

Winter History & Heritage -- #4 (January 9, 2012)

The following entries are based on readings in *America, Vol. 1* by William Bennett:

Northwest Ordinance -- (*America, Vol. 1*, pp. 109-110)

Aside from winning the war with Britain, **this 1787 statute**, which set the stage for new states with constitutions and free governments of their own to be formed from territories, was the supreme achievement of the U.S. Congress in the Confederation era?

Eventually the midwest states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin came into being under its provisions. The statute also guaranteed religious freedom, prohibited slavery, and encouraged education on the frontier.

For “Good Government and the Happiness of Mankind” -- (*America 1*, p. 110)

The Founders--making provision for education in the Northwest Territory by act of Congress (Northwest Ordinance, Article III, 1787)--gave eloquent expression to their view of the character required of citizens in order for republics to succeed. Their statement, quoted below, anticipates a similar one on “political prosperity” made by President Washington in his Farewell Address (1796).

Article III of the Northwest Ordinance reads: “Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall be forever encouraged.”

The Specter of Disunion, Right from the Start -- (*America, Vol. 1*, pp. 112-113)

The first serious dispute between North and South, dividing the Confederation Congress and threatening to break up the Union, was focused on negotiations with Spain in the 1780s. The South insisted on the right to navigate the Mississippi and use New Orleans as a “port of deposit” for her commerce. Northern representatives, for their part, wanted to secure their own interests (like fishing rights off Canada’s Newfoundland, etc.). Neither side yielded its agenda, and as a result, under the procedures for making treaties in the Articles of Confederation, the new U.S. got nowhere with the Spanish.

Shays’ Rebellion -- (*America, Vol. 1*, pp. 113-115)

This Massachusetts insurrection (1786), an uprising of debt-ridden farmers led by a Revolutionary War captain, alerted many of the Founders to the danger popular disorder might pose to the new republic? Washington himself was among those most alarmed, as were Madison and Hamilton who were already collaborating to bring about a constitutional convention. Jefferson, in Paris, was less concerned with the uprising, writing to Madison that “a little rebellion now and then is a good thing.”

James Madison -- (*America, Vol. 1, pp. 117-118*)

This Virginian (1751--1836) helped convene the Constitutional Convention, painstakingly documented its deliberations, and zealously defended its final document? According to biographer M.E. Bradford, however, his critical role in the Convention could be seen as “comic” in the classical sense. He began well (his status as sage and lawgiver generally acknowledged) and ended well, but in between suffered the defeat of several proposals deemed likely to fail if placed before the states for ratification.

Begin Sessions with Prayer -- (*America, Vol. 1, p. 119*)

At a time of grave uncertainty in the Constitutional Convention (1787), Pennsylvania's Ben Franklin rose to make **this spiritual recommendation** (which wasn't followed)? Franklin (typically deist in religious matters) alluded to Jesus' teaching on God's providence, asking rhetorically, “if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?” The elder statesman also cited the *Psalms*: “Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.”

Representation in Congress -- (*America, Vol. 1, pp. 117-120*)

The greatest contest at the Constitutional Convention (1787), according to Madison, pitted large states against small states over **this issue peculiar to republics?** The large states' proposal (masterminded by Madison) insisted on the equality of citizens and the power of popular majorities, while the small states opted for the equality and power of states as corporate entities. The deadlock was broken by Connecticut's Roger Sherman, whose compromise gave its due to the principles of both sides.

Checks and Balances -- (*America, Vol. 1, pp. 120-121*)

The Constitution incorporates **this principle** requiring political decisions based on the cooperation of more than one branch or body of the federal government? One could cite, for example, the president's power to appoint judges with “the advice and consent of the Senate,” or his power to direct the armed forces in war subject to congressional authorization. The object in view, which hasn't worked well in practice, is to disperse power and prevent unconstitutional aggrandizement by any department of the U.S.

Article VI -- (*America, Vol. 1, p. 121*)

Of the 7 articles that make up the main body of the Constitution, **this one** says that, “No religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States”? Historically, the provision was intended (by the Framers and the ratifying States) to prevent exclusion from federal posts on account of one's Christian denominational identity. In modern times, however, it is seen more as an affirmation of everyone's private rights and a denial of religion's relevance to politics.