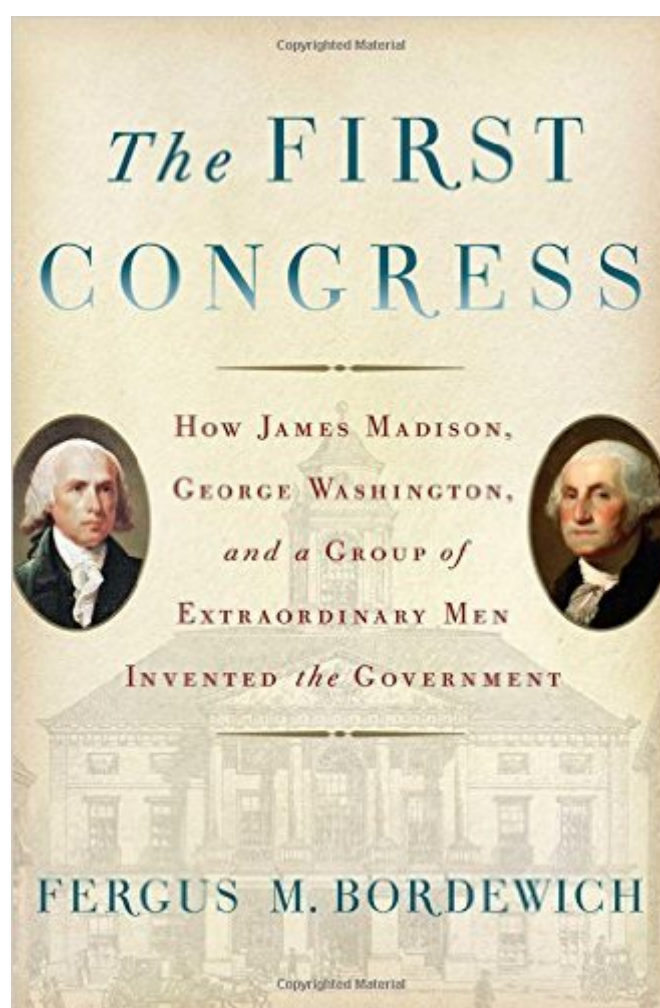


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# The First Congress: How James Madison, George Washington, And A Group Of Extraordinary Men Invented The Government



## Synopsis

The little known story of perhaps the most productive Congress in US history, the First Federal Congress of 1789-1791. The First Congress was the most important in US history, says prizewinning author and historian Fergus Bordewich, because it established how our government would actually function. Had it failed—as many at the time feared it would—it’s possible that the United States as we know it would not exist today. The Constitution was a broad set of principles. It was left to the members of the First Congress and President George Washington to create the machinery that would make the government work. Fortunately, James Madison, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and others less well known today, rose to the occasion. During two years of often fierce political struggle, they passed the first ten amendments to the Constitution; they resolved bitter regional rivalries to choose the site of the new national capital; they set in place the procedure for admitting new states to the union; and much more. But the First Congress also confronted some issues that remain to this day: the conflict between states’ rights and the powers of national government; the proper balance between legislative and executive power; the respective roles of the federal and state judiciaries; and funding the central government. Other issues, such as slavery, would fester for decades before being resolved. The First Congress tells the dramatic story of the two remarkable years when Washington, Madison, and their dedicated colleagues struggled to successfully create our government, an achievement that has lasted to the present day.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The First Congress of the United States (1789-91) was arguably the most productive of all subsequent Congresses. Like the infant presidency of George Washington, the federal legislators were starting from scratch, creating a new government as they went along. Among their achievements: passage of a federal taxation bill (something the previous Confederation government had failed to do and would lead to its downfall); creation of the federal judiciary system including the Supreme Court; creation of the executive departments of state, treasury, and war; the writing and passage of the Bill of Rights; passage of the Funding and Assumption Bills that made provision for paying the crushing war debt and restored the nation's foundering credit; creation of the Bank of the United States, lender of last resort and forerunner of today's Federal Reserve bank; and finding a permanent home for the federal government. It's a startling list of achievements considering opposition inside and outside of Congress, and it did not come without a struggle and compromise. Debates were rancorous, secession was threatened on more than one occasion, the germs of the two-party system were planted, and hanging over all like some deathly pall was slavery, which was debated briefly and shelved for another time. Fergus M. Bordewich covers it all with insight and the slightest bit of cynicism. The story is made rich by its focus on the players, many of whom only get passing mention in other books about this period. They are often quite colorful—cerebral Oliver Ellsworth, Roger Sherman, fiery James Jackson, Robert Morris, Elbridge Gerry, Fisher Ames, Elias Boudinot, Aedanus Burke, and dour William Maclay, who kept a journal. The stars of the story are, of course, George Washington, whose very presence made the startup government possible; James Madison, who wrote much of the legislation and guided it through Congress; Alexander Hamilton who, as Secretary of Treasury, wrote the funding and assumption bills that made provision for the debt. He also wrote bank bill and the legal opinion that trumped Madison's and Jefferson's opposing legal opinions and swayed Washington to sign the bill into law. The operative word for the success of the First Congress is compromise. Without a willingness to compromise, very little would have been accomplished. The great motivator behind a willingness to compromise—and given only passing mention by the author—was fear, fear that the anti-Federalists would hold a second Constitutional convention to dispense with the new Constitution and restore something akin to the Articles of Confederation and this return all power back to the states, and the fear of secession, not just of the slave-holding South, but of New England too. Tensions were rife during the first six months of the new government, and only eased up when George Washington signed the Bill of Rights act, which then went to the states for approval. Thomas Jefferson's role during this time was slight, except

for hosting the dinner for Hamilton and Madison that led to comprise: Madison backing away from blockage of the assumption bill, and Hamilton convincing congressmen from the Northeast to back down and let the residence bill pass, which moved the capital to Philadelphia for a ten-year period, and then to its permanent home on the slopes of the Potomac. Bottom line: there was nothing inevitable about the survival and success of the new government. It was never a foregone conclusion. It came about by men hailing from all parts of the country, each with his own agenda, willing to overlook their pride and prejudices and create a workable government. The result of their spirit of compromise was the successful launching of a government that continues to this day. Writing a detailed account of such an active and crucial period in our nation's history is a monumental task, and I salute the author for having done it. However, it's not the last word on this subject. I also very much appreciate "The Presidency of George Washington" by historian Forrest McDonald (McDonald wrote a great deal about this time but his name is not among those listed in the bibliography); the monumental "The Age of Federalism" by Stanley Elkins & Eric McKittrick. Another name missing from the bibliography is Joanne B. Freeman and her wonderful book "Affairs of Honor" which likewise delves into the personalities of this time. That said, I enjoyed Bordewich's polished and informative narrative and recommend his book highly. Five stars.

After a long, bloody struggle, the United States won their independence from Great Britain, but the government established by the Articles of Confederation did not work well. The new nation was vulnerable economically and militarily in the 1780s, and a better system of government was sorely needed. The new Constitution was eventually ratified by a quorum of states, and the country was hopeful when the new Congress convened in New York City. In "The First Congress," author Fergus Bordewich chronicles the herculean tasks that the first Senate and House of Representatives took on and accomplished to put the new United States on a much more stable footing. The First Congress did not get off to an auspicious start. Travel difficulties and plain indifference resulted in the humiliating lack of a quorum on the scheduled start date of March 4, 1789. When both chambers finally convened, the work in establishing operating procedures was difficult, with James Madison noting that "in every step the difficulties arising from novelty are severely experienced." President George Washington and every member of both chambers of Congress knew that their tasks were vital and that everything that they did in the first session of the new government would be looked back upon as precedents for decades if not generations to come. The sheer magnitude of issues that the First Congress addressed was stupendous, but it had to be, given the fragile condition of

the new country and the exigencies of starting a new government and bringing the Constitution to life. The cascade of issues and controversies addressed by Congress in 1789 and 1790 included amendments to the Constitution, economic policies and their differing effects on different regions, revenue and tariffs, relationships between the House and Senate and between Congress and President Washington, how the Constitution should be interpreted, resolution of debt and the assumption of state debt by the federal government, copyrights, treaties with the Native Americans, immigration policy, how much control a president should have over his appointments, the creation of the federal court system, the creation of a national bank and its related issues of debt and credit, the location of the permanent capital, and, perhaps most explosive and contentious, slavery. Twenty-first century Americans who complain about our national legislators might be surprised to learn, even if they should not be, that legislators of the eighteenth century were just as contentious and self-interested as those of our present day. Bordewich describes how after all of the parliamentary maneuvering, congressmen and senators had to make major compromises across sections and ideologies to make the new government work, with strong regional differences (and threats of disunion and civil war) appearing almost from the moment Congress came into being. The author recalls several speeches on the important issues—most of them serious, but a few even humorous. In another echo of our day, there were complaints in that distant time about the level of congressional pay. The reader also learns quite a bit about each of the Founding Fathers, as well as many of the key figures in the Senate and House. A major storyline of the two years was the rise of Alexander Hamilton and the beginnings of his rivalry with James Madison, which during the First Congress was centered around economics, debt, and the national bank. Bordewich does not neglect to mention some of the details of everyday life in the late eighteenth century in this great book; the reader learns about the travel challenges, primitive medicine, food, celebrations, weather, and revival meetings, and other passages detail congressional recesses and the business and personal dealings that important figures had to conduct. Also, one gets a picture of what New York City and Philadelphia were like at the time, and those who have ever gone on a New England vacation will smile inwardly when reading the account of Washington's travel through Massachusetts and his remarks about the crooked roads there. The author closes by describing the close of Congress, noting who did and did not return for the Second Congress and that the citizenry followed affairs then closely, with public opinion already growing strong and more important. An Afterword section recalls what happened to some of the key figures of the time in the years after the First Congress passed into history. The book also contains a complete listing of the House and Senate members of the First Congress as well as a good picture section. This volume is certainly erudite, and many will

welcome Bordewich's challenge of the vocabularies of even serious readers. In high school and college courses the ratification of the Constitution is often covered in great detail, but the first years of constitutional government are usually not. "The First Congress" fills that void, and this superb volume would be enjoyed by anyone who has a strong interest in the years of the early republic.

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