



American Government
FOUNDATIONS

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Introduction

Our Constitution was written in less than 100 working days. It was signed on September 17, 1787. Nine states agreed by June 21, 1788. The Constitution would be the law of the land. Then certain freedoms were guaranteed. Those were in the Bill of Rights. The other three states said yes. It was 1791.

The Constitution says what the government can do. It also says what it can't do. Most of the power is with the states. Local laws touch our lives every day.

Did the Constitution talk about teens? Give them rights? No. Teens were just property. Their parents "owned" them. What if teens broke the law? They were treated the same as adults. This upset people.

States set up courts just for teens. Called juvenile courts. Illinois was first in 1899. They saw that teens had different needs. Courts wanted to help them. But



judges still had too much power. Teens were jailed without lawyers. They couldn't call their parents. The police asked questions. They had to answer. Teens didn't have the right to stay quiet. This is called self-incrimination. It is a Fifth Amendment right.

It was 1967. The Supreme Court made a ruling. It said teens had rights. These rights were protected. The Constitution said so. Teens had the right to a lawyer. And the right to stay quiet. Since then, the court has ruled many times on teen issues.

Teens have some rights to free speech at school. But not the right to disturb the class. Public schools can limit this freedom. Students can't write whatever they want in the school newspaper. Again, it's up to the school.

Teens have privacy rights at school. To a point. Their things can be searched. An adult must suspect that a rule has been broken. Rights are limited.

Especially for students in school sports. Drug testing was ruled okay. It is constitutional.

It's smart to know your rights. Important. As an engaged citizen, you also have responsibilities. Read the U.S. Constitution. It's a rulebook for our nation. People are in charge. Not the government.



The people of these United States are the rightful masters of both congresses and courts, not to overthrow the Constitution, but to overthrow the men who pervert the Constitution.

—Abraham Lincoln




Chapter 1

A NATION IN TROUBLE

It was 1783. George Washington wanted to rest. He helped win the Revolutionary War. Washington helped create the United States. Now it was time to return home to Mount Vernon, Virginia.

America was in trouble in early 1787. Each state acted like its own country. There was no president. The judicial branch didn't exist. No one made sure laws were fair. The government was broke. States could collect taxes. The federal government could not. Congress had to ask states for money. They often refused to pay.





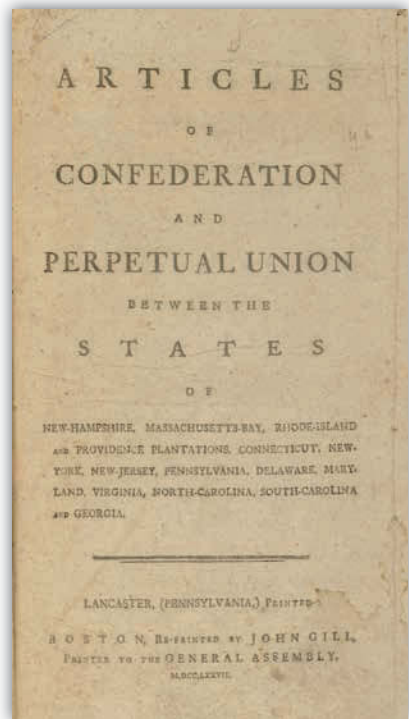
Washington's rest was short. The new nation needed him. The great general came to Philadelphia. Others also made the trip. They came to rewrite the Articles of Confederation. They were a set of laws that formed the U.S. government. By 1781, all 13 states had approved the Articles. They were the first American constitution.

Think About It: *Were the Articles of Confederation America's first fail?*

[WHAT IS A CONSTITUTION?]

A constitution is a document. It is a set of rules. Words are written down. They say how the government will work. A constitution is the starting point. It says what the government can do. And what it cannot do. It also says how much power the government will have. A constitution explains how the government is organized. Good constitutions can be changed. Why? Because people's beliefs change over time.

The first U.S. constitution was called the Articles of Confederation. States stayed independent. The central government had limited power. American leaders didn't want to create a strong central government. They had seen what too much power could do. The cruelty of British rule was fresh in their minds. Plus, Americans were more loyal to their state than their country.




The Articles kept the states united. It was during the Revolutionary War. After the war the nation grew. Some people moved west. More came to the 13 states. Problems were harder to solve. The nation was too big. Our first constitution was too simple.



[MANY PROBLEMS]

The Articles were weak. States had power. But the federal government did not. Citizens were okay with that. Americans did not trust government. They had spent years under British control. King George III had taken away their freedoms. America was now its own country. The people ruled, not kings.

The Articles made problems. The government could not collect taxes. It could not set up courts.



Laws were not enforced. And the government did not have the power to control trade. There was no national army to protect the new nation.

The states were not united. Each had its own money. States collected their own taxes. Each had its own trade rules. States fought. No one had power to settle the fights.

There was no shared currency. Each state had its own. States did not look out for the good of all people. Some people went broke. The states had to come together. Or the U.S. would fail as a new nation.

[NEW RULES]

The men met at the Pennsylvania State House. Now called Independence Hall. Washington and the other men closed the doors. They shut the windows. Whatever they talked about would be a secret. The men made a decision. The Articles would not be