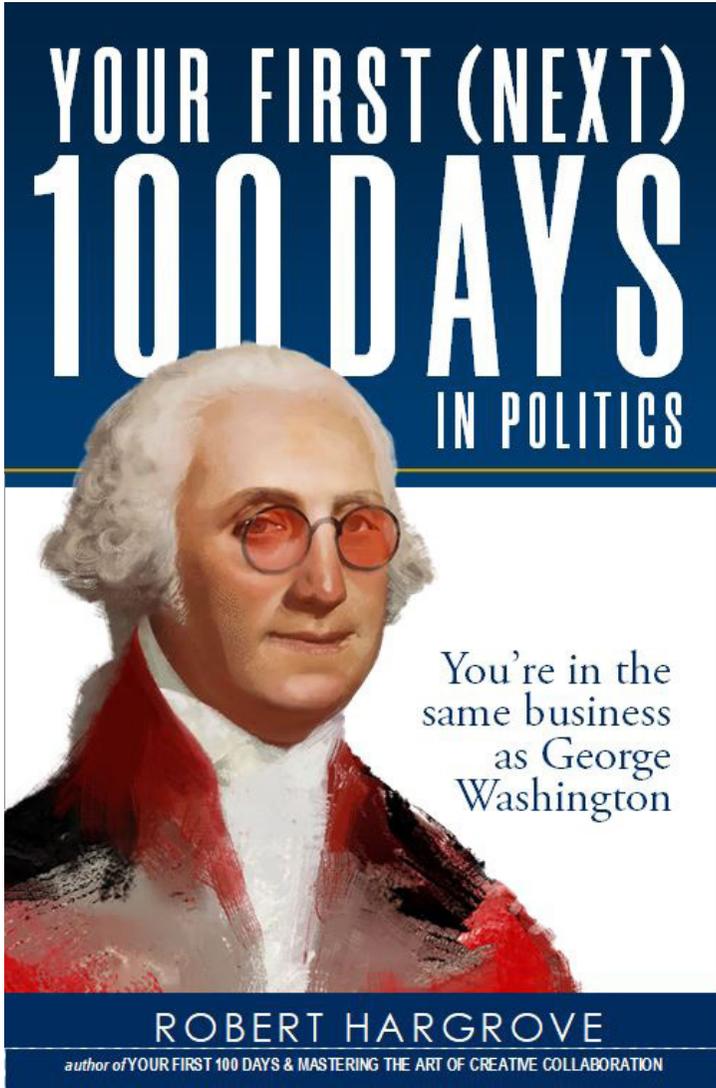


Please enjoy the first interlude of Robert Hargrove's latest book, *You First (Next) 100 Days in Politics*.

**A Ben Franklin's Breakfast:
Great Compromisers Make Great Democracies**



Interlude One

Ben Franklin's Breakfast: Great Compromisers Make Great Democracies

Great heroes do not make great compromisers. Great compromisers make great democracies. -Benjamin Franklin

Our Constitution was not the work of one extraordinary leader or solo genius who laid down a vision of the United States and inspired people to execute it. Rather, it was created by an extraordinary constellation of leaders who met in Philadelphia in 1787 at the Constitutional Convention to gather individual slices of genius for the purpose of shaping a new government.

The Constitutional Convention was convened after the American Revolutionary War when there was no nation, just a collection of former British colonies and easily as much frenetic incivility, polarizing goals, and division as we have seen in recent years.

The Constitutional “Framers” bestowed upon us the American system of government based on a separation of powers between the president, the Congress, and the judiciary, as well as a path forward for avoiding the kind of “democracy in deadlock” we face now.

I believe that every leader about to start their first 100 days at the national, state, or local level should read and recount this story of the

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Convention. For it was there that the Framers laid down the template for moving the country forward by means of civil dialogue, shared purpose, collaboration, and compromise.

IT TAKES LEADERSHIP TO CONVENE AN EXTRAORDINARY COMBINATION OF PEOPLE

In 1787 Benjamin Franklin—one of the most important Founding Fathers, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention from Pennsylvania, and occupant of Mrs. Mary House boarding house in Philadelphia—was enjoying a hearty breakfast of a small beer, blueberry muffins, some Philly cheese, and salted fish.

As he ate, Franklin read a letter from John Adams, which included a reminder from Adams’s wife Abigail who often shared her own wise political views. Franklin smiled softly as he took in her strong request that he remind the Framers of the Constitution to “remember the ladies,” telling her husband that “all men would be tyrants if they could.”

Ben Franklin was not just a kindly Founding Father, a bespectacled dispenser of aphoristic advice, and famous for his dangerous liaisons with women; he also played a key role in the Revolution. Once he was playing chess with his equal the Duchess of Bourbon, who made a move that inadvertently exposed her king. Ignoring the rules of the game, he promptly captured it. “Ah,” said the duchess, “we do not take Kings so.” Replied Franklin in a famous quip: “We do in America.”

After eating his breakfast, he strolled over to the State House determined not to take himself too seriously, even though he and his colleagues were about to draft a document that was intended to “alter the course of history.” It was one where government would be ruled not by accident of a king’s birth or by force, but by democratic choice and reason. The story of that idea would be the story of American history.

As he approached the State House, he glanced up at the great clock over the door, referred to as The Clock of History. It was a reminder to the delegates of the Convention that the eyes of the world would

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be upon them, and what they did in that building would be judged by history.

It had taken real leadership to get delegates to come to the Constitutional Convention. This did not just happen on its own. James Madison knew there had to be a convener to bring the states together for such a daunting task, and that it could not be him. Madison was a diminutive man who stood 5'5", with a weak voice, who had been sickly all his life. He lacked the personal credibility needed to convince others to attend the meeting. Acknowledging his limitations, he pondered who might bring them together. The answer was obvious—George Washington.

For six months, Madison skillfully courted Washington to get him to come out of retirement and attend the convention but was met with some resistance. Given the failings of human nature, Washington had doubts whether democracy could work, believing a ruling elite might be necessary. Washington also realized that many of the delegates believed the Constitutional Convention would be a power grab by an all-powerful, quasi-Royalist government. He knew if he attended, he might be drafted to be the “president” and, as he was fiercely protective of his reputation as a dedicated public servant, he did not want to be seen as grasping for power. Finally, at the urging of friends, and for the welfare of the country, he agreed, and the states started choosing delegates to attend.

Both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson declined the invitation to attend. Jefferson called it “an assembly of demigods”³ who were trying to reinstate George Washington as king. In truth, he was in Paris as an ambassador to France. Likewise, John Adams was in Europe serving as an ambassador to Great Britain. Patrick Henry (“Give me liberty or give me death”) also turned down an invitation to attend, saying “I smell a rat in Philadelphia tending toward a monarchy.”

Still, it was an extraordinary combination of people from different professions and occupations who came together to collaborate on framing the principles of the Constitution—politicians, ambassadors,

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doctors, lawyers, planters, investors, shipbuilders, generals, printers, postmasters, inventors, and journalists.

A CONVERSATION THAT CREATED OUR CONSTITUTION

Preparation was important. Madison leveraged his network in the different states to gain firsthand insight into the delegates. He studied the constitutions of the thirteen states, as well as the noble efforts of other democracies, and circulated these to the delegates to study. He prepared an agenda with the different topics to be discussed, asking Washington and Peyton Randolph, the delegate from Virginia, for their reactions.

The fifty-five delegates from twelve states convened that summer in long coats and knee breeches, in sweltering heat and secrecy, with the windows of the Hall nailed shut to prevent eavesdropping. The delegates decided to facilitate a free and open exchange of ideas; however, inside the Hall, Federalists (Big Gov) and anti-Federalists would hurl veiled insults at each other, and once got into a bar room brawl at the end of one day.

Ben Franklin was a “man in full” at the convention, charming and disarming yet deeply purposeful, lighthearted, and funny. He offered to help Madison in any way he could—super host, moderator, after-hours confidant. A native of Philadelphia, he would convene small gatherings at the Mrs. Mary House for dinner and drink, where delegates from different states could establish positive human relationships, despite their divergent views. This is where the greater good would be emphasized amongst combatants, mind melds would happen, and conflicts ironed out.

Franklin was not a religious man, but sensing the potential for personal quarrels and rancorous debate, he suggested offering a daily morning prayer “imploring the assistance of Heaven” in being re-

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minded of the greater goal “and its blessings on our deliberations,” so that people would be able to successfully find a meeting of the minds.

The delegates came to the Convention ready to have a conversation about improving the Articles of Confederation of autonomous states. They switched the conversation to creating a constitution that would define a totally new country, and this would rest on establishing shared purpose and mastering the art of creative collaboration and compromise.

NAVIGATING THE CLASH OF DISSENTING VIEWS

Much of the dialogue centered on picking a topic that was a bone of contention and then scanning each state’s constitution and discussing whether a particular aspect of the “Massachusetts Plan” or the “Virginia Plan” provided the best alternative. Should there be a president for life, or one president every four years? Should there be two houses of Congress or one?

The Framers were legitimately torn between having a strong presidency and federal government—which could lead to the kind of abuse of power seen with the British monarchy—or having too weak a presidency and federal government—which could lead to anarchy. There was general agreement about having two houses of Congress, but there were many squabbles, wrangles, and wars of words about representation. The larger states wanted representation in Congress based on size of the population, not including slaves. The smaller states wanted representation with an equal number of seats from each state.

Madison would speak up on the convention floor, not to air his views, but to return people to a shared purpose that was big enough to subordinate their egos to—that of drafting the Constitution of the United States, based on the idea of “One Nation, conceived in Liberty for All of Us.”

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He would hold up a fistful of parchment and remind people that the job was not to make fanciful speeches, floating thoughts that would disappear the moment they were spoken, like steam from a teapot. It was one of creative collaboration in drafting a joint document that everyone in the room could sign. As the summer rolled along, this would require the delegates to learn to think and work together with others who saw things differently.

Franklin would intervene when arguments got too heated or there were too many digressions, interrupting with a bit of humor: *“Gentlemen, there are two kinds of people. Those who have something to say and those who just need to say something.”* This would generally produce a laugh. He would add, *“Speak not but what may benefit the noble purpose to which we have come here.”* When people would step over each other’s words, he would say, *“Listen first so as to show you care what others think.”* When people would digress, he would say, *“Gentlemen, let’s avoid trifling conversation.”*

Yet even when the conversation cooled from outright clashes to superficial conviviality, there were always issues boiling below the surface. Washington worried that the power of the presidency and federal government would be too small. Madison, along with Jefferson, felt trapped in “the bigness of the Federal government.” Jefferson wrote a letter to the Convention saying, “I firmly believe that Virginia is my country.”

George Washington did not say much on the convention floor, always concerned about being seen as power hungry. He listened in a way that embraced the ambitions, appetites, and prejudices of the delegates, whether he agreed or disagreed. He would skillfully use his power and influence to orchestrate behind the scenes.

Hamilton, a Federalist, could generally convince Washington of his views and would speak with great passion and eloquence on the floor. He was a shrewd politician who had a transformative vision of the United States as being one of the greatest political and economic

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powers in the world, but he was not above entering into the transactional world of brokerage and making trade-offs.

His style was to listen to everyone intently whenever controversial issues came up in the “markup sessions”—like presidential power, a national bank, or standing army. He would write notes as if doodling on paper, searching for middle ground. He would then show others what he had written down, asking “Could this work?” He would add, for instance, “What if the national bank paid off the states’ Revolutionary War debts?”

THE MIRACLE AT PHILADELPHIA

Madison would later say that the “miracle at Philadelphia,” as it was later dubbed, was the result of the explosion of creative ideas that emerged from the constant wrangling of many delegates with conflicting views and opinions. This was catalyzed by the time pressure to get the Constitution down on parchment before the first session of Congress in September.

As the summer wore on with fierce argument and 24/7 toil, the delegates rolled up their sleeves and got down to business. Their collaboration was a process of shared creation that involved generating rapid iterations of rough drafts of the Constitution or part of it. They were able to find creative solutions by connecting the dots between their conflicting views.

It was to be neither a government of kings and queens, nor a government of the mob. It was to be a government based on the permanent separation of powers between the president, Congress, and Supreme Court. It was believed that the glue that would hold this new democratic system together was the same kind of debate and collaborative problem-solving they had experienced at the convention.

Even as the Constitutional Convention neared its end, there were still sticking points that most people found hard to agree with. How long would the president’s term be? Would large and small states have

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equal representation in Congress? Who had power over the budget? Who could declare war?

One of the key issues was that of representation. Larger states favored representation by population. Smaller states favored equal representation by states. Franklin, who sensed a deadlock, decided to back off his original position of representation by population.

In his final speech at the Convention, Franklin said, "I doubt whether any other Convention we can obtain, may be able to make a better Constitution: For when you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. It therefore astonishes me to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does; Thus, I consent to this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors, I sacrifice to the Public Good. Within these walls they were born, and here they shall die."

The last version of the Constitution contained the Connecticut Compromise which said that there would be two houses of Congress. The Senate or upper chamber would be elected on the basis of equal representation of each state. The House of Representatives would be elected by population, with each slave being counted as three fifths of a person. The president or either chamber would also originate legislation or a budget, but the House would have full financial control. Further, only Congress could declare war.

As John Quincy Adams, the sixth president of the United States, observed regarding the power of shared purpose and collaboration, "The mutual influence of these two mighty minds upon each other is a phenomenon, like the invisible and mysterious movements of the magnet in the physical world."

Washington said the Constitutional Convention went from a cacophony (which reminded people of the Tower of Babel their enemies would delight over) to a beautiful symphony. He wrote later to

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his friend the Marquis de Lafayette, “it appears to me, little short of a miracle, that the Delegates from so many different States [so different from each other] should unite in forming a system of national government,” one that the world would be watching and waiting to see and that would last hundreds of years. Madison commented toward the end of the summer, “The happy Union of these States is a wonder, their Constitution a miracle; their example the hope of Liberty throughout the world.”

By the middle of September, the delegates had drafted a proposal written on four pages of parchment. They sent that draft to the printers who set the type of its soaring preamble with a giant W, sharp as an eagle’s claw.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common general Welfare and Secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves, and Posterity, do ordain and Establish this Constitution of the United States of America.

On September 17, 1787, the Constitution was read aloud and signed. The delegates went forward to lend their names to the document, and Benjamin Franklin followed and wept as he inscribed his name. As he left the convention, someone asked him what they had created. “A republic,” he answered, “if you can keep it.”

In the end, the Framers punted and left some things up to George Washington to decide once he became president. Washington and his Cabinet met for weeks at the beginning of his administration to sort the issues of a strong Congress and Supreme Court. Still, the Framers were able to go before Congress and get the whole thing ratified so the country could be brought into existence.

This was nothing short of miraculous since at least one third of the United States population did not identify with being American at

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the time and would just as likely have preferred to return to the protection of King George and the British Empire.

THE PROCESS OF HOW WE ACHIEVED THE CONSTITUTION MUST NOT BE FORGOTTEN

Today, we celebrate and commemorate who the Framers were and what they achieved in drafting the Constitution of the United States. What we have forgotten is the process of how they achieved it, which is essential to reinvigorating our Democracy today.

The Framers, including George Washington who referred to the “Miracle of Philadelphia,” really did think it was a miracle that such an extraordinary combination of people with conflicting visions and values was able to produce the Constitution.

Yet, the “Miracle of Philadelphia” was also due to the fact that James Madison acted as the convener who brought people together, and Ben Franklin acted as a skilled facilitator as well as a super host, so people could make human connections.

The “Miracle of Philadelphia” was also achieved by people treating each other with civility when emotions were running strong, leveraging the power of shared purpose, collaboration, and compromise.

If you are about to start your first 100 days as a new leader with or without a big title, in a polarized political context, you can still impact the issues you and others passionately care about by following the template the Framers laid down for us.