

Ratification: the people debate the constitution, 1787-1788 by pauline maier. sim...

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Book Review: Ratification, The People Debate the Constitution

In Pauline Maier's *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788*, the author gives a detailed and interesting account of the convention surrounding the ratification of the Constitution of the United States of America, and the people and decisions that surrounded that vital document. The process and the politics behind the creation of the document that created the laws behind which America has stood for centuries are addressed by Maier with great detail and accessibility. In particular, the objections that many opponents had toward the Constitution are detailed, especially the debate regarding its stance on slavery.

Before the Constitution was created, the United States tried its hand at government with the Articles of Confederation. This document created a much more state-centric and autonomous government than is known today, and was seen by many as an unrepentant failure due to wide state divisions and irresponsible government. Instead of the unicameral government created by the Articles, a bicameral government was decided upon; this was meant to create a balance between federal authority and state-based autonomy which was sorely desired by many.

Maier writes that many Americans at the time thought the Constitution was deeply flawed when it was initially ratified. For one, there was no Bill of Rights as yet when the founding fathers left Philadelphia; this did not specify the freedom and rights that many Americans held dear. The bicameral nature of Congress had several statutes in it that worried state-

centric supporters, and opponents like Patrick Henry: Article 1, Sections 8 and 9, for example, levied direct taxes against states for the sake of the federal government. Furthermore, the election of Congress members would be controlled in terms of the "times, places and manner" of said elections. Many religious leaders worried about the potential for pagans and other undesirables to enter into political office, and so they pushed for religious tests that would keep them out and only good Christians in.

The debate regarding slavery was a substantial issue in the ratification of the Constitution. Many Quakers in Rhode Island objected to the open language of the Constitution that implied that it might uphold slavery as a practice; in the case of South Carolina, delegates supported the notion of the Constitution upholding "property rights," John Rutledge claiming that "religion and humanity have nothing to do with the questions" of protecting slavery (Maier, 2010). Slaves were property, first and foremost; with that in mind the Constitution had to protect the right to property.

Despite the fact that many still objected to the tacit inclusion of slavery as a right protected in the Constitution, many provisions in the finished document still supported or stealthily endorsed slavery. The most important of these was the Three-Fifths Compromise, which was created by the Northern states to allow Southern states to count their slaves as three fifths of a person for the sake of House seats. This endorsement of slavery angered many Northern states; Rhode Island had already made provisions to free all children born to slave mothers after 1784, and had passed an emancipation act in order to ban slavery altogether in the state. Pennsylvania itself was

already in the thrust of a full-scale abolition movement, but still made these provisions in order to secure a unified country and appease the southern states.

Maier's writing style and prose are meant to provide a needed sense of context and readability to both amateurs and experts on US history. Providing her own personal perspective on the events surrounding ratification, Maier offers unique, modern takes on what was going on in 1787, and why we should care. On the subject of the impending ratification of the Constitution in the eyes of the American people, Maier writes, " the popular excitement reminded me at times of Americans' obsession with the final games of the World Series, but with greater intensity because everyone understood that the results would last far longer than a season. . . . Politics was in a real sense the first national game" (Maier, 2010).

In conclusion, Maier provides a comprehensive account of the many difficulties and debates that raged on during the time of the Constitutional Convention. of 1787. Many issues were weighed when considering how to restructure the country and create this vital document, including states' rights and powers. Slavery was a very important issue; the Quakers of Rhode Island opposed it, as did most of the leaders in Pennsylvania at the time. However, the wealth and power of the southern states, particularly South Carolina, made it necessary to make concessions in order to secure the Union altogether. With that in mind, provisions like the Three-Fifths Compromise were created, which secured the wealth and property of the south for the whole of the country. Maier presents all of these facts with

great detail and personality of prose, offering a realistic and approachable account of how the Constitution was created.

References

Maier, P. (2010). *The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788*. Simon & Schuster Publishers.