from Phyllis Schlafly

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Bicentennial of the Bill of Rights

On December 15, we celebrate the Bicentennial of the ratification of the Bill of Rights. This great document is relatively noncontroversial today, but two centuries ago, it was the biggest single issue during the hot and stormy debates in 1787 and 1781 over ratification of the United States Constitution.

The Constitution written at the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 did not contain guarantees of freedom of religion, press, speech, assembly, trial by jury, and numerous other rights our citizens believed important. Some militant spokesmen argued that a conspiracy had been hatched in Philadelphia to rob the people of their liberties and the -states of their sovereignty.

Most of the 95 newspapers in our fledgling nation supported ratification, but they remained silent on the issue of amendments or discounted their importance. Some even charged that demands for a bill of rights were just a political weapon designed to defeat the Constitution.

Supporters of the Constitution, called Federalists, at first refused to recognize the political importance of the bill of rights issue. They tried to convince their critics that a bill of rights was unnecessary because sections of the new Constitution are themselves a bill of rights, and anyway that the new federal government would not have any powers not specified in the Constitution itself.

Five states requested amendments to safeguard the rights of individuals from abuses of power by the new federal government. Only after the Federalists realized that the new Constitution might be rejected outright did they agree to recommend a series of amendments.

Even with the promise of a bill of rights, 545 or 33 percent of the 1,648 delegates in the various states voted to reject the Constitution. In six of the nine states, only the promise of future amendments enabled the Constitution to pass.

In a very hard-fought and bitter battle, Massachusetts ratified the Constitution by only 187 to 168. Rhode Island rejected the Constitution in a referendum by 2,711 to 239. New Hampshire ratified by the narrow margin of 57 to 47.

For some months, it was impossible to predict how the two largest states, New York and Virginia, would vote. In Virginia, Governor Patrick Henry's oratorical brilliance hurled against the Constitution was just as impressive as his previous performances, but he lost to the careful politicking and preparation of pro-Constitution James Madison when Virginia ratified 89 to 79. Then New York ratified by only 30 to 27.

North Caroli.na at first refused to ratify. Only after the Bill of Rights was adopted did North Carolina and Rhode Island take another look and decide to join the Union.

As soon as the new government was established, James Madison, the Father of the Constitution, moved quickly as a Congressman to fulfill the campaign promise for a bill of rights. He consolidated the recommendations of the states, and Congress submitted twelve “rights,” or amendments, to the states for ratification.

Ten of the twelve were ratified by eleven states, the number necessary for constitutional amendments at that time. These ten amendments became known as our Bill of Rights.

The story of the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, which explains the important role played by the Bill of Rights issue, is well told in the book A Child of Fortune by Jeffrey St. John (Jameson Books, Inc., Ottawa, IL, l990). The name of the book comes from a letter written to the Marquis de Lafayette by General George Washington in which he said that the Constitution signed in Philadelphia “is now a Child of Fortune, to be fostered by some and buffeted by others.”

St. John has written the history of these world-changing events in the style of a current 20th century newspaper correspondent. With simulated day-by-day reportage, this prize-winning journalist-historian makes his reader an eyewitness to the political battles that birthed our constitutional republic.

His book is authentic history, and he makes America's most important period come alive in a way that no writer has heretofore done. In a foreword to the book, former Chief Justice Warren Burger wrote: “Given the sad state of knowledge of our students including many college graduates -- about our history, this book should be required reading to graduate from high school.”

That's why the Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution, chaired by Mr. Burger, has sent a copy of this book to every high school library in the country. Here's hoping every high school student reads it.