

## *Three Words*

The success of the convention was never assured. It opened eleven days late, amidst considerable opposition. Nineteen of the seventy-four elected delegates never appeared. Of the fifty-five who did participate in the secret proceedings at the Philadelphia State House, with its poor ventilation that hot summer, only thirty-nine would sign the document the convention produced. Its presiding officer had come only reluctantly, fearing the meetings would fail and thus tarnish his reputation. But General George Washington did come to preside over a constitutional convention for those four hot and muggy months in 1787, a convention that would change a “half-starved and limping government” (the words are those of General Washington) into something quite different, a strong national government.

On September 17, after almost four months of intense negotiations, the weary delegates of twelve states (Rhode Island had refused to send any representatives) signed the document and returned to their homes for an even greater battle. For now, they must convince the citizens of their respective states that this new document was not, as Patrick Henry said, “the tyranny of Philadelphia,” or “an elective despotism” (Richard Henry Lee), but the only hope for the new nation. And so in newspapers and in public halls, in taverns and in published speeches, the struggle went on for ratification.

Article VII of the proposed constitution specified that nine states must ratify, and the

ninth—New Hampshire—did so the following June, with the critical states of Virginia and New York following in the next few weeks.

What, then, did these ratifying conventions approve? In essence, they approved three words: a personal pronoun, the definite article, and an old Latin noun.

Three words—a pronoun, an article, a noun. But they embodied the most startling idea in all political history. In a stroke they announced the end of the divine right of kings. In a literary moment, they repudiated inherited power and religious tyranny. Although proposed by patricians, by the new nation's elite, three words declared aristocracy at an end. Now, the welfare of all, not a privileged few, would be the appropriate end of government. Really, 1787 represented a second revolution, one that would complement the ideas of the Declaration of Independence eleven years before, giving strength and form to that earlier promise of the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. A second revolution and one consisting of three words, three words that recognized the profound dignity of every person of whatever religious faith, of any ethnic group, of low birth or high; three words that recognize simply "Americans."

In the 215 years since the thirty-nine delegates signed the Constitution, America has sometimes failed, even egregiously, to live by its better lights and, in Lincoln's powerful phrase, its better angels. But three words—a pronoun, an article, a noun—remain to rebuke us, to redirect us, to give us hope and vision.

So let the young parents at the crib and the physician at her work, the mechanic in his garage and the students at their desks, recall three words. As judges preside and juries deliberate, as welders work their fiery craft and musicians evoke new tunes, let them remember three words. As the farmer plows and the architect draws, let it be with hope because of a pronoun, an article, and an old Latin noun.

Few dates really define American history and an American identity. September 11, despite its profound tragedy, is not one of them. September 17 is. Let us, then, grieve with hope. Let our friends around the world take heart as they see America grieve with hope, and let our foes fear us for the same reason. For on September 17, 1787, thirty-nine delegates in Philadelphia signed a document that defined America and asserted the dignity of all people, blazing a path for every nation on earth to follow. And at its heart are the three words, our words, the words of enduring promise. Let America speak them with pride, treasure them, die for them if necessary, live by them always; for they are, "We, the People."