

LESSON IN LITERATURE . . .

THEME

- The theme of a story is the idea that runs through the entire story.
- The idea that the author chooses for a theme is one that he thinks is true for all people, not just for the characters in the story.
- The plot, characters, and setting all help express the theme.
- Stories, poems, plays, and songs may express the same theme in different ways.

THINK ABOUT IT!

1. What idea is expressed in Sarah's words, "I can't spend one more day of my life as a slave"?
2. How does the river contribute to the theme of the story?
3. Can you list three ideas in the story that are true for everyone, not just for the characters in the story?
4. Name a story, poem, or song whose theme is "freedom."

No Turning Back

"Sarah, you can't swim across. You'll freeze."

The fear on Aunty's face didn't stop Sarah from taking the next step into the cold water of the river. "I can't spend one more day of my life as a slave, Aunty."

"We can try again tomorrow night," Aunty said.

Sarah turned her head around to face Aunty, but she kept her feet planted firmly in the direction of freedom. "Aunty, what is it you been saying to me these last two weeks when I get scared? When we hidin' in a swamp and feel the snakes swimmin' by our feet? When we hear those hounds baying in the distance?"

Aunty looked down. "G-d will provide."

"G-d will provide.' All my whole life, Aunty. When they sold Mama down to Alabama, you tell me G-d gonna provide. G-d got us this far. Why ain't He gonna provide right now?"

Aaaaaaaooooooooo! The baying of the dogs was getting closer.

"No turning back now, Aunty," Sarah whispered fiercely. "C'mon."

Suddenly Aunty pointed downriver. A flat boat was being poled upriver by a white man in dark clothing. He was struggling against the current of the river, but he was headed straight for them.

"Tracker didn't say it was going to be a white man," said Aunty.

Sarah stood tall and proud. These weeks in the woods—this taste of freedom—had changed her. Either this white man was their ride to freedom, or she would dive in and outswim him to the other side.

About twenty feet from Sarah the man cupped a hand over his mouth.

"You folks sure ain't quiet," he shouted. "I heard you half a mile away." Sarah held her breath.

The man drew to within fifteen feet. "Good thing, I guess. Rucker said you was *supposed* to cross down that way."

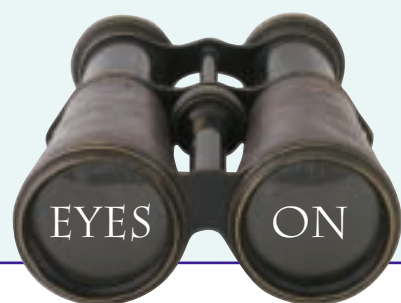
Sarah breathed a huge sigh of relief. "You Mr. Rucker's man?"

The man nodded. "Rucker will meet you at the barn," he said. "C'mon, get on before you freeze."

Barely aware of the chilly air, Sarah turned her eyes heavenward and mouthed the words, "Thank You."

INTO . . . *The Silent Lobby*

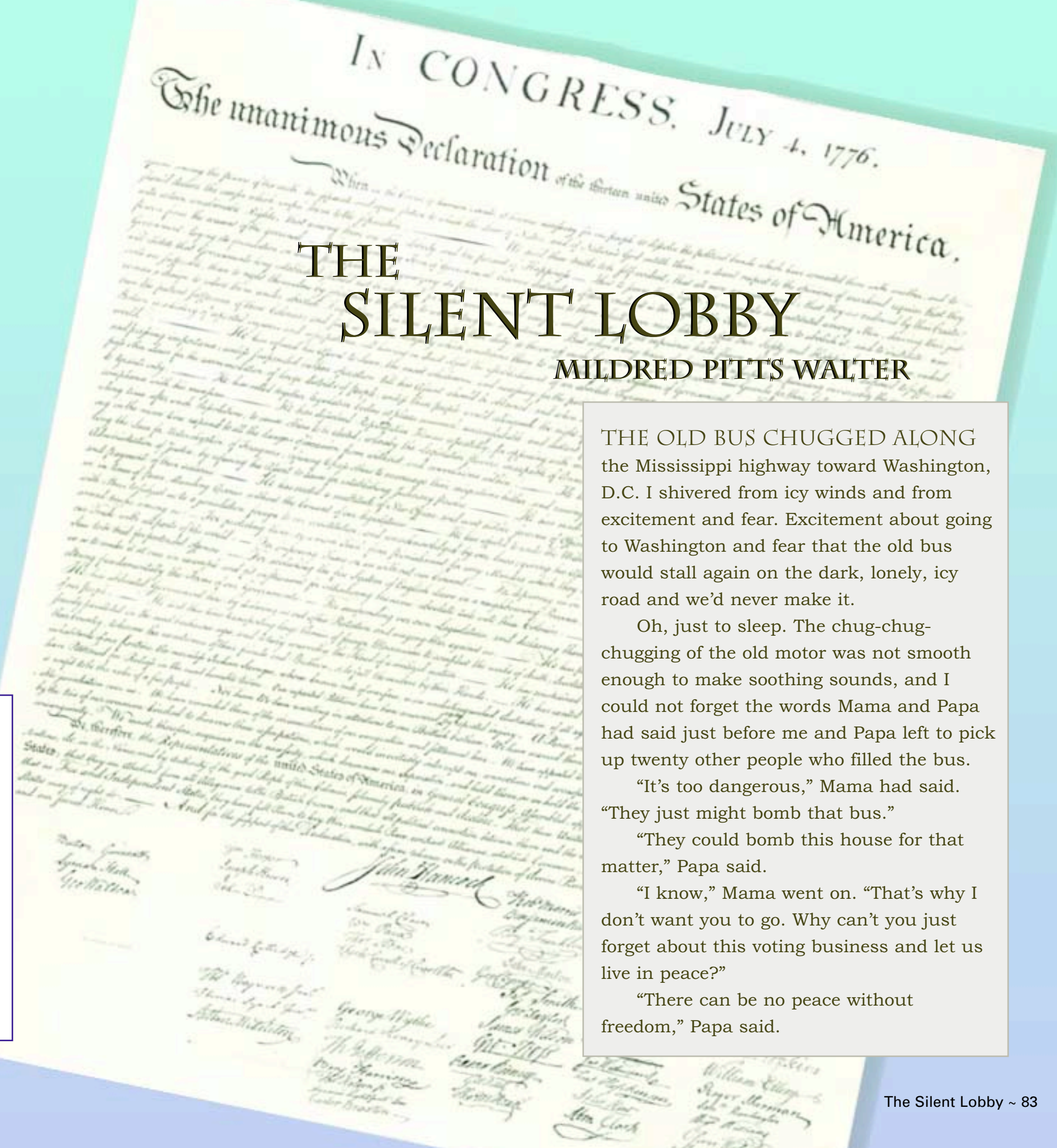
A group of people travel to Washington, D.C. in an old bus. These are poor people dressed in old clothes. They have come to insist on their right to vote—a right that is guaranteed by the Constitution. It takes courage and determination to stand up to people who are more powerful than you, who look down on you, and who make you feel poor and shabby.



. . . Theme

A famous person said, *Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world.* This is a powerful idea. This is what *The Silent Lobby*, which is based on events of the 1960s, is about. (*Committed citizens* are people who have made a firm decision to bring about some change.) This idea is the theme of this story.

The theme is the message of a story. It is what the author wants us to know, the reason the author wrote the story. The author uses plot, setting, and characters to express the theme. Themes are about ideas like the struggle for freedom, courage, personal responsibility, and justice.



THE SILENT LOBBY

MILDRED PITTS WALTER

THE OLD BUS CHUGGED ALONG the Mississippi highway toward Washington, D.C. I shivered from icy winds and from excitement and fear. Excitement about going to Washington and fear that the old bus would stall again on the dark, lonely, icy road and we'd never make it.

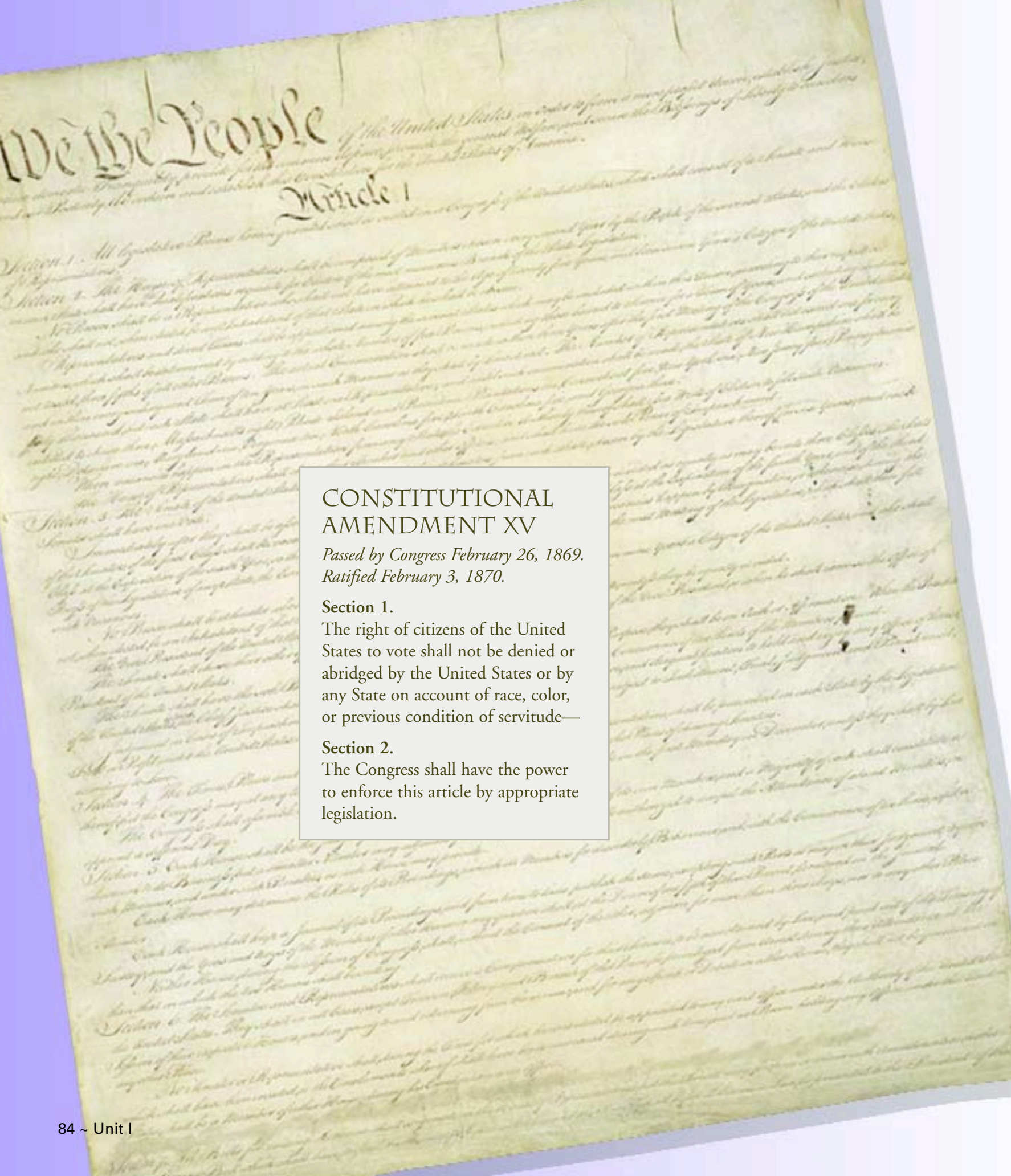
Oh, just to sleep. The chug-chug-chugging of the old motor was not smooth enough to make soothing sounds, and I could not forget the words Mama and Papa had said just before me and Papa left to pick up twenty other people who filled the bus.

"It's too dangerous," Mama had said. "They just might bomb that bus."

"They could bomb this house for that matter," Papa said.

"I know," Mama went on. "That's why I don't want you to go. Why can't you just forget about this voting business and let us live in peace?"

"There can be no peace without freedom," Papa said.



CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT XV

Passed by Congress February 26, 1869.
Ratified February 3, 1870.

Section 1.
The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude—

Section 2.
The Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

“And you think someone is going to give you freedom?” Mama asked with heat in her voice. “Instead of going to Washington, you should be getting a gun to protect us.”

“There are ways to win a struggle without bombs and guns. I’m going to Washington and Craig is going with me.”

“Craig is too young.”

“He’s eleven. That’s old enough to know what this is all about,” Papa insisted.

I KNEW. IT HAD ALL STARTED TWO YEARS AGO, IN 1963.

Papa was getting ready to go into town to register¹ to vote. Just as he was leaving, Mr. Clem, Papa’s boss, came and warned Papa that he should not try to register.

“I intend to register,” Papa said.

“If you do, I’ll have to fire you.” Mr. Clem drove away in a cloud of dust.

“You ought not go,” Mama said, alarmed. “You know that people have been arrested and beaten for going down there.”

“I’m going,” Papa insisted.

“Let me go with you, Papa,” I was scared, too, and wanted to be with him if he needed help.

“No, you stay and look after your mama and the house till I get back.”

Day turned to night, and Papa had not returned. Mama paced the floor. Was Papa in jail? Had he been beaten? We waited, afraid. Finally, I said, “Mama, I’ll go find him.”

“Oh, no!” she cried. Her fear scared me more, and I felt angry because I couldn’t do anything.

At last we heard Papa’s footsteps. The look on his face let us know right away that something was mighty wrong.

“What happened, Sylvester?” Mama asked.

“I paid the poll tax, passed the literacy test, but I didn’t interpret the state constitution the way they wanted. So they wouldn’t register me.”

Feeling a sense of sad relief, I said, “Now you won’t lose your job.”

“Oh, but I will. I tried to register.”

1. Before someone can vote in an election for the first time, the person must complete a form and send it into the local board of elections. The person’s name will then be placed on the list of *registered voters* and, on election day, that person can vote.

WORD BANK	struggle (STRUH gul) <i>n.</i> : a fight
	alarmed (uh LARMD) <i>adj.</i> : suddenly frightened or worried

Even losing his job didn't stop Papa from wanting to vote. One day he heard about Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The Freedom Party registered people without charging a poll tax, without a literacy test, and without people having to tell what the Mississippi Constitution was about.

On election day in 1964, Papa proudly voted for Mrs. Hamer, Mrs. Victoria Grey, and Mrs. Annie Devine to represent the people of the Second Congressional District of Mississippi. Eighty-three thousand other black men and women voted that day, too. Great victory celebrations were held in homes and community centers. But the Governor of Mississippi, Paul B. Johnson, declared all of those eighty-three thousand votes of black people illegal. He gave certificates of election to three white men—William Colmer, John Williams, and a Mr. Whittier—to represent the mostly black Second Congressional District.

Members of the Freedom Party were like Papa—they didn't give up. They got busy when the governor threw out their votes. Lawyers from all over the country came to help. People signed affidavits saying that when they tried to register they lost their jobs, they were beaten, and their homes were burned and businesses bombed. More than ten thousand people signed petitions to the governor asking him to count their votes. There was never a word from the governor.

MY MIND RETURNED TO THE SOUND OF THE OLD BUS slowly grinding along. Suddenly the bus stopped. Not again! We'd never make it now. Papa got out in the cold wind and icy drizzling rain and raised the hood. While he worked, we sang and clapped our hands to keep warm. I could hear Sister Phyllis praying with all her might for our safety. After a while we were moving along again.

I must have finally fallen asleep, for a policeman's voice woke me. "You can't stop here near the Capitol," he shouted.

"Our bus won't go," Papa said.

"If you made it from Mississippi all the way to D.C., you'll make it from here," the policeman barked.

WORD BANK **affidavit** (AH fih DAY vit) *n.*: a written statement made with the promise to tell the truth
petition (puh TIH shun) *n.*: a written request signed by a large number of people

At first the loud voice frightened me. Then, wide awake, sensing the policeman's impatience, I wondered why Papa didn't let him know that we would go as soon as the motor started. But Papa, knowing that old bus, said nothing. He stepped on the starter. The old motor growled and died. Again the policeman shouted, "I said get out of here."

"We'll have to push it," Papa said.

Everyone got off the bus and pushed. Passersby stopped and stared. Finally we were safe on a side street, away from the Capitol with a crowd gathered around us.

"You mean they came all the way from Mississippi in that?" someone in the crowd asked.

Suddenly the old bus looked shabby. I lowered my head and became aware of my clothes: my faded coat too small; my cotton pants too thin. With a feeling of shame, I wished those people would go away.

"What brings you all to the District?" a man called to us.

"We've come to see about seating the people we voted for and elected," Papa answered. "Down home they say our votes don't count, and up here they've gone ahead and seated men who don't represent us. We've come to talk about that."

"So you've come to lobby," a woman shouted. The crowd laughed.

Why were they laughing? I knew that to lobby meant to try to get someone to decide for or against something. Yes, that was why we had

WORD BANK **lobby** (LAH bee) *v.*: to work at influencing lawmakers to vote a certain way

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT XXIV

Passed by Congress August 27, 1962. Ratified January 23, 1964.

Section 1.

The right of citizens of the United States to vote in any primary or other election for President or Vice President, for electors for President or Vice President, or for Senator or Representative in Congress, shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State by reason of failure to pay poll tax or other tax.

Section 2.

The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

come. I wished I could have said to those people who stood gawking at us that the suffering that brought us here was surely nothing to laugh about.

The laughter from the crowd quieted when another woman shouted, "You're too late to lobby. The House of Representatives will vote on that issue this morning."

Too late. That's what had worried me when the old bus kept breaking down. Had we come so far in this cold for nothing? Was it really too late to talk to members of the House of Representatives to persuade them to seat our representatives elected by the Freedom Party, not the ones chosen by the governor?

JUST THEN RAIN BEGAN TO FALL. THE CROWD QUICKLY LEFT, and we climbed onto our bus. Papa and the others started to talk. What would we do now? Finally, Papa said, "We can't turn back now. We've done too much and come too far."

After more talk we all agreed that we must try to do what we had come to do. Icy rain pelted us as we rushed against cold wind back to the Capitol.

A doorman stopped us on the steps. "May I have your passes?"

"We don't have any," Papa replied.

"Sorry, you have to have passes for seats in the gallery." The doorman blocked the way.

"We're cold in this rain. Let us in," Sister Phyllis cried.

"Maybe we should just go on back home," someone suggested.

"Yes. We can't talk to the legislators now, anyway," another woman said impatiently.

"No," Papa said. "We must stay if we do no more than let them see that we have come all this way."

"But we're getting soaking wet. We can't stand out here much longer," another protested.

"Can't you just let us in out of this cold?" Papa pleaded with the doorman.

"Not without passes." The doorman still blocked the way. Then he said, "There's a tunnel underneath this building. You can go there to get out of the rain."

WORD BANK legislators (LEH jiss LAY torz) n.: lawmakers

WE CROWDED INTO THE TUNNEL AND LINED UP ALONG the sides. My chilled body and hands came to life pressed against the warm walls. Then footsteps and voices echoed through the tunnel. Police. This tunnel...a trap! Would they do something to us for trying to get in without passes? I wanted to cry out to Papa, but I could not speak.

The footsteps came closer. Then many people began to walk by. When they came upon us, they suddenly stopped talking. Only the sound of their feet echoed in the tunnel. Where had they come from? What did they do? "Who are they, Papa?" I whispered.

"Congressmen and women." Papa spoke so softly, I hardly heard him, even in the silence.

They wore warm coats, some trimmed with fur. Their shoes gleamed. Some of them frowned at us. Others glared. Some sighed quickly as they walked by. Others looked at us, then turned their eyes to their shoes. I could tell by a sudden lift of the head and a certain look that some were surprised and scared. And there were a few whose friendly smiles seemed to say, Right on!

I glanced at Papa. How poor he and our friends looked beside those well-dressed people. Their clothes were damp, threadbare, and wrinkled; their shoes were worn and mud stained. But they all stood straight and tall.

My heart pounded. I wanted to call out to those men and women, "Count my Papa's vote! Let my people help make laws, too." But I didn't dare speak in that silence.

Could they hear my heart beating? Did they know what was on my mind? "L-rd," I prayed, "let them hear us in this silence."

Then two congressmen stopped in front of Papa. I was frightened until I saw smiles on their faces.

"I'm Congressman Ryan from New York," one of them said. Then he introduced a black man: "This is Congressman Hawkins from California."

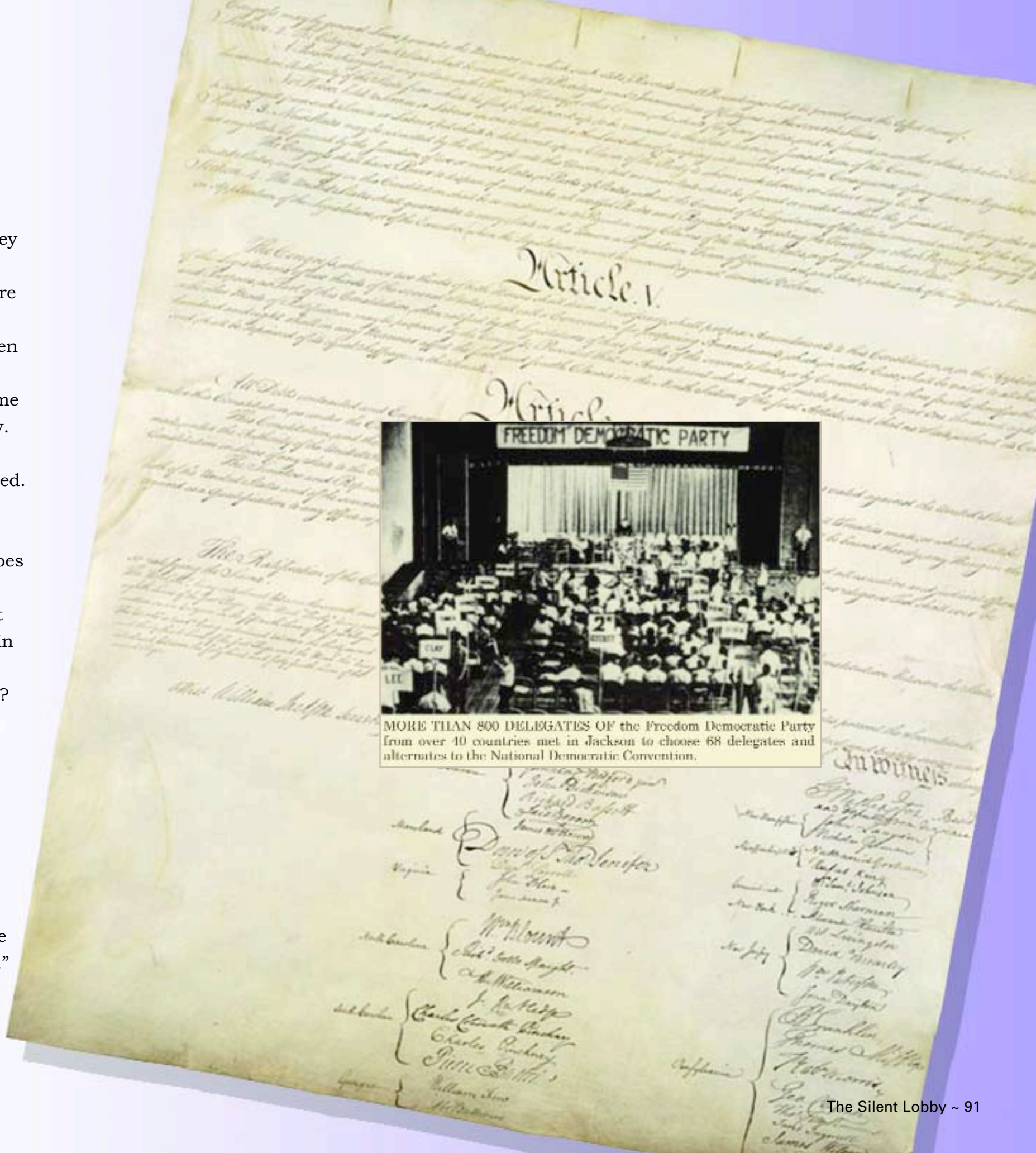
"I'm Sylvester Saunders. We are here from Mississippi," Papa said.

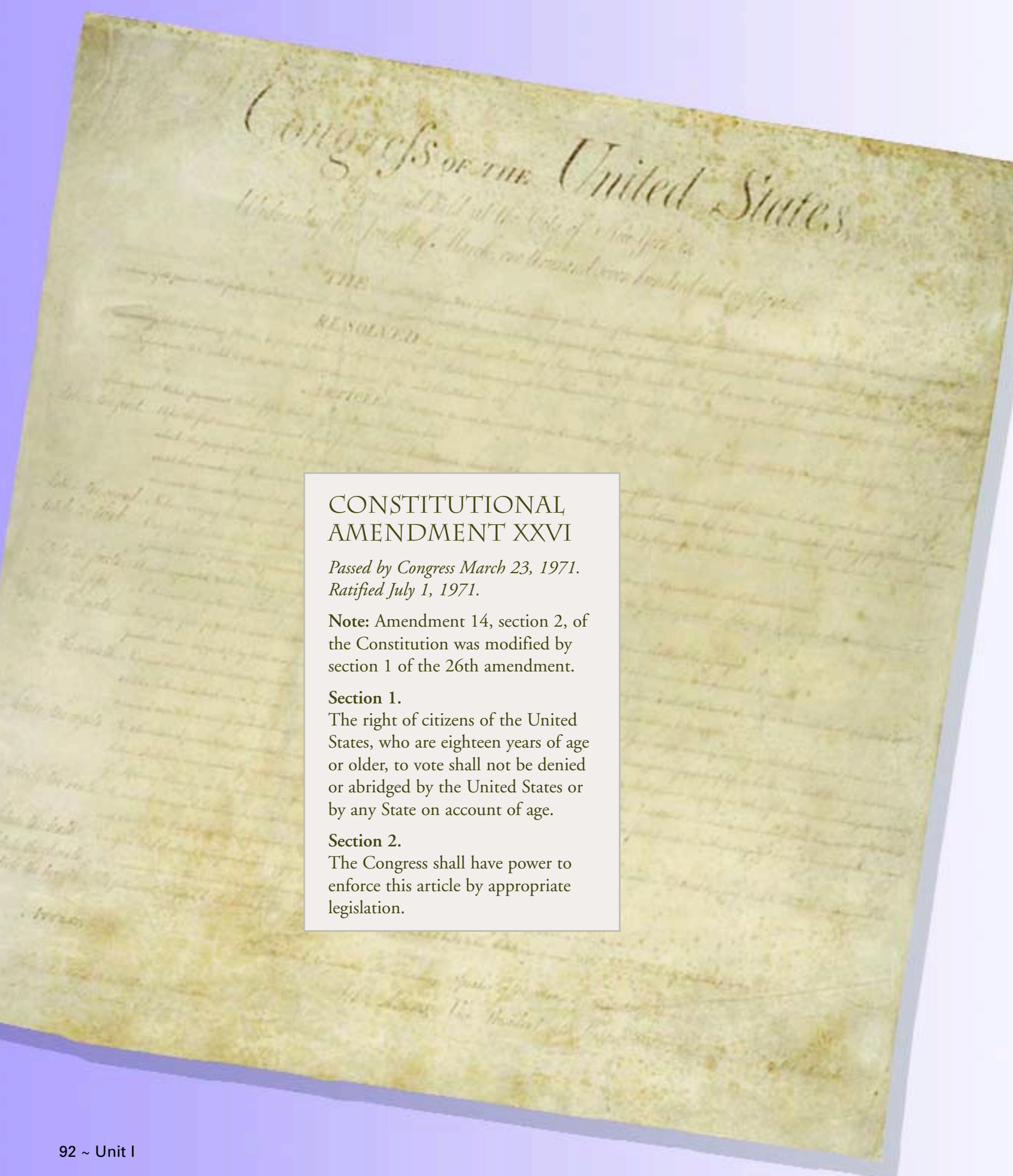
"We expected you much earlier," Congressman Ryan said.

"Our old bus and bad weather delayed us," Papa explained.

"That's unfortunate. You could've helped us a lot. We worked late into the night lobbying to get votes on your side. But maybe I should say on our side." Mr. Ryan smiled.

"And we didn't do very well," Congressman Hawkins said.





CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT XXVI

Passed by Congress March 23, 1971.
Ratified July 1, 1971.

Note: Amendment 14, section 2, of the Constitution was modified by section 1 of the 26th amendment.

Section 1.

The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age.

Section 2.

The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

“We’ll be lucky if we get fifty votes on our side today,” Congressman Ryan informed us. “Maybe you would like to come in and see us at work.”

“We don’t have passes,” I said, surprised at my voice.

“We’ll see about getting all of you in,” Congressman Hawkins promised.

A LITTLE LATER, AS WE FOUND SEATS IN THE GALLERY, Congressman Gerald Ford² from the state of Michigan was speaking. He did not want Mrs. Hamer and other fairly elected members of the Freedom Party seated in the House. He asked his fellow congressmen to stick to the rule of letting only those with credentials from their states be seated in Congress. The new civil rights act would, in time, undo wrongs done to black Americans. But for now, Congress should let the men chosen by Governor Johnson keep their seats and get on with other business.

Then Congressman Ryan rose to speak. How could Congress stick to rules that denied blacks their right to vote in the state of Mississippi? The rule of letting only those with credentials from a segregated³ state have seats in the House could not justly apply here.

I looked down on those men and few women and wondered if they were listening. Did they know about the petitions? I remembered what Congressman Ryan had said: “We’ll be lucky if we get fifty....” Only 50 out of 435 elected to the House.

Finally the time came for Congress to vote. Those who wanted to seat Mrs. Hamer and members of the Freedom Democratic Party were to say, yes. Those who didn’t want to seat Mrs. Hamer were to say, no.

At every yes vote I could hardly keep from clapping my hands and shouting, “Yea! Yea!” But I kept quiet, counting: thirty, then forty, forty-eight...only two more. We would lose badly.

Then something strange happened. Congressmen and congresswomen kept saying “Yes. Yes. Yes.” On and on, “Yes.” My heart pounded. Could we win? I sat

2. Congressman Gerald Ford later became the 38th president of the United States.

3. Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, in some states, black Americans were kept separate from white Americans in many situations. For example, white children and black children were sent to separate schools. States where blacks and whites were kept separate by law were called *segregated* (SEG rih GAY tid) *states*.

WORD BANK **credentials** (kruh DENN shulz) *n.*: documents showing that a person has privileges

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.
The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

Studying the Selection

FIRST IMPRESSIONS
How would you have felt, standing in the tunnel, as the congressmen and women walked by?

on my hands to keep from clapping. I looked at Papa and the others who had come with us. They all sat on the edge of their seats. They looked as if they could hardly keep from shouting out, too, as more yes votes rang from the floor.

When the voting was over, 148 votes had been cast in our favor. What had happened? Why had so many changed their minds?

Later, Papa introduced me to Congressman Hawkins. The congressman asked me, “How did you all know that some of us walk through that tunnel from our offices?”

“We didn’t know,” I answered. “We were sent there out of the rain.”

“That’s strange,” the congressman said. “Your standing there silently made a difference in the vote. Even though we lost this time, some of them now know that we’ll keep on lobbying until we win.”

I felt proud. Papa had been right when he said to Mama, “There are ways to win a struggle without bombs and guns.” We had lobbied in silence and we had been heard.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Mildred Pitts Walter was born in 1922. The seventh child of an African-American family in Louisiana, young Mildred experienced poverty and racial prejudice. However, her parents gave her a strong sense of pride and strength. After graduating from college, she moved to Los Angeles, where she taught elementary school and worked with her husband in the civil rights movement. When Walter asked a book publisher for children’s books about black people, he suggested she write one herself. The result was one book, and then many more fiction and nonfiction works about people of color. Mildred Walter lives in Denver, Colorado.

QUICK REVIEW

1. Where is the old bus coming from and where is it going?
2. Who were the three people who had been elected by the people of the Second Congressional District?
3. What organization registered people without charging a poll tax, without a literacy test, and without people having to tell what the Mississippi Constitution was about?
4. What had Papa’s boss said he would do, if Papa registered to vote?

FOCUS

5. Why does Papa insist that Craig go on the bus ride to Washington?
6. One of the themes of *The Silent Lobby* is the struggle for equality—black Americans are supposed to have the same rights as white Americans and they are struggling to get those rights. Why don’t people want them to vote?

CREATING & WRITING

7. You are a member of Congress. You changed your vote, after seeing the people from Mississippi standing in the tunnel. Write a letter home to one of your grandparents, explaining why you did so.
8. Read through the story once again, and list some examples of actions that show that people from Mississippi don’t give up. Make sure you give the page numbers in parentheses.
9. Study the stanza from the *I Have a Dream* speech that your teacher has provided. You and the rest of your classmates will recite the part assigned to you. Notice how some of the lines are repeated, making the speech almost like a song or a poem.