



## A little division leads to a multiplication of freedom

By Jim Waters

Political pundits, editorial pages and other history-challenged Kentuckians grouse about divisive politics and unproductive legislative sessions.

They would have relished America's early days. The founders locked themselves in the Pennsylvania State House during the summer of 1787 and emerged with the greatest man-made document ever – the U.S. Constitution. But what happened behind those doors certainly didn't resemble a love fest. Rather, think of it more as the "Summer of Making Sausage."

The end product: exceptional. The process: messy.

Intense verbal battles erupted between proponents of strong central government and those who favored weaker federal powers. Small and large states clashed. Bitterness attached itself to arguments about issues ranging from slavery to the power of presidents. And you think we face tough issues today?

Sometimes the founders are over-idealized. They had their flaws. But they didn't play the kind of legislative games popular with today's yellow-bellied politicians. They proffered great ideas and displayed unyielding conviction.

They looked down the barrel of British guns and sacrificed their fortunes to pursue liberty. The same document they signed to declare independence would serve as their death warrant if they failed.

Yet, independent spirits such as James Madison and Thomas Jefferson maintained a tremendous sense of when to compromise for the good of the country and when to hold the line.

For instance, if the Federalists hadn't acquiesced to anti-Federalists' call for a Bill of Rights, the Constitution we know likely would not exist. Instead of the United States of America, history would have recounted a cluster of small, disparate countries with competing territorial despots.

Truth is, this country was *born* by divided government.

It probably couldn't have happened any other way. Even our founders, who often argued furiously, agreed on that.

"Divided we ever have been, and ever must be," declared Adams.

Jefferson agreed, stating: "Divided we stand, united we fall."

All Kentuckians should be concerned too few politicians display some of that same kind of fervor while railing against profligate spending plans and educational cover-ups that threaten to give our state the signature of a Third-World Country.

Not enough lawmakers are willing to go toe-to-toe with wayward budget chairmen, weak-kneed House Speakers or waffling governors. John Adams wouldn't have had any problem doing so.

William Niskanen, chairman of Cato Institute's board of directors, once noted in a Washington Monthly magazine article the value of divided government:

- Spending increases an average of only 1.73 percent when opposing political parties control the White House and Congress. When the same parties control the presidency and Congress, spending more than triples – increasing by an average of 5.26 percent.
- Major reforms engineered between divided governments survive. A Democratically controlled House of Representatives approved President Reagan's tax cuts in 1981 and 1986; Republicans enacted welfare reforms during Democrat Bill Clinton's presidency.
- American participation in war is constrained. Niskanen noted: "In 200 years of U.S. history, every one of our conflicts involving more than a week of ground combat has been initiated by a unified government."

Editorialists usually bemoan "divisive government" when they don't get their way. For example, some of Kentucky's editorial pages rushed to defend tax-increase proposals during the 2008 legislative session. Fearing voter backlash, many lawmakers resisted.

Special-interest editorialists will lament the divisive politics in Frankfort while claiming not enough got done.

George Washington, who towers above all Founders, gets credit for urging his fellow Americans to: "Associate yourself with men of good quality if you esteem your own reputation; for 'tis better to be alone than in bad company."

Likewise, it's better to have achieved little during a legislative session than to have the "bad company" of uniformly accepted failure.

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