to strengthen the union and yet protect liberty. After the Constitution was adopted in 1787, and ratified by the states in 1788, a Bill of Rights was proposed in 1789 and ratified in 1791. The Constitution remains the enduring document that protects the liberty and independence gained in the American Revolution.

Key Principles of the Constitution

The people are sovereign. Power comes from the consent of the governed.

We have a federal system of government. This form means that power is divided. Some powers have been delegated or given exclusively to the Federal or national government. Other powers are shared by the federal government with the states. Other powers are reserved only to be exercised by the states, and still others are reserved only to the people.

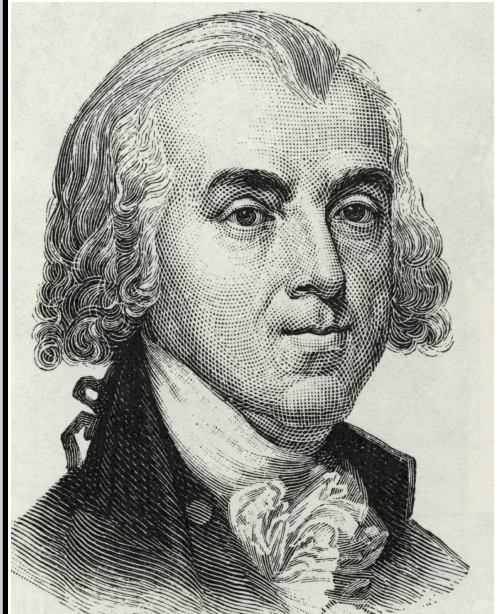
Within the federal government, there is a separation of powers. This means that powers are separated among three separate and equal branches of government. Only the legislative branch can make laws. Only the executive branch can carry out or administer laws. Only the judicial branch has the power to interpret laws. This separation of powers was intended to create "checks and balances" on each of the other

Protections of the Bill of Rights

- ✧ freedom of religion, speech, press, and public assembly
- ✧ right to bear arms
- ✧ freedom from unlawful quartering of military
- ✧ protection from unreasonable searches and seizures
- ✧ protection of due process of law
- ✧ rights to a fair trial in criminal cases
- ✧ right to jury trials and common law
- ✧ protection from excessive bails and fines
- ✧ protection from cruel and unusual punishment
- ✧ protection of rights retained by the people
- ✧ powers not delegated to the federal government are reserved to the States or people

"It was done by bargain and compromise, yet notwithstanding its imperfections, on the adoption of it depends whether we shall become a respectable nation, or a people torn to pieces."

Nicholas Gilman,
delegate from New
Hampshire



James Madison,
father of the Constitution

Delegates who signed both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution:

Roger Sherman, Connecticut
George Read, Delaware
Elbridge Gerry,
Massachusetts
Benjamin Franklin,
Pennsylvania
George Clymer, Pennsylvania
Robert Morris, Pennsylvania
James Wilson, Pennsylvania
George Wythe, Virginia

We, the People of the United States...