

The Forgotten Delegate

The Constitutional Convention of 1787 is generally remembered as a gathering of some of the most intelligent minds to walk the nation — Washington, Madison, Franklin, etc. — working to revise the government for the United States. And although this convention is portrayed as all successful, it did not all go as smoothly as remembered.

Luther Martin, a delegate from Maryland, was one of the fiercest critics of the new Constitution. Martin advocated for states' rights and was deeply concerned over a strong central government. As the convention continued, he became increasingly unhappy with the direction it was taking, especially with the push for proportional representation in Congress.

Martin delivered a speech in June 1787, where he strongly protested the Virginia Plan, which proposed a bicameral legislature based on population size, fearing that smaller states like Maryland would lose their voice in the new government. This advocacy for states' rights and untrusting nature over a powerful executive earned him only a few allies at the convention.

Yet, Martin's major point was his opposition to the “necessary and proper” clause, which he believed would grant the federal government unchecked powers and undermine state authority. He feared that the centralized government created by the Constitution would be too powerful and too distant from the people. To Martin, the Constitution's failure to include a Bill of Rights at that stage was equally concerning, fearing that individual liberties would be in constant jeopardy.

As the final draft of the Constitution took shape, Martin had had enough. Convinced that the new Constitution would trample on the rights of individual states (and therefore people), he left the convention, refusing to sign the document. He later returned to Maryland and campaigned against ratification. In doing so, Martin joined a larger group of Anti-Federalists who feared that the Constitution endangered the very liberties they fought for in the Revolution.

Martin's loud opposition helped fuel the eventual push for the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution, which were added in 1791 in an effort to aid ratification. These amendments addressed some of his core concerns, particularly by explicitly protecting freedoms like speech, religion, and the press.

So, although history often focuses on the Framers who supported the Constitution, Martin's dissent is a reminder that the path during the Convention was far from smooth. His departure highlights the divisions that shaped the nation's founding document. In the end, Martin's concerns about the balance of power between the federal government and the states continue to echo in American politics to this day.

References:

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