CHAPTER EIGHT: THE UNITED STATES OF NORTH AMERICA, 1786–1800

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KEY TOPICS
*The tensions and conflicts between local and national authorities in the decades after the American Revolution
*The struggle to draft the Constitution and to achieve its ratification
*Establishment of the first national government under the Constitution
*The beginning of American political parties
*The first stirrings of an authentic American national culture

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: MINGO CREEK SETTLERS REFUSE TO PAY THE WHISKEY TAX
In impoverished Mingo Creek, Pennsylvania, farmers lived an independent subsistence existence. The federal government imposed an excise tax on whiskey to help meet the costs of its unsuccessful campaigns against the Indians. Throughout the backcountry, farmers protested against the tax; in western Pennsylvania they rioted in what became known as the Whiskey Rebellion. A 13,000 man army, larger than any Washington had commanded during the Revolution, put it down. The vignette shows how federal power had prevailed over the local community.
FORMING A NEW GOVERNMENT  Nationalists, generally drawn from the economic elite, argued for a stronger central government to deal with the economic crisis of the 1780s. Representatives from five states met in Annapolis, calling for a convention to propose changes in the Articles of Confederation. Congress agreed, so 55 delegates from 12 states assembled in Philadelphia in May 1787. Representing the nation’s political and social elite, they debated plans for strengthening the central government. The Great Compromise provided a middle ground for agreement. The interests of small and large states were met by establishing a bicameral legislature with one house based on population and one representing all states equally. The convention compromised on free-state and slave-state interests by agreeing to count five slaves as three freemen. In lieu of a monarchy, the convention created an electoral college to select a president.

Supporters of the Constitution called themselves Federalists. Anti-Federalist opponents of the Constitution feared that the document gave too much power to the central government and that a republic could not work well in a large nation. James Madison, speaking for the Federalists, argued that the multitude of interests in a large state would create a balance of power and prevent special interests from seizing control. The ratification struggle divided Americans. Opponents tended to be agrarian localists while supporters tended to be commercial cosmopolitans. Several states agreed to ratification only with the understanding that a bill of rights would be added. The first ten amendments to the Constitution served to restrain the growth of governmental power over citizens.

THE NEW NATION  Following ratification of the Constitution, a new government was set up with George Washington as its president. Washington preferred that his title be a simple “Mr. President” and dressed in plain republican broadcloth. Congress established executive departments, the heads of which coalesced into the Cabinet. The Judiciary Act of 1789 created the federal court system. Contrary to nationalist wishes, states maintained their individual bodies of law. Federal courts became the appeals bodies, establishing the federal system of judicial review of state legislation. Localists supported the eleventh amendment, which prevented states from being sued by non-citizens. The new Congress turned to the nation’s fiscal problems.

In 1790, Secretary of Treasury Alexander Hamilton submitted a series of financial proposals that strained the Federalist coalition. Debate broke out over paying holders of government securities at face value, even though many had bought up the securities at a fraction of their face value. Congress also debated the federal assumption of state debts because Southern states had already paid off most of their obligations. A compromise that located the nation's capital on the Potomac River led to passage of Hamilton's credit program. Hamilton then proposed a Bank of the United States that many opponents considered an unconstitutional expansion of power. Jefferson espoused the doctrine of strict construction while Hamilton was a loose constructionist. Hamilton also called for a protective tariff to develop an industrial economy. Hamilton’s plan did restore financial health and encouraged economic growth.

Foreign affairs further strained Federalist coalition. Americans initially welcomed the French Revolution, but when the Revolution turned violent and war broke out with Britain, public opinion divided. Hamilton favored closer ties with Britain; Jefferson feared them. Both sides
advocated neutrality. The arrival of “Citizen Genet” increased domestic tensions. Washington issued a neutrality proclamation which outraged Jefferson’s supporters who identified the French Revolution with the growth of liberty. Among the most pressing “foreign” problems faced by the new government concerned Indians who refused to accept United States sovereignty over them. The Indian Intercourse Act made treaties the only legal way to obtain Indian lands, but did not stop the violence by white settlers. Under the leadership of Little Turtle of the Miami tribe, an Indian coalition defeated a large American force in the Ohio Valley.

The status of the United States in the West was precarious due to Spanish and British hostility. The Spanish, who had acquired French claims, closed the Mississippi River to American shipping, promoted immigration, and forged alliances with Indian tribes to resist American expansion. Britain granted greater autonomy to its North American colonies, strengthened Indian allies, and constructed a defensive buffer against Americans.

By 1794, the government faced a crisis over western policy. The prospect of war and rebellion grew. Western farmers were refusing to pay the whiskey tax as required by Hamilton’s plan. An army sent into western Pennsylvania ended resistance. Strong military action was also seen in the West when General Wayne destroyed Indian resistance leading to the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, that led to the cession of huge amounts of land by the Ohio Indians.

Britain had blockaded France and confiscated the cargoes of 250 American ships. The British were anxious to settle their American disputes and concentrate on defeating France. The Jay Treaty resolved several key disputes between the United States and Britain, but did so at the expense of the French alliance and without addressing slaveholder interests. Opponents held up the treaty in the House until Pinckney’s Treaty with Spain granted them sovereignty in the West. The political battles over the Jay Treaty brought President Washington off his nonpartisan pedestal. In his farewell address he summed up American foreign policy goals as “peace, commercial relations, friendship with all nations, and no entangling alliances.”

FEDERALISTS AND JEFFERSONIAN REPUBLICANS No one anticipated the emergence of organized political parties. Shifting coalitions began to polarize into political factions during the debate over the Jay Treaty. Hamilton’s supporters claimed the title “Federalist.” The opposition supporters of Thomas Jefferson chose “Republican,” implying that the Federalists were really monarchists. These coalitions shaped the election of 1796, which John Adams narrowly won. Jefferson, the opposition’s candidate, became vice president.

Adams faced the issue of having his vice president lead the opposition but the new president benefited from the rising tensions with France when that nation began seizing American shipping. When negotiations broke down, the nation was on the brink of war. The X, Y, Z Affair made Adams’s popularity soar. The Federalists pushed through the Alien and Sedition Acts which severely limited freedoms of speech and of the press and threatened the liberty of foreigners. Republicans organized as an opposition party. Federalists saw opposition to the administration as opposition to the state and prosecuted leading Republican newspaper editors. Jefferson and Madison drafted the Virginia and Kentucky Resolves that threatened to nullify these unconstitutional laws.
Adams negotiated an end to the quarrel with France. The Federalists were divided over Hamilton’s dispute with Adams. Federalists also had become identified with oppressive warmongering. In the election of 1800, the Federalists waged a defensive struggle calling for strong central government and good order. By controlling the South and the West, Jefferson won the election, though due to a technicality, the Federalists nearly tied up the final outcome. The rise of partisan politics greatly increased popular participation as American politics became more competitive and democratic. Popular celebrations became common and suffrage increased.

“THE RISING GLORY OF AMERICA” The Revolutionary generation began to create a national culture. American artists depicted national heroes and national triumphs. Architects sought to create a national capital that would create a “reciprocity of sight” for the national buildings. Even though most Americans lived in small, bare houses, in coastal cities the building boom featured a new “federal” style that emphasized economy of decoration and indigenous materials. The Revolutionary years saw a tremendous increase in the number of newspapers. During the 1790s newspapers became media for partisan politics. In response to prosecutions under the Sedition Act, American newspapers helped to establish the principle of a free press.

As a highly literate citizenry, Americans had a great appetite for books. The literature of the Revolutionary era reflected political concerns. Writers explored the political implications of independence or examined the new society including the American character, that was emerging. The single best-seller was Noah Webster’s *American Spelling Book* which attempted to define an American language. Other writers wrote histories of the Revolution or of heroes of the Revolution. Parson Weems’s *Life of Washington* created a unifying symbol for Americans. Although women’s literacy rates were lower than that of men, a growing number of books were specifically directed toward women. Several urged that women in a republic ought to be more independent than before.

**CONCLUSION** The nation that unified the diverse American population had withstood a decade of stress.

**Lecture Suggestions**

1. Make the connection between the problems of the 1780s and the Constitution. To examine the Constitution, you might look at it topically. Examine what the motives of its framers were and then examine how those intentions were achieved. Look at economic motives: the framers sought to create enough centralized power for economic growth. The commerce clause, the provisions for tariffs, regulation of currency, etc. all indicate centralized power. Look at the political goals. Most students assume that the Constitution promotes democracy. Look at the provisions for indirect elections, staggered access to power. Emphasize how these provisions checked democracy. Look at how the framers created unity between North and South and between small and large states. Take the document apart and show what interests it served.

2. To deal with the 1790s start off by examining American attitudes towards political parties. (See Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System* (Univ. of California Press, 1969.) Then examine the reasons that parties emerged. Treat the events of the
1790s—Hamilton’s plan, Jay Treaty, etc.—as steps towards party formation. Point out that despite Americans’ opposition to party politics, they were the first people to form political parties.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Who were the “nationalists” and what did they want? How did the Constitution of 1787 fulfill their goals?

2. Why was the Constitution of 1787 ratified? What were the arguments for and against it? Who opposed it and why?

3. What is the connection between the Federalists who supported the constitution and the supporters of the Federalist Party?

4. Who was a Federalist and who was a Republican? What were the goals of each party?

5. Why did western farmers (like those in Mingo Creek) oppose the whiskey tax? Were they right in seeing the tax as a betrayal of the ideals of the Revolution?

6. Why did the United States nearly get into a war with France? Why was war averted?

**Out of Class Activity**

Students could compare the Articles of Confederation with the Constitution of 1787. They could examine which groups of people were better served by each system of government. They could research supporters and opponents of the Constitution and present to the class arguments in favor of and against the Constitution.

**If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject**

It’s controversial and note the author’s Hamiltonian bias. But Forrest McDonald’s *The Presidency of George Washington* (Univ. of Kansas Press, 1974) does a good job of explaining events through Hamiltonian eyes. There’s a lot of interesting stuff there to plunder for lectures.

**Audio Visual Aids**


“To Form a More Perfect Union” (©1975) Re-creates events leading up to the ratification of the Constitution and discusses the compromises required before it could be accepted. (Color, 31 minutes, 1975)
“Man and the State: Hamilton and Jefferson on Democracy” Contrasts Hamilton’s and Jefferson’s views on democracy by showing their reactions to events such as the Civil War, the depression, and Vietnam. (Color, 26 minutes, 1975)

“George Washington and the Whiskey Rebellion: Testing the Constitution” Dramatizes how George Washington defended the principles of the constitution through enforcement of the whiskey tax. (Color, 27 minutes, 1975)