THE HOUSE
For my children:
Elizabeth, Joan and Bob

THE HOUSE: THE HISTORY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.
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Prologue

The United States House of Representatives is regarded by many as the finest deliberative body in human history. A grand conceit, to be sure. But one that is not far from the mark. It is an extraordinary instrument for legislating the will of the American people. Through an electoral process it regularly absorbs fresh blood and fresh ideas so that it can reflect popular needs and demands. Every one of its members from 1789 to the present—over ten thousand individuals!—has been elected. Not one has been appointed. It has been said many times that the United States House of Representatives is the "People’s House," and as such it has endured for more than two centuries.

Any history of this institution should begin with a reminder that many of the traditions and practices of the American system of government originated in Great Britain, a country ruled by a monarch and a two-house Parliament: the House of Lords and the House of Commons. As England expanded its empire into the New World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and colonies of transplanted settlers were established, the king, or corporate or individual entrepreneurs who subsidized the colonization, appointed governors to represent their will and execute their instructions. To assist them in their responsibilities, these governors chose advisory councils of distinguished residents and over time allowed them to offer suggestions by which the colonies could be administered.

More particularly, in 1619, the stockholders of the company that maintained settlers in what was the colony of Virginia in North America
As the number of immigrants to the New World increased and the frontier moved steadily eastward, the colonists became more and more independent of their local assemblies. In the 1620s, many colonies established their own governing bodies, the General Court of Massachusetts Bay Colony, elected by the colonists to represent them in colonial affairs. These General Courts granted the colonists the right to make their own laws and choose their own officials. At first every settler had the right to vote for local offices, but this right was soon limited to the freemen, those who had paid their debts and had lived in the colony for a certain number of years.

Other colonies, such as Virginia and Maryland, also established General Courts to govern the colony. In Virginia, the General Court was elected by the Virginia Company, a group of investors who owned the colony. In Maryland, the General Court was elected by the proprietor, Lord Baltimore, who owned the colony.

As the colonies grew in size and population, they began to feel that they were too independent of the mother country. The colonists were concerned about the unfairness of paying taxes to England without representation in the British Parliament. This feeling of growing independence was fueled by a sense of identity as Englishmen living in a new land, and a desire to chart their own course.

The colonists' desire for self-government and their fear of the power of the mother country were brought to a head in the Boston Massacre. In 1770, a group of British soldiers fired into a crowd of colonists, killing five and wounding several others. This event sparked a sense of outrage and led to the colonists' growing belief that they needed to take control of their own affairs.

The colonists' resistance to British rule took many forms, from peaceful protests to armed rebellion. In 1775, the colonies declared their independence from England, and the American Revolutionary War began. This war lasted for eight years and resulted in the colonies winning their independence.

The American Revolution was a turning point in history, not only for the United States but for the rest of the world. It demonstrated the power of self-government and the importance of individual liberty. The United States became a beacon of democracy, inspiring other nations to seek their own independence and to value freedom above all else.

This struggle for freedom is the story of the United States, a nation founded on the principles of liberty and democracy. It is a story of people who believed in the power of their own ideas and who were willing to fight for what they believed in. It is a story of the sacrifices made by those who came before us, so that we could live in a free and just society. And it is a story of hope, that the values of liberty and democracy will continue to inspire future generations to come.
Boston Tea Party and the resulting Coercive Acts of 1774 (which closed the port of Boston, forbade town meetings and quartered soldiers among civilians, among other things) further exacerbated the problem. These Intolerable Acts, as the colonists dubbed them, triggered the convocation of delegates assembled from all the colonies, save Georgia, to agree on demands and devise strategy to pressure Britain into recognizing the rights of colonists. When the First Continental Congress convened in Carpenter’s Hall in Philadelphia in September 1774, most delegates had no intention of initiating rebellion. They were still, by and large, loyal to the Crown.

It is important to note that they used the word “Congress” to describe this assembly. That word did not mean a legislative body as it is used today. A congress in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries usually denoted a diplomatic assembly of sovereign national states, such as the Congress of Vienna in 1815 that arranged the peace following the Napoleonic Wars. The countries taking part in the Congress of Vienna were independent nations. So the delegates at the First Continental Congress represented a collection of individual entities, each of which had special needs and interests. And although they had separate concerns and separate governing bodies, they had a common purpose and goal which bound them together.

In addressing their deeply felt grievance, the First Continental Congress executed a number of important actions. It demanded the repeal of the Intolerable Acts, the repeal of all taxes and a return to a policy of salutary neglect. Furthermore, it agreed to collective economic sanctions against Great Britain, namely, the imposition of a policy of nonimportation of British goods, starting on December 1, 1774, and nonexportation of American goods on September 1, 1775. This Continental Association was to be enforced by committees within each colony chosen by those qualified to participate in assembly elections, thereby involving the entire electorate in the effort. However, merchants and planters failed to carry out the nonimportation and nonexportation agreements, and Parliament refused to accept the claims of the colonists, or relax its rule.

So the crisis escalated, and a Second Continental Congress convened in the State House in Philadelphia in 1775. Some of the members of this Congress favored the radical cause of independence; they included John Adams and Samuel Adams of Massachusetts, Richard Henry Lee and George Wythe of Virginia, and Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina, but they were balanced by moderates such as John Dickinson and James Wilson of Pennsylvania, and John Jay of New York. Even so, most of these delegates realized that if conflict or revolution ensued it must not come from any action by Congress but from the continued provocations of Great Britain. The delegates must stand together and project the appearance of unanimity, not disagreement or discord.

As subsequently happened, Britain played into the hands of the radicals. It pushed the delegates into adopting revolutionary action. Bloodshed occurred at Lexington and Concord and at Bunker Hill in Massachusetts, whereupon these delegates dared to proceed further to seek redress of their grievances. They raised an army, issued Continental currency and opened negotiations with foreign powers to win support and intervention.

As the fighting continued, the move toward independence accelerated. In 1776, North Carolina instructed its delegates in Congress to seek separation, and on June 7, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia submitted a resolution which declared that the colonies are “and of right ought to be, free and independent states.” A committee was formed to write a justification of the action to be taken should Congress vote to adopt the resolution. Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the document, wrote an eloquent statement about human liberty and equality. On July 2, 1776, the Lee resolution was passed, and on July 4, the Declaration of Independence was adopted without dissent.

These delegates were united in the single goal of winning independence from Britain, but they had little enthusiasm for creating a controlling central government. After all they were committed to their individual “sovereign” states. Still they needed a central authority of some sort to attend to such problems as providing military and financial resources for their common goal. So another committee prepared a proposal outlining the structure of a national government. This was the Articles of Confederation, a document written mainly by Dickinson. It constituted a major breakthrough in the development of representative government for a collection of sovereign entities. It declared that the several states were to be joined in a “perpetual union” and a “firm league of friendship.” But it also admitted that each state would retain its “sovereignty, freedom, and independence.” And it created a unicameral Congress representing all the states.

But the Articles failed. The document lacked the instruments of government essential to make it work effectively. It lacked the ability to coerce or enforce its laws and the power to tax; it forbade any commercial treaty that might limit the right of individual states to levy their own import duties; and it required a unanimous vote by the states to amend the Articles, something that proved to be impossible. In other words, this central government was subservient to thirteen other governmental bodies.

It took until March 1, 1781, for the Articles of Confederation to be ratified, since ratification also required unanimous approval. Maryland refused its consent until all the states ceded their western lands to the central government.

Meanwhile, in mid-October 1781, the British army surrendered at Yorktown and the struggle for independence came to an end. The following year a provisional peace treaty was signed in Paris and later ratified by Congress.