

## Becoming an American

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V.

**I**N THIS LETTER I shall write upon the making of laws, which, in my judgment, is the governmental responsibility that demands from our citizens closest study and most careful attention.

There are three functions of government:

- (1) the making of laws,
- (2) the enforcing of laws and the directing of the machinery of government, and
- (3) the explaining of the laws and the punishment of those who break them.

In olden times all three of these functions were exercised by one person—the chief or the king. As long as this ruler used his vast power wisely and fairly, his government was satisfactory and his subjects contented, but when his rule became autocratic, as it often did, there was thus enkindled in their hearts a desire to overthrow his power and many times there followed revolution and change in the government. Our nation is the product of such revolution and such change.

The makers of the plan of our government, contained in the United States Constitution, were very fearful of a government in which the three responsibilities were combined in one office or one department. Hence they gave them to three entirely separate and distinct departments—the legislative, the executive and the judicial departments. It is with the first of these departments that this letter has to do.

Our legislatures, both national and state, are organized according to what is called the bicameral system; that is, there are two houses, each serving as a check against hurried and unwise legislation on the part of the other. The men who wrote the Constitution were familiar with the two types of legislatures—that is, legislatures of one house and legislatures of two houses. Certain colonies had used the one-house system and had found it unsatisfactory in that its members were more prone to enact laws without sufficient consideration. Hence the tendency particularly among many of the colonists of English descent, was to favor the two-house plan. Moreover, a difference had arisen between the more thickly peopled colonies and those of few people over the number of representatives each should be given. This difference of opinion aroused among people and in the constitutional convention much discussion and dissension. Finally a compromise plan of having two houses, one a senate of two members from each state and the other a house in which representation should be according to population, was adopted.

Formerly, all members of the senate were elected by the state legislatures. This plan proved not wholly satisfactory in that now and then there was free use of money in bringing about elections and it came to be rather freely charged that state legislatures were thereby corrupted and rich men, rather than men chosen for ability alone, very often elected to the senate. To prevent this, in 1913 the Seventeenth Amendment, providing that senators shall be chosen

by direct vote of the people, was adopted. Members of the lower house, or house of representatives, have always been elected by direct vote of the people of the districts or states which they represent.

As was said before, it is the work of these two bodies, the two together being called Congress, to make laws. To do this they meet in regular session annually the first Monday in December and, in addition in special session whenever the President sees fit to call them together. The election of the members of Congress, that is, of the lower house and at least one-third of the senators, takes place on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November each even-numbered year. The newly elected Congress, however, does not assemble the following month. Instead, unless called in special session, it does not meet until December of the next year, thirteen months after the election. This long delay is strongly objected to by many people and it is very probable that in the near future efforts may be made to change it. Congress then usually remains in session for six or eight months. The second session, convening the following December, (there are two sessions of every congress) is called the short session, in that it must adjourn on the fourth of the following March when the terms of its members expire.

In the meeting of this body any member has the right to introduce for the consideration of his associate members any bill he thinks should be enacted into law. After he has written the proposed law out in proper words and form, he does this by reading its title and explaining what he hopes it will accomplish. It is then ordinarily printed and placed in the hands of the members. After a day's time, it is read a second time by title and referred to the proper committee, whose business it is to study its wording and meaning carefully, to consider its effects upon the country and to recommend either for or against it.

In the early days of our country, there were no committees in Congress. It was soon found, tho, that much time was lost thru the efforts of the entire body to consider all bills offered; so the plan of having smaller groups to study the various bills was devised and is in use today. As a consequence, much of the work of Congress or of a state Legislature is done by committees.

When the committee is ready to report, a time is set for the discussion of the bill and for a vote of the house upon its adoption. At this time, there comes the third and final reading, usually only by title. After such discussion as there may be, a vote is taken. If the bill passes this house, it then goes to the second house where the same plan is followed. If it is passed also by this house, it is submitted to the President or to the Governor, who will either sign it or veto it. If he vetoes the bill, it can be enacted into law by a two-thirds vote of both houses.

So you see that the making of a law is a slow and tedious process, requiring hard study and careful attention. It was hoped by the makers of our nation

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