Last week, we told how the convention finally agreed on how states would be represented in the national government. There would be two houses in the national legislature. In one house -- the House of Representatives -- the number of representatives from each state would depend on the state's population. In the other house -- the Senate -- all states would have an equal number of representatives. The agreement on representation was known as the "Great Compromise." Not all the delegates in Philadelphia were pleased with it. But it saved the convention from failure. The debate on representation in the House raised an important issue. No one wanted to talk about it. But all the delegates knew they must discuss it. The issue was slavery. If representation was based on population, who would you count? Would you count just free people? Or would you count Negro slaves, too? There were thousands of slaves in the United States in seventeen eighty-seven. Most lived in southern states.

But many could be found in the north, too. And northern ship owners made a lot of money by importing slaves from Africa. The Articles of Confederation said nothing about slavery. Each state could decide to permit it or not. Massachusetts, for example, had made slavery illegal. Nine other states had stopped importing new slaves. Only three states -- Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina -- continued to import slaves. The issue was never easy to discuss. Some of the most important men in America owned slaves. They included George Washington and James Madison. No one wanted to insult these men. Yet the convention had to make some decisions about slavery. Slavery affected laws on trade and taxes, as well as the question of representation in Congress. During the debate, some delegates argued that slaves were property. They could not be counted for purposes of representation. Others argued that slaves were people and should be counted with everyone else. Gouverneur Morris of Pennsylvania made an angry speech. "Slavery," he declared, "is an evil institution.

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It has caused great sadness and poverty in all the states where it is permitted." Charles Pinckney of South Carolina defended the existence of slavery in the United States. "In all ages," he said, "one half of mankind have been slaves." George Mason of Virginia, a slave owner, wanted to free all slaves. He said Virginia attempted to do this when it was a British colony. But he said the British government blocked Virginia's attempts. Mason blamed the problem on British businessmen who made money from slavery. Other delegates rose to denounce or defend slavery. But the convention had no power to rule on whether slavery was right or wrong. Everyone knew the convention would fail if it tried to write a Constitution that banned slavery. The southern states would never accept such a document. They would refuse to join the United States. Rufus King of Massachusetts said the convention should consider slavery only as a political matter. And that is what happened. The convention accepted several political compromises on the issue. James Wilson of Pennsylvania, for example, proposed a method of counting each state's population for purposes of representation. All white persons and other free citizens would be counted as one each. Every five slaves would be counted only as three persons. This was called the 'three-fifths' rule. The delegates accepted it.

The word 'slave' was never used in the Constitution. It simply used the words 'all other persons.' The 'three-fifths rule' remained law until the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution was passed in eighteen sixty-eight. Alexander Hamilton said the three-fifths compromise was necessary. "Without it," he said, "no union could possibly have been formed." Slavery also became an issue when the convention began discussing the powers of the national legislature. Once again, the question was asked: Are slaves people? Or are they property? The answer would affect import taxes and the growth of new states. The convention accepted several compromises on these questions, too. It agreed that the national treasury could collect a tax of ten dollars for every imported slave. It also agreed that slaves could be imported until the year eighteen-oh-eight. Then no new slaves could be brought into the country. Until then, each state had the power to make its own decisions about slavery. After eighteen-oh-eight, the national government would make all decisions. As debate on a new Constitution continued through the summer of seventeen eighty-seven, several delegates asked an important question. Who would approve, or ratify, it? The state legislatures? The people?

Or, as Gouverneur Morris proposed, one big national convention? As always, Elbridge Gerry opposed giving this power to the people. "The people," he said, "have the wildest ideas of government in the world." James Madison disagreed. He believed the people must ratify their new plan of government. Madison said, "I consider the difference between a system founded on the legislatures only, and one founded on the people, to be the true difference between a treaty and a constitution." Edmund Randolph of Virginia proposed that state conventions should consider the document prepared by the Philadelphia convention. They could offer amendments, he said. And then another general convention would decide on a final document. Gouverneur Morris agreed, but for another reason. He said, "I have long wished for another convention that would have the firmness to provide a strong central government...which we are afraid to do." James Madison hated the idea. Calling another general convention would mean the Philadelphia convention had failed.

It would mean the end of all his hard work and hopes. When the debate was over, the delegates agreed that the people should ratify the new Constitution through conventions held in each state. Finally, the delegates had to decide how many 'yes' votes by states would be needed to ratify the Constitution. Any changes to the Articles of Confederation needed ratification by all thirteen states. The Philadelphia convention was called only to change those Articles. So all thirteen would have to approve. This, as several delegates noted, would be impossible. After all, Rhode Island never sent a representative to Philadelphia. It was sure to reject the Constitution. Also, as everyone knew, the Philadelphia convention went far past the point of changing the Articles of Confederation. The delegates wrote a completely new plan of government. They could agree to accept ratification by fewer than thirteen states. Delegates who supported a strong central government acted quickly. They raised the question of numbers. How many states were needed to ratify? By the end of the day, the convention had not decided. But many of the delegates must have met that night. Early the next day, the convention voted. And the number it agreed on was nine. The great convention in Philadelphia was nearing the end of its work. It needed only to write out its agreements in final form and sign the document. That will be our story next week.