

MEET THE DISSENTERS

ELBRIDGE GERRY (1744–1814) **MASSACHUSETTS**

Small, thin, with a hawklike nose and a squint in his eye, this Marblehead native was the third of twelve children of a wealthy merchant-shipper. When Gerry graduated from Harvard College, he joined his father and his brothers in the family export business. Despite a slight stutter, Gerry entered politics in 1772 and, as a protégé of Samuel Adams, became an outspoken advocate of independence. In 1776, Gerry became a member of the Continental Congress, where he focused his attention on military and financial matters. His steady call for better pay and equipment for the Continental troops earned him the name “Soldiers’ Friend.” Although he sat in the Confederation Congress from 1783 to 1785, Gerry found himself less suited to governing than to agitating for revolution. Dour, suspicious, and aggressive, Gerry made many enemies during his political career, but even his foes conceded that he was politically shrewd and clever. At the Constitutional Convention, Gerry managed to antagonize almost everyone with his unpredictable stances on key issues. Although he began the Convention as an advocate of a strong central government, he ultimately refused to sign the Constitution that it produced and worked against ratification in his home state. In 1789, however, he declared himself a supporter of the new government and was elected to the first Congress. Here he became a strong advocate of Federalist policies. By 1789, Gerry had shifted political loyalties once again. After several failures to win the governorship of his home state, Gerry at last took that office in 1810. When the Democratic-Republicans attempted to hold on to political power in Massachusetts by redistricting measures, Gerry’s Federalist opponents coined the phrase “gerrymandering” to describe this political ploy. Nearly seventy years old, Gerry nevertheless agreed to serve as James Madison’s vice president in 1813, the last political office of his long and stormy career.

GEORGE MASON (1725–1792) **VIRGINIA**

Perhaps the most effective opponent of Madison and the Federalists, Mason was raised by his uncle, John Mercer, following his father’s death when Mason was a young boy. Mercer boasted one of the largest private libraries in the colonies, and Mason read widely in these fifteen hundred volumes. As the owner of Gunston Hall, one of Virginia’s largest plantations, Mason was a wealthy and socially influential man. He became involved in western land speculation, buying an interest in the Ohio Company, and wrote a stinging defense of colonial entitlement to the Ohio Valley region when the Crown revoked the company’s rights. Mason served as a justice of the peace before taking a seat in 1759 in the House of Burgesses. He took up his pen

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 5: The Bill of Rights

5.1 Info Brief

once again to defend the colonial position on the Stamp Act, and by 1774, he had emerged as a leader of the patriot movement in Virginia. Mason drafted the Virginia Declaration of Rights in 1776. By the early 1780s, Mason had grown disillusioned with public life and retired to Gunston Hall. He agreed to attend the Mount Vernon conference in 1785 but did not go to Annapolis despite his appointment as a delegate to that convention. Mason played a leading role at the Constitutional Convention, speaking frequently and exerting considerable influence over the deliberations. He became increasingly critical of the direction the Convention was moving, however, and in the end, Mason refused to sign the Constitution. Among his primary objections was the absence of a bill of rights. Mason actively campaigned against ratification in Virginia, causing a breach in his friendships with both Washington and Madison.

EDMUND RANDOLPH (1753–1813) **VIRGINIA**

Born into a prosperous planter family, Randolph received his education at the College of William and Mary and then went on to study law with his father. When the Revolution began, Randolph's father chose to remain loyal to the Crown; the younger Randolph supported independence. He served as one of General Washington's aides-de-camp during the war. At twenty-three, Randolph was the youngest member of the state convention that adopted Virginia's first constitution in 1776. Soon afterward he became mayor of Williamsburg and then the state's attorney general. He entered national politics with his election to the Continental Congress in 1779. In 1786, Randolph became governor of Virginia. It was Randolph who presented the Virginia Plan to the Constitutional Convention, but as the weeks went by, his support for a strong central government diminished. He reluctantly declared his unwillingness to sign the Constitution at the Convention, but when the ratification battle began in Virginia, Randolph once again returned to the Federalist camp. He served as President Washington's first attorney general, and when Jefferson resigned from his cabinet post as secretary of state in 1794, Randolph stepped into that position. He attempted to remain neutral in the growing political division between Jefferson and Hamilton, and perhaps because of the strain this caused, he decided to retire from public life in 1795. He returned to the practice of law and devoted his free time to writing a history of Virginia.