

NATION BUILDING: THEN

Building the American Nation

The idea for this program grew out of reactions to the seemingly optimistic talk in the media earlier this year about nation building in Afghanistan and Iraq. One of those reactions was curiosity about what it took to build our own nation after the War for Independence. Knowing *that* might help put some of the current talk into perspective. So we begin with a brief look at a subject that whole books have been written about.

Establishing our nation took almost fifteen years, from the Declaration of Independence in 1776 to the ratification of the Bill of Rights in 1791. And it took still longer to work out the details of how to put the Constitution and Bill of Rights into effect. (Indeed, the success of the whole nation-building process was still in doubt when President Abraham Lincoln gave his address at Gettysburg in November 1863. For as you know, he said that the Civil War was “testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”)

Remember that at the end of the war for independence, the former colonies saw themselves as independent states, not as a single nation. The convention of 1787 that wrote the Constitution was *not* called for that purpose. It was called to revise the Articles of Confederation of 1777 under which the colonies had acted during the war. (This was in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence which stated “that these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and *Independent States*.”) Independent of Great Britain, yes, but also independent of one another. Indeed, there was widespread suspicion that a strong overall government would lead to the same kinds of problems the colonies had faced under British rule.

We need to remember too that not everyone thought independence from Great Britain was a good idea even after the war was over.

And so the founders of the new nation faced a number of liabilities.

- First, debts had to be paid and trade re-established. Back pay was owed the men and officers of the Continental Army, and money was owed creditors both at home and abroad. Both foreign trade and business at home had been disrupted by the war.
- Second, differences existed over the very nature of any national government that might be formed. Some founders wanted to limit the powers of that government so as to give maximum freedom to the individual states and citizens. Others thought only a strong federal government could protect the common good of all.
- Third, the various states had different interests. The smaller ones were afraid of being outvoted by the larger ones if each state had representation based on its population. The states whose economies depended on the use of slaves objected to the efforts of those who wanted to have slavery abolished. These differences, and others, made it difficult to reach agreement on the Constitution.
- Fourth, differences existed within individual states as well. People on the frontier thought some of the ideas of those in long settled areas threatened their interests.
- Fifth, the founders had no models they could look to for answers as to how to solve some of these problems. They were beginning an experiment that had never been tried before on the same scale.

But the founders also had assets that were to prove invaluable.

- First, they were committed to preserving their liberty and the right of the people to control their own destiny.
- Second, they believed in the need for morality in civil life in order to preserve that liberty and that right.
- Third, they had a common intellectual heritage from Western Europe.
- Fourth, they had a tradition of free speech and representative government.
- Fifth, they were willing to compromise for the common good (albeit sometimes grudgingly and only after long debate and delay).

- Sixth, many of the leaders had been active in the war, either in the military or as civilian workers at home and overseas. They had a sense that they were involved in historic actions and wanted to insure that history would be kind to them.
- Seventh, their security was not threatened by neighboring countries.
- Eighth, they held a vast territory from the Atlantic coast to the Mississippi River with natural resources waiting to be developed.

Many serious problems remained even after the federal government was in operation. But some of them, at least, would be solved because of these assets. They would also be solved because the plans the founders made and the nation they sought to establish were their own.

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(Revised 03/22/04)