

Chapter 6

Creating the Constitution

What is the proper role of a national government?

6.1 Introduction

In 1782, an army officer wrote a letter to George Washington. In it, he expressed his hope, shared by many of his fellow officers, that the independent American states would be joined into “a kingdom with Washington as the head.” The general was appalled. He had spent years in bloody battle working to sever ties with a monarchy. Washington wrote back, “Be assured Sir, no occurrence in the course of the War, has given me more painful sensations than your information of there being such ideas existing in the Army . . . banish these thoughts from your mind.”

Like Washington, most Americans did not want to be ruled by a monarch. What they did want, though, was an effective government. In the minds of many, that was not what they had under the **Articles of Confederation**, the nation’s first constitution. Troops who wanted Washington to be king were suffering from Congress’s inability to meet the army’s basic needs. “On the general subject of supplies,” wrote a member of Congress, “we need hardly inform you that our Army is extremely clamorous, we cannot pay them—we can hardly feed them.”

Over the next few years, many Americans believed that things were going from bad to worse for the new nation. In 1786, a group of rebellious farmers who could not pay their debts shut down several courthouses in Massachusetts. Congress could not help the state government deal with the rebellion. Some Americans saw this as a sign that the nation was sliding into anarchy.

If a more effective government was needed, how should it be structured? That was the question facing delegates called to a special convention in Philadelphia in 1787. This **Constitutional Convention** took place in the room on the facing page, in a building now known as Independence Hall. Presiding over the convention was none other than George Washington, the man who would *not* be king.



This statue in the Virginia State Capitol shows George Washington as an American “Cincinnatus.” Cincinnatus was a legendary Roman patriot, a citizen-farmer who turned soldier and leader in a time of crisis, just as Washington did. And like Washington, he returned to farming after the crisis was over.

