**Mila University Centre**

**Department of Foreing Languages/ English Section**

**Level: Third Year**

**Module: Study of Textes of Civilisation**

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**Lesson Three: The Foundation of a Nation**

1. **Formation of a National Government**

The 13 American colonies became the 13 United States of America in 1783, following their war for independence from Britain. Before the war ended, they ratified a framework for their common eff orts. T**hese Articles of Confederation** provided for a union, but an extremely loose and fragile one. **George Washington called it a “rope of sand.”** There was no common currency; individual states still

produced their own. There was no national military force; many states still had their own armies and navies. There was little centralized control over foreign policy; states negotiated directly with other countries. And there was no national system

for imposing and collecting taxes.

Disputes between **Maryland and Virginia** over navigation rights on the Potomac River, which formed their common border, led to a conference of five states in Annapolis, Maryland, in 1786. Alexander Hamilton, a delegate from New York, said that such commercial issues were part of larger economic and political questions. What was needed, **he said, was a rethinking of the Confederation.** He and the other delegates proposed holding a convention to do just that. Support from Washington,

unquestionably the most trusted man in America, won over those who thought the idea was too bold.

The gathering in Philadelphia in May 1787 was remarkable. The 55 delegates elected to the convention had experien in colonial and state government. They were knowledgeable in history, law, and political theory. Most were young, but the group included the elderly **Benjamin Franklin**, who was nearing the end of an extraordinary career of public service and scientific achievement. Two notable Americans were not there: **Thomas Jeff erson was in Paris as American ambassador to France**, and Jo**hn Adams was in London as ambassador to Great Britain.**

The Continental Congress had authorized the convention to amend the **Articles of Confederatio**n. Instead, the delegates threw aside the Articles — judging them inadequate for the needs of the new nation — and devised a new form of government based on the separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers.

The gathering had become a constitutional convention. Reaching consensus on some of the details of a new constitution would prove extremely diffi cult. Many delegates

argued for a strong national government that **limited states’ rights**. Others argued **equally persuasively for a weak national government that preserved state authority.** Some delegates feared that Americans were not wise enough to govern themselves and so opposed any sort of popular elections.

Others thought the national government should have as broad a popular base as possible. **Representatives from small states insisted on equal representation in a national legislature.** Those from big states thought they deserved to have more infl uence. Representatives from states where slavery was illegal hoped toutlaw it.

Those from **slave states** rejected any attempts to do so. Some delegates wanted to limit the number of states in the Union. Others supported statehood for the newly settled lands to the West. Every question raised new divisions, and each was resolved by compromise. The draft Constitution was not a long document. Yet it

provided the framework for the most complex government yet devised. The national government would have full power to issue currency, levy taxes, grant patents, conduct foreign policy, maintain an army, establish post offi ces, and wage war. And it would have three equal branches — a congress, a president, and a court system — with balanced powers and checks against each other’s actions. Economic interests infl uenced the course of debate on the document, but so did state, sectional, and ideological interests. Also important was the idealism of the men who wrote it. They

believed they had designed a government that would promote

individual liberty and public virtue.

**On September 17, 1787, after four months of deliberation, a majority of delegates signed the new Constitution.** They agreed it would become the law of the land when nine of the 13 states had ratifi ed it. The ratifi cation process lasted about a year. Opponents voiced fears that a strong central government could become tyrannical and oppressive. Proponents responded that the system of checks and balances would prevent this from happening. The debate brought into existence two factions: the **Federalists,** who favored a strong central government and

who supported the Constitution, and the **Anti-Federalists,** who favored a loose association of states and who opposed the Constitution.