The Bill of Rights
U.S. Constitution would not have been ratified without the Bill of Rights

George Mason, author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights (courtesy of Gunston Hall)

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By J.W. Peltason

The Federalists might never have obtained ratification in several important states if they had not promised to add a bill of rights to the Constitution. Most state constitutions adopted during the Revolution had included a clear declaration of the rights of all people. Most Americans believed that no constitution could be considered complete without such a declaration. George Mason of Virginia was responsible for the first and most famous American bill of rights, the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776. He and Patrick Henry might have prevented ratification of the Constitution in Virginia if the Federalists had not agreed to their demands for amendments.

James Madison led the new Congress in proposing amendments. He suggested 15 amendments, and the Congress accepted 12 of them to be submitted for ratification by the state legislatures under the amending process outlined in the Fifth Article of the Constitution. By December 15,
1791, the necessary legislatures in three-fourths of the states had approved 10 of the 12 amendments. These 10 amendments are known as the *Bill of Rights*. One of the two rejected amendments dealt with the size of the House of Representatives. It would have changed representation from no more than one representative for every 30,000 persons to no more than one for every 50,000 persons. The other rejected amendment provided that Congress could not change the salaries of its members until after an election of representatives had been held. It was ratified 202 years later and it became the 27th Amendment.

The Antifederalists accepted defeat when the Constitution was adopted, and then they set about to win power under its rules. Their actions set a style for American politics that has never changed. Americans sometimes feel dissatisfied with the policies and practices of those who govern. But few Americans have condemned the constitutional system or have felt that a second Constitutional Convention might establish a better one.

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