

We the People: The Story of the Constitution

by Lynne Cheney

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Overview

Cheney lays out the tumultuous situation of the country at the end of the Revolutionary War. She moves on to the gathering of the representatives at the convention and colorfully describes the various issues and arguments that had to be resolved before the Constitution could be written.

Grade 5**LEARNING TARGETS**

- ✓ I can identify important people who were part of the Revolutionary War, and who also helped in the writing of the Constitution.
- ✓ I can explain how their discussions and decisions at the Constitutional Convention became part of American politics today.
- ✓ I can explain the Great Compromise and how it worked to balance the power between States.

STANDARDS

5th Grade
Civics

5.1.2.2.1 Identify historically significant people during the period of the American Revolution; explain how their actions contributed to the development of American political culture.

5.1.4.7.2 Describe how governmental power is limited through the principles of federalism, the separation of powers, and checks and balances.

5th Grade
Language
Arts

5.2.1.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

5.2.3.3 Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text based on specific information in the text.

GUIDE

As you read the book for the first time with the class, post two large sheets of paper for keeping lists. Title the first paper “People” and the second “Decisions.” While you are reading, pause to note the names of people in the book and important information about them. You may want to make note of the page numbers where the person is mentioned. On the “Decisions” list, pause when the delegates to the Convention make a decision and make note of what it was. When the lists are complete, ask students who they think had the greatest impact on the Convention and why. Ask them to refer to specific parts of the text to explain their opinions. Return to that page together and review the text. Then ask students which decision was most important. Once again, look for specific language in the book to explain opinions.

Civics Standards: 5.1.2.2.1

Language Arts Standards: 5.2.1.1

The delegates to the Constitutional Convention had some very difficult decisions to make. The concerns and interests of the different states were often conflicting, making it hard for the to come to agreement. Ask the students if they have ever been in a situation where a decision had to be made, but there was a lot of disagreement. How did the decision get made in those circumstances? What are some methods that the delegates used to make difficult decisions? Find examples in the book to illustrate the methods. (Discussion: proposal of 3 branches of government and then the concerns of small/ large states that were raised in response. The decision to have an Electoral College to elect the President. Compromise: The Great Compromise to balance the power of small/ large states. The decision regarding how to count slaves for representation, although distasteful to us now, was also a compromise. Civil Debate: The discussion regarding slavery was a debate with two sides expressing their views.)

Civics Standards: 5.1.2.2.1

Language Arts Standards: 5.2.1.1

How do the examples of decision-making in the book reflect how our government makes decisions today? Did those who wrote the Constitution embed their methods into the government they created? Ask students to think of examples of discussion, compromise and civil debate in government today. (Elections involve debates between candidates, discussion of issues and candidate platforms. Legislative action involves discussion of bills put before the legislature, debate of those bills, and usually some compromise to get a bill passed. Legislatures often have to compromise on the content of a bill in order to insure that the President will sign it.)

Civics Standards: 5.1.2.2.1

Language Arts Standards: 5.2.3.3

Consider how the people in the book are depicted. Madison is described as the man behind the scenes who comes up with the plan. Washington is described as a principled leader of men. Franklin is persuasive and a compromiser. Morris is opinionated and perhaps a bit stubborn. Do the characteristics of these delegates contribute to the decision that was made? What did they bring to the discussion and how might their contributions have helped the final compromises get made?

Civics Standards: 5.1.2.2.1

Language Arts Standards: 5.2.3.3

Many people have a hard time compromising. Ask the students for examples of times they have had to compromise. Was it a good or bad experience? Why was the compromise necessary? The delegates at the Constitutional Convention had to agree to compromise on some very difficult issues. What were they? (large/ small state representation, how to count slaves for representation, whether to ban bringing further slaves to the United States, whether to have citizens vote directly for the President) Why did they have to compromise? (The country would have fallen apart without compromise.) Some of the delegates refused to sign the Constitution. Why? (It didn't list individual rights.) There are some people who feel so strongly about a specific issue that they would be unwilling to vote for a candidate who disagreed on that one issue, even if they were in agreement on many other things. Are there some things that students would never agree to compromise on?

Civics Standards: 5.1.2.2.1

Language Arts Standards: 5.2.3.3

One of the basic ideas in our government is the balance of power. No one group is allowed to have all of the power. Ask students to describe how the Great Compromise in the issue of representation of large and small states worked to balance power. There is another balance of power described in the book, what is it? (The work of the 3 branches of government.)

Civics Standards: 5.1.4.7.2

Language Arts Standards: 5.2.1.1

ASSESSMENTS

As an exit ticket, have students pick one person described in the book. In a couple of sentences describe how that person contributed to the decisions made at the Constitutional Convention.

Look through newspapers and magazines for examples of decision-making by our government today. Make a bulletin board of the clippings.

The 3 branches of government, the balance of representation between large and small states and the Electoral College for electing the President are all still important parts of our government. Have students choose one of these three concepts and write a paragraph about it either defending it or criticizing it.

Have students do further research about one of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention and write a report about his life and contributions to the United States.

NOTES