

Name _____

Date _____

A More Perfect Union

“U.S. Constitution & Purpose of Government”

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b”

John Locke was a 17th-century English philosopher who formulated important theories about governments and humankind. Locke’s ideas were extremely influential on the Founding Fathers: America might not be America without him.

\\n

Locke’s ideas influenced the Age of Enlightenment, also called the Age of Reason. Writers during the Enlightenment era, which lasted from the 1650s to the end of the 1700s, asked profound questions: what makes humans human? Why do governments exist and what is their role? Enlightenment thinkers didn’t automatically accept conventional wisdom or the teachings of the church. Instead, they championed reason and science. Like Locke’s writings, the theories and ideas of the Enlightenment were instrumental to the American Revolution.

\\n”

Notes

2. b''

Montesquieu was an 18th-century French philosopher. He was another important figure in the Enlightenment. In his writings, he discussed the separation of government powers into an executive, legislative and judicial branch. He was inspired by the British system, but he imagined a system even better where no one person or branch could have all the power.

\n

The reason behind the separation of power was that a person or group of people who gain too much power can start making decisions that don't benefit all of society. They can use the government to benefit themselves or their friends instead. One way of keeping this in check is by separating powers in the government. Different responsibilities fall to different branches of government. This keeps any one branch from having too much power. One branch of government may promote a bad idea. But hopefully, the other branches will limit their power.

\n''

3. b'

Locke advocated religious tolerance. He supported this over an enforced single religion. Locke argued that it simply makes more sense to allow people to believe and practice what they want than it would to try to force everyone to believe the same thing. His writings on the topic paved the way for religious freedom in the United States. Indeed, for hundreds of years people have come to the United States in search of religious freedom.

\n'

4. b''

When citizens overthrow their governments, they bring about a revolution. Locke believed that if a government takes away the people's rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the people have the right to start a revolution. Locke argued that the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are innate, or existing from birth and natural to all people. These thoughts would later be used by America's founders. This idea--of the right to revolution--didn't only inspire the US's Founding Fathers. It has influenced many people in countries around the world for hundreds of years.

\n''

Notes

Notes

Notes

5. b''

Thomas Jefferson was one of the architects of the American Revolution. Twenty-four years later, he became the third president of the United States. Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, outlining the ideas that the new American government would have at its foundation.

\n

But even though he was a brilliant thinker, he was full of contradictions. For example, he was at first a big advocate of states' rights and limiting federal powers. But then as president, he used the power of the federal government and its national bank, which he had originally opposed, to make the Louisiana Purchase, a major territorial acquisition.

\n''

6. b'

In the time leading up to the American Revolution, many colonists felt that the British Parliament did not represent their interest. Even more frustrating, the British government taxed them. It used their taxes to support a government that, many felt, ignored them. These colonists adopted a slogan to describe their opinion: "No taxation without representation." These colonists believed that the British Parliament was denying them of their rights.

\n'

7. b''

The Declaration of Independence asserted America's independence from Britain. The document outlines the natural rights of men and how the British government had infringed upon those rights. It is a revolutionary document in more ways than one. It attempted to show the legal and moral basis of the war for independence.

\n

The concept of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" as natural rights of human beings is rooted in Enlightenment thought. This part of the Declaration of Independence can be traced very directly to Locke's writings. The idea is that we are born with these rights. If governments do not respect them, the people have the right to overthrow that government. That's what the Americans did.

\n''

Notes

Notes

Notes

8. b''

James Madison drafted the US Constitution, the document that forms our government. His draft was changed and tweaked by other members of the Constitutional Convention, but he's still considered its primary author. He later became the fourth president of the United States.

\n

The Constitution outlines the principles of the United States government. It establishes the three branches of government, describes the relationship of the states to the federal government and allows for amendments as necessary. There have been twenty-seven amendments so far. The first ten are known as the Bill of Rights, which describe and protect the rights of the people.

\n''

9. b''

The Articles of Confederation was the United States' first attempt at a constitution. It was a plan of union for the original thirteen states. It set up the government and was in use from 1781 until 1789. The Articles of Confederation put all the power in the hands of the states and not much power in the federal government. For example, the federal government couldn't charge taxes and couldn't raise an army. It had to rely on the states and their militias. In 1787, the Constitutional Convention met to improve the Articles. Instead, they wound up drafting a whole new document and establishing a much stronger national government.

\n''

Notes

Notes

10. b”

At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, there were many issues of power to resolve. The small states were concerned that their voices wouldn’t be heard if state population determined how many representatives in government a state had. New Jersey led the small states with the New Jersey Plan. In this plan, each state would send the same number of representatives to Congress. Big states like Virginia favored the Virginia Plan, which stated that the number of representatives in the legislature should be determined by population.

\n

The delegates, or representatives, eventually settled on the Connecticut Compromise, which created a bicameral (two-chamber) legislature. In the Senate, each state would have two seats. In the House of Representatives, the state’s population would determine the number of seats.

\n”

11. b”

The founders finally agreed that each state would have two senators and that a state’s number of seats in the House of Representatives would be based on that state’s population. But then came the question of how to count a state’s population. Women would count toward population, the founders decided, even though women couldn’t vote. The next question the founders tackled: should they count slaves?

\n

The Southern states wanted slaves to count toward their populations. They had more slaves, so counting them toward population would mean that they could send more representatives to the House. The more populated states in the North didn’t want slaves to count toward the population of the Southern states. They didn’t have as many slaves and didn’t want to lose the advantage of having larger populations. Ultimately the delegates agreed on a seemingly random fraction: in determining a state’s population, each slave would count as three-fifths of a person. This is known as the Three-Fifths Compromise.

\n”

Notes

Notes

12. b'

The Constitution described the powers and responsibilities of the three branches of the federal government: a legislative branch, an executive branch and a judicial branch. The members of each branch would be chosen in different ways: executive by Electoral College, legislative by popular vote and judicial by executive appointment. Furthermore, each branch would wield different powers. The legislative branch would write laws, the executive branch would carry out laws and the judicial branch would judge laws and interpret the Constitution.

\n

The delegates gave each branch specific powers and limitations. That way the three could "check" each other's power to create a balanced government.

\n'

13. b''

A postwar depression made life terrible for many Americans. In 1786, before the Constitutional Convention, a farmer named Daniel Shay led 2,000 armed farmers through western Massachusetts, closing banks and courts. The federal government, however, could do nothing about it. With no army and no policing force, the government had to wait for militias in Massachusetts to suppress the uprising. Shay's Rebellion exposed the weakness of the Articles of Confederation. Under the Articles of Confederation, the government could not support an army. The government could not fund the army or provide food or other provisions. In the early years of the United States, this became a problem because the country could not defend itself. The Constitution gave the federal government the ability to support the army.

\n''

Notes

Notes

14. b''

Notes

Once the Constitution had been drafted, it still had to be ratified by the states. This wasn't a smooth process. Debates raged over nearly every element of the document, but most focused on the power balance between the federal government and the states. This issue led to America's first political parties. The Federalists favored adopting the Constitution with its strong central government. The Anti-Federalists preferred keeping the power with the states and were opposed to adopting the new document. The debate over how much power the federal government should have continues to this day.

\n''