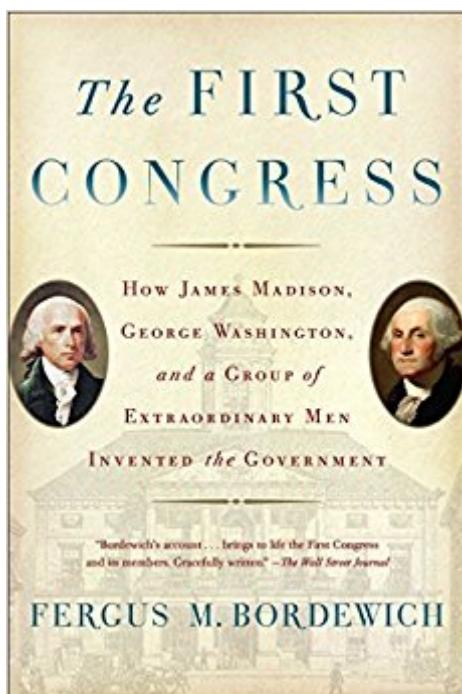


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The First Congress: How James Madison, George Washington, And A Group Of Extraordinary Men Invented The Government



Synopsis

This [“fascinating”](#) ([Chicago Tribune](#)), [“lively”](#) ([The New York Times](#)) history tells how the First Congress and the Washington administration created one of the most productive and far-reaching governments in American history [“gracefully written”](#) [and well worth reading”](#) ([The Wall Street Journal](#)). The First Congress may have been the most important in American history because it established how our government would work. The Constitution was a broad set of principles that left undefined the machinery of government. Fortunately, far-sighted, brilliant, and determined men such as Washington, Madison, Adams, Hamilton, and Jefferson (and others less well known today) labored to create a functioning government. In *The First Congress*, award-winning author Fergus Bordewich brings to life the achievements of the First Congress: it debated and passed the first ten amendments to the Constitution, which we know as the Bill of Rights; admitted North Carolina and Rhode Island to the union when they belatedly ratified the Constitution, then admitted two new states, Kentucky and Vermont, establishing the procedure for admitting new states on equal terms with the original thirteen; chose the site of the national capital, a new city to be built on the Potomac; created a national bank to handle the infant republic’s finances; created the first cabinet positions and the federal court system; and many other achievements. But it avoided the subject of slavery, which was too contentious to resolve. The First Congress takes us back to the days when the future of our country was by no means assured and makes [“an intricate story clear and fascinating”](#) ([The Washington Post](#)).

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Customer Reviews

“Fergus M. Bordewich has transformed the recent multivolume collection of sources on the First Federal Congress into a lively narrative. . . . The First Congress is a perfect example of what a very good writer can do with these raw materials.” (Carol Berkin *The New York Times Book Review*) “The First Congress faced its daunting agenda with resourcefulness. . . . [Bordewich] provides clear and often compelling analyses of the problems that required varying doses of compromise and persuasion. . . . Readers will enjoy this book for making an intricate story clear and fascinating.” (David S. Heidler *The Washington Post*) “Fergus Bordewich paints a compelling portrait of the first, critical steps of the American republic, a perilous time when Congress . . . a body that has proved naturally contentious and short-sighted . . . had to be wise, and it was. The First Congress deftly blends many voices and stories into an elegant and gripping tale of a triumph of self-government.” (David O. Stewart, author of *Madison's Gift: Five Partnerships That Built America* and *The Summer of 1787: The Men Who Invented the Constitution*) “Bordewich’s account is well worth reading and brings to life the First Congress and its members. Gracefully written. . . . Bordewich provides a balanced assessment of the many achievements of the First Congress, while not overlooking its shortcomings.” (Mark G. Spencer *The Wall Street Journal*) “The story of how these flawed but brilliant men managed to put the theory of the Constitution into actual practice and create a functioning government is the subject of Fergus M. Bordewich’s fascinating *The First Congress*.” (Tom Moran *The Chicago Tribune*) “With his highly informative *The First Congress*, historian Fergus M. Bordewich joins the ranks of familiar authors like Joseph Ellis, David McCullough, Fred Kaplan and others, whose biographies and studies of early American history have captivated so many. . . . Bordewich combines fascinating biography with a detailed account of the three sessions of Congress that ran from 1789-1791 and established the institutions and protocols that we follow today.” (Tony Lewis *The Providence Journal*) “Entertaining. . . . The colorful machinations of our first Congress receive a delightful account that will keep even educated readers turning the pages.” (Kirkus Reviews (starred review)) “Bordewich brings back to life the . . . practical, impatient, and tired politicians . . . who transformed the parchment of the US Constitution into the flesh and blood of a national government. . . . Anyone curious about the origins of today’s much-maligned national legislature will marvel at this hair-raising story of stunning political creativity.” (Richard A. Baker, US Senate Historian Emeritus and co-author

of The American Senate: An Insider's History) "Fergus Bordewich reminds us, with solid research and sprightly prose, that once upon a time Congress worked and leaders of the new nation understood that true patriotism requires that legislators actually get things done and keep the Government open for business. This book should be required reading for every member of Congress." (Paul Finkelman, Senior Fellow, University of Pennsylvania Program on Democracy, Citizenship, and Constitutionalism) "[A] highly readable and sweeping account of the First Federal Congress." (Kenneth R. Bowling, co-editor, First Federal Congress Project; Adjunct Professor of History, George Washington University; and author of Peter Charles L'Enfant) "Bordewich expertly conveys the excitement of how the first U.S. Congress (1789-91) created a government. . . . This engaging and accessible book sheds new light on the meaning of constitutionality." (Library Journal) "Finally, a popular and finely paced account of the Congress that could have easily unmade the new American republic." (Allen Guelzo, The Washington Monthly) "Bordewich's telling of the debates around what we think of as the Bill of Rights is especially illuminating. . . . Bordewich brings these debates to life with fascinating and sympathetic portraits." (Philip A. Wallach, The Brookings Institution)

Fergus M. Bordewich is the author of several books, among them *America's Great Debate: Henry Clay, Stephen A. Douglas, and the Compromise That Preserved the Union*, which won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in history. His articles have appeared in many magazines and newspapers. He lives in San Francisco. Visit him at FergusBordewich.com.

This is well written history that takes a thrilling story to great heights. Bordewich is that too-rare combination of solid historian and good story teller. His dissection of the First Congress is enjoyable and well told. The first part of the book is the James Madison story, as Madison struggles to give the new government of the United States staying power. The second part of the book is the Alexander Hamilton story, as Hamilton becomes Washington's legislative lodestar and displaces Madison as the Chief Executive's "prime minister" of sorts. Relying on diary excerpts (to a great extent in the telling of the Senate story as that was not an open body in its early years) as well as public records, the author gives a great account of the Bill of Rights and other seminal legislation that grounded our national government and allowed our people to accept and support it. The legislative battles and maneuverings are fascinating and well told. I learned a lot of interesting things (and I read a fair amount of history of the period) and enjoyed the well executed telling of more famous events like

the assumption deal that fixed the location of our national capital. Washington's role and the execution of his office as he saw it (the man was very much aware that he was possibly setting precedents that would last for eons) is also explored as it must be in any such history. The change in Madison - from Federalist to what could be described as proto-Jeffersonian over the course of the session is an interesting example of how "great men" still must be politicians if they want to stay on the playing field. The men portrayed are patriots (mostly), some "great" and some hacks who many readers will conclude had no business being there. Thus, they were like any legislative body ever assembled, before or since. A quote by Charles Francis Adams in the book (paraphrasing here) to the effect that to call them gifted and special is to deny their greatness as they were able to forge a great governmental foundation despite the political pressures they faced and vanity and egos and prejudices they possessed.

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 Treasure, 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 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.

I really enjoyed this book which puts the reader in a front-row seat watching the First U.S. Congress debate such contentious issues as the assumption of debt, slavery, the location of the Capitol and

the creation of a national bank. One takeaway I have is a good sense at how incredibly difficult it was for this first Congress to develop a form a government which had never been tried before. The rules which our contemporary Congress follows had not been established and these men were essentially developing how our government functions while trying to execute those functions. Another takeaway is how difficult it was to get any sort of legislation passed. There was as much debate, arguing, cajoling and deal-making that there is today. It's almost amazing that given the size our Congress, that any bill is passed outside of party lines. I will say that the title of the book left me a little confused because it mentioned that James Madison and George Washington, along with a group of extraordinary men, invented our government. Throughout the book, I was waiting for George Washington to do something on the level that James Madison was doing in the House of Representatives. Maybe George Washington was working behind the scenes because besides a couple of instances where Washington addressed the Congressmen and Senators, he rarely made an appearance in the book. Overall, I really enjoyed reading the book and have a new found appreciation for James Madison who I intend to read on further as well as Alexander Hamilton.

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