

**National Council for History Education Presentation
Madison Fellows Panel 4-21-18 San Antonio
Gennie Burleson Westbrook**

What can Madison, Jefferson, and Washington teach us about civil discourse?

Introduction: Most observers agree that today's political environment is hyper-polarized and hyper partisan, and many teachers of history and political science are eager to help students navigate the public sphere without the demonization and sloppy thinking so frequently on display. On many college campuses discussions are shut down because divergent opinions are unwelcome. How do we help students discuss controversial issues productively? Diana E. Hess, of University of Wisconsin, Madison, has studied such questions throughout her career and has recommended some important steps.

1. Don't be afraid to use controversy as a teaching tool: lead "high quality discussions of important historical and contemporary questions and issues."* Young people need to be "taught how to seriously consider questions of how we ought to live together."
2. In order to engage in nonpartisan political education, "the first thing is to make sure discussions are planned and prepared for." Spontaneous discussions of controversial topics are unlikely to be "rigorous and interesting." Students must do some pre-discussion reading and thinking.
3. In both the assigned readings and in the discussion itself, expose students to "multiple and competing ideas...[in order that they learn] how to evaluate them rigorously...We want to model for students the importance of being willing to change one's mind."
4. Establish civility norms, a process that requires careful judgment. Personal insults and epithets are off-limits, of course. However, "What becomes difficult is when one student considers something a genuine and legitimate perspective on a controversial issue and another student considers that same idea insulting."

"If we avoid issues because they will be particularly sensitive to some students, we're going to end up avoiding a whole lot of the topics that are most important for our democracy to make decisions about."

*All quotes in the introduction are taken from Joan Richardson's interview with Diana Hess. See **Joan Richardson. Using controversy as a teaching tool: An interview with Diana Hess** Originally published in December 2017/January 2018 *Phi Delta Kappan* 99 (4), 15-20. © 2017 Phi Delta Kappa International.

In this lesson, we consider some primary sources in order to answer the question, "**What can Madison, Jefferson, and Washington teach us about civil discourse?**" These writings give us a window into a principled and civil approach to addressing controversy with respect to the Constitution itself. Lesson components are excerpted from the Bill of Rights Institute publication *Founders and the Constitution: In Their Own Words* Volumes 1 and 2. These books and many other curriculum resources are available in their entirety at no charge at <http://voicesofhistory.org/founders-constitution/>. In this lesson we use the following resources:

- In His Own Words: James Madison on the Problem of Faction – *Federalist No. 10*, November 23, 1787
- In His Own Words: Thomas Jefferson on the Constitution, Letter to James Madison, December 20, 1787
- In His Own Words: George Washington on the Constitution, Farewell Address, 1796

Lesson Plan: What can Madison, Jefferson, and Washington teach us about civil discourse?

Overview: The founding period of the United States was characterized by intense controversy regarding how to establish “good government from reflection and choice, [rather than by] accident and force.” (Hamilton, *Federalist No. 1*). In this lesson, students will conduct close readings of excerpts from writings by Madison, Jefferson, and Washington in order to apply lessons from that era to today’s public discourse in a structured classroom conversation. Beginning with topics that students are unlikely to consider personally controversial, students can develop and practice applying civility norms, thus building tools that they can use to navigate the heated conversations of their own lives. Each of the three segments of the lesson has its own short introduction, vocabulary list, context questions, and a primary source excerpt for student analysis.

Objectives:

Students will

- Analyze excerpts from Founders’ writings in order to understand how those writings reflected controversial issues of their own era.
- Evaluate to what extent and in what ways those writings can be applied to make modern-day discourse related to controversial issues more fruitful.

Lesson Handouts in this packet

Page 8 James Madison on the Problem of Faction – *Federalist No. 10*, November 23, 1787

Page 12 Thomas Jefferson on the Constitution, Letter to James Madison, December 20, 1787

Page 16 George Washington on the Constitution, Farewell Address, 1796

Background Homework (10 min.)

Set the stage for study of the documents by providing only the introduction page for each segment of the lesson (Madison, Jefferson, and Washington) for students to read for homework. In other words, each student will receive and read an introductory handout that includes only pages 7, 11, and 15 from the following packet. Instruct students to annotate, color code, or make lists showing similarities and differences among the three Founders, and to note a question or two that they would like to know the answer to for each Founder. Inform students that they will prepare for a discussion to answer this **Key Question: What can Madison, Jefferson, and Washington teach us about civil discourse?**

Prior to class, write the following **Conversation Questions** on the board, but if possible, conceal these questions and reveal them only after students have completed the **Vocabulary, Context, and Document Analysis** small group activity. Note that students will be trading places half-way through the **Whole Class Conversation** activity. Be sure there are meaty and important questions for Conversation Group A and for Conversation Group B.

1. Context: What was the purpose of each of the documents in the lesson?
 - James Madison, *Federalist No. 10*, November 23, 1787
 - Thomas Jefferson, Letter to James Madison, December 20, 1787
 - George Washington, Farewell Address, 1796
2. For each author, what were the main ideas he hoped to get across for his own time?

3. How can modern civic culture benefit from understanding both the content of *Federalist #10* and the process or organization method Madison used in making his points?
4. What tips for civility can be drawn from Jefferson's approach in his December 20, 1787 letter to Madison?
5. How can Washington's 1796 advice apply to twenty-first century civil discourse?
6. Discuss specific examples from recent events in which recommendations gleaned from studying these documents might be helpful.
7. What are some characteristics of modern life that contribute to hyper-polarized civil discourse?
8. What are some ways that you as students can counteract the damage of those modern obstacles to civil discourse?

Warmup (10 min.)

1. Invite a few volunteers to share the following from their homework.
 - a. Similarities among Madison, Jefferson, and Washington
 - b. Differences among the three Founders
 - c. A question about which students are curious regarding one or more of these Founders.

Vocabulary, Context, and Document Analysis (30 min.)

1. Divide class into three groups and assign one primary source excerpt to each group. Provide each group with its respective **Vocabulary and Context** page and the corresponding *In His Own Words* excerpt. Then, depending on your class size, further subdivide each of the three groups into working groups of 4 -5.
 - a. Everyone in the Madison group will receive packet pages 8, 9 10.
 - b. Everyone in the Jefferson group will receive packet pages 12, 13, 14.
 - c. Everyone in the Washington group will receive pages 16 and 17.
2. Within each working group, students should briefly discuss their list of vocabulary words and identify the terms that are most difficult or unfamiliar to them. They will be especially alert to those terms when they read the primary source together, seeking to use context clues to determine the meaning of the term before using reference material if necessary to ascertain its usage in the document.
3. Instruct students to discuss and take notes regarding the answers to the Context questions listed below the vocabulary, as they read the *In His Own Words* excerpt together.
4. Finally, still working in their small groups, and after they have read and discussed the primary source excerpt assigned, students should discuss their part of the Key Question: **What can Madison, Jefferson, and Washington teach us about civil discourse?** Each student should continue to take notes on this part of their conversation. With a minute or two left, have students "sound off" to label themselves **A or B** within each of the working groups.

Whole Class Conversation (20 min.)

1. If students are not familiar with the inner/outer circle discussion strategy, brief them on the procedures:
 - a. The inner circle serves as the conversation panel, working from the list of discussion questions on the board.
 - b. The outer circle observes and moves the conversation along by asking follow-up questions as needed based on the inner circle's participation.

- c. All interactions must be courteous, with no one hogging the conversation. Ideally the students are speaking to one another, making space for every student to participate, with no prompting from the teacher.
 - d. The teacher's role is to observe and keep notes about the quality of the conversation.
 - e. Half-way through the time allowed for this step, inner and outer circle students will trade places, and the conversation will continue with the new discussion panel. Students should avoid repeating comments and observations that have been previously mentioned.
2. Have students place their desks in two concentric circles facing the center of the room. The inner circle, those who labeled themselves **A** within their small groups, will be the first discussion panel. The outer circle, those who labeled themselves **B** in the previous step, will ask questions as needed to move the discussion along, but Group B will not answer questions at this time.
 3. Students may refer to the list of questions on the board to serve as a roadmap for the conversation. You may wish to have students work in the order the questions are listed the first time or two that you use this strategy. Later, students should be able to develop their own order of questions as the conversation flows in a more organic manner. As students become more familiar with the strategy, they will take more ownership of the conversation and need less coaching.

Wrap-up (10 minutes)

Before analyzing the primary sources, students noted some questions they had about each Founder. Close by giving everyone an opportunity to share what his/her questions were and tell how the class conversation helped them learn something valuable about the Founding Era.

Debrief the process used in the activity by having students evaluate the quality of their conversation. What went really well and what needs improvement? What did they learn about civil discourse and how it can be cultivated? What would happen in the larger society if more people deliberately implemented processes to establish and apply civility norms?

Suggested Answers

Accept reasoned responses that demonstrate growth in understanding of the documents and principles addressed. Regarding how we can use these documents about Founding controversies to guide and improve discourse today, students may observe something like the following points.

James Madison on the Problem of Faction – *Federalist No. 10*, November 23, 1787

- Context: Madison's purpose in the *Federalist Papers* was to defend the form of republican government embodied in the Constitution. In *Federalist # 10* he explained why a large republic would foster a great number of factions and the diversity that would prevent tyranny. Groups would be forced to negotiate and compromise arriving at solutions that both represented the will of the majority and protected the rights of minorities.
- *(Depending on the level of student background in the Founding period, you may wish to provide this additional context to students: Madison recognized that human nature meant that we would have different opinions, and that a republic could not exist if the liberty to have diverse opinions was squelched. Therefore, the large republic would allow for diverse views AND free speech AND protect minority rights from majority tyranny.)*

- Tips for improving civility may be extrapolated from the method that Madison himself used to make his arguments.
 - Start with definitions of important terms (e.g.: faction).
 - Honor the complexity of the issue; understand that honorable people will legitimately see different sides and come to different policy solutions. “The latent causes of faction are sown into the nature of man.”
 - Consider and actively seek to respect multiple ways to solve a problem. i.e.: If the causes of faction are inevitable, look for ways to control its effects.
 - “The great object to which our inquiries are directed” is both to preserve liberty and to promote the public good. Recognize that civil society requires compromise.
 - Seek to understand multiple and varied viewpoints; better solutions to problems can be found when we listen respectfully to one another and move outside of our echo chambers. Explaining why liberty would be safer in a large republic than in a small one, Madison wrote, “Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens...”

Thomas Jefferson on the Constitution, Letter to James Madison, December 20, 1787

- Context: Jefferson’s purpose in this letter was to explain to his friend and colleague, James Madison, the pros and cons that he saw in the Constitution.
- *(Depending on the level of student background in the Founding period, you may wish to provide this additional context to students: Madison himself much later said of the Declaration of Independence drafted by Jefferson, “On the distinctive principles of the Government...of the United States, the best guides are to be found in ...the Declaration of Independence, as the fundamental Act of Union of these States.” Jefferson and Madison had great respect for one another, and they were completely in step regarding the essential principles on which government should be founded to maintain liberty: rule of law, limited government, equality, popular sovereignty, unalienable rights, and others. However, in spite of their agreement on principles, they did not always see eye to eye on the policies that should flow from those principles.)*
- Tips for civility
 - Start with areas of agreement. Beginning with common ground demonstrates respect for those on the other side of an issue.
 - Provide specific evidence and principles to explain one’s reasoning.
 - Communicate with both frankness and courtesy.

George Washington on the Constitution, Farewell Address, 1796

- Context: Jefferson had argued in 1787 for a “rotation in office” to avoid the likely abuse of power that could develop under career politicians. Washington was determined to demonstrate that rotation after a second term. Washington’s theme was the importance of unity in spite of partisan differences.
- *Depending on the level of student background in the Founding, you may wish to provide this additional context: George Washington’s contributions to the founding of the United States cannot be overestimated. Called the “indispensable man” by historians, Washington’s character and commitment to public service were critical to the survival of the new country both in war and*

in peace. After the Revolutionary War, he voluntarily gave up military power, and after a second term as president, he voluntarily gave up civilian power. Washington and James Madison had begun crafting a farewell statement near the end of Washington's first term, but he reluctantly postponed his retirement from public office because of the fierce partisanship that wracked his cabinet, and his country. Washington begged Jefferson and Hamilton to show a little more mutual forbearance and respect for different opinions and policies—with limited results. In 1796 he sent Madison's draft of a farewell speech to Hamilton, and Hamilton recommended edits for the president's consideration. The Farewell Address was never delivered orally, but was widely distributed in newspapers and received as a beloved president's practical advice for his nation. He hoped that both Republicans and Federalists would see the influence of their respective party leaders, Madison and Hamilton, reflected in the president's guiding voice.

- Tips for civil discourse
 - Paragraph 1: Keep in mind the importance of unity while working out your concerns together; unity will be more effectively maintained under the Constitution than under the Articles of Confederation. (Washington referred to the Articles of Confederation as “your first essay.”)
 - Paragraph 2: The Constitution is worthy of confidence because it is the result of careful study and responsible negotiation, it balances authority with liberty, and it includes within itself a process for amendment. These same characteristics can improve the level of modern discourse.
 - Paragraph 3: Respect for the law is essential to maintain liberty. Modern controversies also benefit from a disciplined approach to problem solving.
 - Paragraph 4: The people have a right to change their government. But people must not ignore the law just because they disagree with it. Civil society requires that people respect the law. *(In another passage of the Farewell Address, Washington warned, “in the most solemn manner, against the baneful effects of the spirit of party, generally. This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind.”)* Washington knew that good citizenship was expressing your opinion but working together with your fellow citizens for the public/common good rather than mere self-interest.
 - Paragraph 5: The people's power to govern themselves depends on their responsibility to obey the law. Modern discourse also requires that people consider their responsibility to be well informed, think in a disciplined manner, and respect the law and one another.
 - Paragraph 6: Separation of powers and checks and balances prevent abuse of power. In every age the people must be alert to those who would abuse their power so that wise use of the right to vote results in the election of responsible and honorable office-holders.

For further reading:

Founders and the Constitution: In Their Own Words (Volume 1 - 2004) (Volume 2 - 2005)
 by Stephen M. Klugewicz (Author, Editor), David Marion (Author), Robert M. S.
 McDonald (Author), Craig Yirush (Author), Claire McCaffery Griffin (Editor), Logan
 Murray (Editor), Veronica Burchard (Editor), <http://voicesofhistory.org/founders-constitution/>

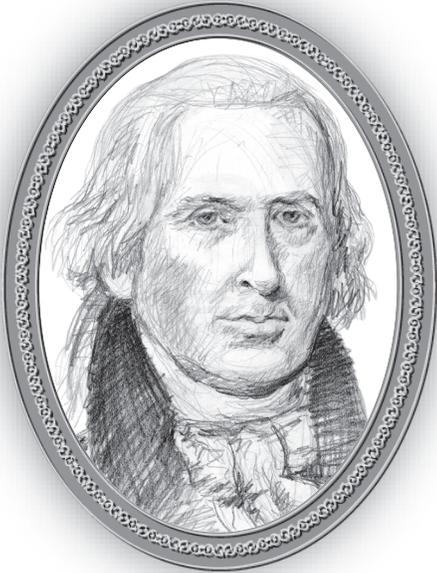
Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* 2015

Joan Richardson. Using controversy as a teaching tool: An interview with Diana Hess Originally published in December 2017/January 2018 *Phi Delta Kappan* 99 (4), 15-20. © 2017 Phi Delta Kappa International. All rights reserved. <http://www.kappanonline.org/richardson-using-controversy-as-a-teaching-tool-an-interview-with-diana-hess/> Dec. 11, 2017 (Accessed 4/11/2018)

We are eager to receive your comments about this lesson. Please email Gennie: gwestbrook@billofrightsinstitute.org to let us know how it works with your students, and how we can we improve it.

JAMES MADISON

(1751–1836)



The essence of Government is power; and power, lodged as it must in human hands, will ever be liable to abuse.

—James Madison, 1787



Introduction

James Madison's slight stature and reserved personality gave little indication of the keen intellect and shrewd nature of the man. Perhaps no other person of the Founding generation had as much influence as he in crafting, ratifying, and interpreting the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights. A skilled political tactician, Madison proved instrumental in determining the form of the early American republic.

Madison's political theory was founded upon a realistic view of human nature. He believed that men in society tended to form factions, defined as groups that promoted their own interest at the expense of the rest. Factions posed a special problem for democratic societies because a faction composed of the majority of the people could easily oppress the minority. To combat this, as he argued in *Federalist Paper No. 51*, power must be set against power, "ambition must be made to counteract ambition." Madison therefore favored the separation of powers within the central government and a division of power between the national and state governments. This latter concept, federalism, was a radical idea in the late eighteenth century. Few people at the time believed that power in a nation could be divided between two levels of government, each supreme in its own sphere.

Madison believed that safety lay in numbers. The more heterogeneous the society, the less chance there would be for any one group to combine with others to form a faction of the majority. Though ancient philosophers had argued that only small republics could survive for a long period of time, Madison believed the opposite. A large republic could encompass many different groups and different interests—economic, religious, and social—and thereby provide a safeguard against the tyranny of the majority.

Relevant Thematic Essays for James Madison

- Federalism
- Republican Government (Volume 2)
- Limited Government (Volume 2)

VOCABULARY AND CONTEXT QUESTIONS

Excerpts from *Federalist Paper No. 10*

1. **Vocabulary:** *Use context clues to determine the meaning or significance of each of these words and write their definitions:*
 - a. actuated
 - b. adverse
 - c. aggregate
 - d. fallible
 - e. latent
 - f. inference
 - g. sinister
 - h. compass
 - i. concert
 - j. oppression

2. **Context:** *Answer the following questions.*
 - a. When was this document written?
 - b. Where was this document written?
 - c. Who wrote this document?
 - d. What type of document is this?
 - e. What was the purpose of this document?
 - f. Who was the audience for this document?

IN HIS OWN WORDS: JAMES MADISON ON THE PROBLEM OF FACTION

Excerpts from *Federalist Paper No. 10*

A

By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community. . . .

B

As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed. . . .

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man. . . .

The inference to which we are brought is, that the *causes* of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its *effects*.

C

If a faction consists of less than a majority, relief is supplied by the republican principle, which enables the majority to defeat its sinister views by regular vote. . . .

D

When a majority is included in a faction, the form of popular government, on the other hand, enables it to sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest both the public good and the rights of other citizens.

E

To secure the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction, and at the same time to preserve the spirit and the form of popular government, is then the great object to which our inquiries are directed. . . .

F

The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it; the fewer the distinct parties and interests, the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party; and the smaller the number of individuals composing a majority, and the smaller the compass within which they are placed, the more easily will they concert and execute their plans of oppression. Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other. . . .

Source: *Federalist Paper No. 10*. The Avalon Project at Yale Law School.
<<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/federal/fed10.htm>>.

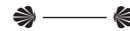
THOMAS JEFFERSON

(1743–1826)



May it [the Declaration of Independence] be to the world what I believe it will be, . . . the Signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self government. . . . All eyes are opened, or opening to the rights of man.

—Thomas Jefferson, 1826



Introduction

Thomas Jefferson hoped that he would be remembered for three accomplishments: his founding of the University of Virginia, his crafting of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and his authorship of the Declaration of Independence. It is for the last that he has most endeared himself to succeeding generations as a champion of liberty and equality.

Jefferson indeed believed that these achievements were the high points of a life dedicated to the promotion of human freedom. Education, he held, freed the mind from ignorance. Tolerance freed the will from coercion. And the assertion of human liberty and equality freed the body from the chains of tyranny.

But Jefferson's actions sometimes contradicted his words. An opponent of centralized power, as president he completed the Louisiana Purchase and unhesitatingly employed the resources of the federal government to enforce the harsh and unpopular Embargo Act. A proponent of individual rights, he excused the atrocities committed by the French Revolutionaries during the Reign of Terror. A critic of slavery who outlawed the slave trade as president, he was the owner of more than 200 African Americans. The key to understanding Jefferson lies in the difficult task of reconciling these inconsistencies.

Relevant Thematic Essays for Thomas Jefferson

- Slavery
- Freedom of Religion
- Commerce
- Republican Government (Volume 2)
- Equality (Volume 2)
- Liberty (Volume 2)

VOCABULARY AND CONTEXT QUESTIONS

Letter to James Madison, December 20, 1787

1. **Vocabulary:** *Use context clues to determine the meaning or significance of each of these words and write their definitions:*
 - a. levy
 - b. omission
 - c. sophisms
 - d. monopolies
 - e. eternal
 - f. unremitting
 - g. *habeas corpus*
 - h. entitled
 - i. abandonment
 - j. magistrate

2. **Context:** *Answer the following questions.*
 - a. When was this document written?
 - b. Where was this document written?
 - c. Who wrote this document?
 - d. What type of document is this?
 - e. What was the purpose of this document?
 - f. Who was the audience for this document?

IN HIS OWN WORDS: THOMAS JEFFERSON ON THE CONSTITUTION

Letter to James Madison, December 20, 1787

This is an excerpt from one letter in a long correspondence between Jefferson and Madison concerning the Constitution. Jefferson was in Paris at this time, acting as United States minister (ambassador) to France.

December 20, 1787

I like the organization of the government into Legislative, Judiciary, and Executive. I like the power given the Legislature to levy taxes; and for that reason solely approve of the greater house [the House of Representatives] being chosen by the people directly. . . . The people are not to be taxed but by representatives chosen immediately by themselves. . . . I am much pleased too with the substitution of the method of voting by persons [in the legislature], instead of that of voting by states: and I like the negative given to the Executive with a third of either house, though I should have liked it better had the Judiciary been associated for that purpose, or invested with a similar and separate power. . . .

I will now add what I do not like. First the omission of a bill of rights providing clearly and without the aid of sophisms for freedom of religion, freedom of the press, protection against standing armies, restrictions against monopolies, the eternal and unremitting force of the habeas corpus laws, and trials by jury. . . . Let me add that a bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth. . . .

The second feature I dislike, and greatly dislike, is the abandonment in every instance of the necessity of rotation in office, and most particularly in the case of the President. Experience concurs with reason in concluding that the first magistrate will always be re-elected if the constitution permits it. He is then an officer for life. . . . The power of removing him from office every fourth year is a power which will not be exercised. . . .

I have thus told you freely what I like and dislike. . . . I own that I am not a friend to a very energetic government. It is always oppressive.

Source: Jefferson to Madison, December 20, 1787, in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 428–433.

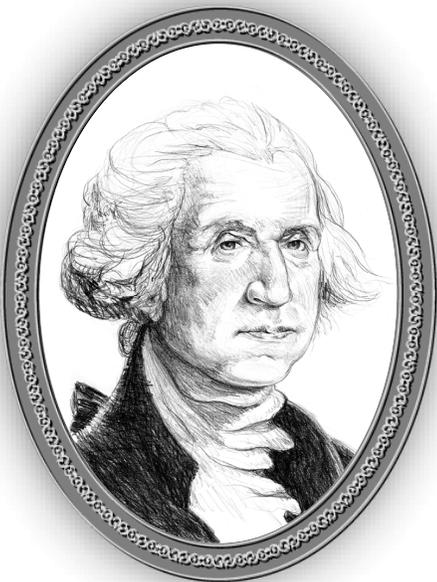
ANALYSIS: THOMAS JEFFERSON ON THE CONSTITUTION

Directions: In the column on the right, briefly describe how Jefferson reacted to the section of the Constitution reproduced in the left column. Use Handout C as the basis for your answers.

	THE CONSTITUTION'S PROVISION	JEFFERSON'S REACTION
A	The government is separated into three branches: legislative (Article 1), executive (Article 2), and judicial (Article 3).	
B	Article 1, Section 2, Clause 1: The House of Representatives shall be chosen . . . by the People of the several States. Article 1, Section 7, Clause 1: All Bills for raising Revenue shall originate in the House of Representatives.	
C	Article 1, Section 7, Clause 2: The Votes of both Houses shall be determined by [individual] Yeas and Nays.	
D	Article 1, Section 7, Clause 2: Every Bill which shall have passed the House of Representatives and the Senate, shall . . . be presented to the President of the United States; If he approve he shall sign it, but if not he shall return it, with his Objections to that House in which it shall have originated, who shall . . . proceed to reconsider it. If after such Reconsideration two thirds of that House shall agree to pass the Bill, it shall be sent . . . to the other House, . . . and if approved by two thirds of that House, it shall become a Law.	
E	Article 1, Section 9, Clause 2: The Privilege of the Writ of Habeas Corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it.	
F	Article 3, Section 2, Clause 3: The Trial of all Crimes, except in Cases of Impeachment, shall be by Jury.	
G	Article 1, Section 8, Clauses 12 & 14: [The Congress shall have Power] To raise and support Armies, but no Appropriation of Money to that Use shall be for a longer Term than two Years. . . . [and] To make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval Forces.	
H	Article 2, Section 1, Clause 1: [The President] shall hold his Office during the Term of four years.	

GEORGE WASHINGTON

(1732–1799)



The time is now and near at hand which must probably determine whether Americans are to be freemen or slaves. . . . Our cruel and unrelenting enemy leaves us the only choice of brave resistance, or the most abject submission. We have, therefore, to resolve to conquer or die.

—George Washington, 1776



Introduction

Americans have long appreciated the importance of George Washington to their nation's history. Deemed “the indispensable man” by one historian, Washington secured American independence as commander of the Continental Army and established republican traditions as the nation's first president. His unblemished character and force of personality steeled men's hearts in combat and stirred their souls in peace. But only recently have historians begun to recognize Washington's intellectual contributions to the formation of the American republic. Though never a systematic thinker, Washington understood the relationship between political theory and practice and was a close associate of many of the leading statesmen of the day, such as James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson. Indeed, the friendship between Washington and Madison is one of the most important political partnerships of the Founding Era.

During the 1780s, Washington's home at Mount Vernon served as a crossroads for ideas that led to the shaping of the Constitution in 1787 at Philadelphia. Representatives of the Confederation Congress, delegates to the Constitutional Convention, and members of state ratifying conventions all stopped at Mount Vernon during the decade on their journeys north and south. Few of these conversations are recorded in detail, but no other private home in America was the scene of so many discussions among the politically powerful. It could justly be said that the outlines of the new republic were largely drawn one hundred feet above the Potomac River on a farm whose location marked the exact geographic midpoint between North and South.

Relevant Thematic Essays for George Washington

- Republican Government
- Limited Government

VOCABULARY AND CONTEXT QUESTIONS

Excerpts from the Farewell Address (1796)

1. **Vocabulary:** *Use context clues to determine the meaning or significance of each of these words and write their definitions:*
 - a. calculated
 - b. efficacious
 - c. unawed
 - d. acquiescence
 - e. enjoined
 - f. obligatory
 - g. presuppose
 - h. extensive
 - i. vigor
 - j. indispensable

2. **Context:** *Answer the following questions.*
 - a. When was this document written?
 - b. Who wrote this document?
 - c. What type of document is this?
 - d. What was the purpose of this document?

IN HIS OWN WORDS: GEORGE WASHINGTON ON THE CONSTITUTION

Excerpts from the Farewell Address (1796)

1. . . . You have improved upon your first essay, by the adoption of a constitution of government better calculated than your former for an intimate union, and for the efficacious management of your common concerns.
2. This government, the offspring of our own choice, uninfluenced and unawed, adopted upon full investigation and mature deliberation, completely free in its principles, in the distribution of its powers, uniting security with energy, and containing within itself a provision for its own amendment, has a just claim to your confidence and your support.
3. Respect for [the Constitution's] authority, compliance with its laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true liberty.
4. The basis of our political systems is the right of the people to make and to alter their constitutions of government. But the Constitution which at any time exists, till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole people, is sacredly obligatory upon all.
5. The very idea of the power and the right of the people to establish government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government. . . .
6. In a country so extensive as ours, a government of as much vigor as is consistent with the perfect security of liberty is indispensable. Liberty itself will find in such a government, with powers properly distributed and adjusted, its surest guardian.

Source: "Washington's Farewell Address 1796." The Avalon Project at Yale Law School.
<<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/washing.htm>>.