

An All-New Government



When something has never been tried before, how much are you willing to trust it? If it's a new lasagna recipe, no big deal—but what if it's a new technology, like a self-driving car? When the U.S. Constitution was proposed, it created a new type of government that had never been tried before. Today, this may seem ho-hum or might even sound like fun, but that's because modern Americans take for granted something that early Americans did not: the idea that a government has limited power that is given to it by the people. Early Americans' experience with government was the opposite. The British government they'd broken free from had unlimited power that was only restrained by a few laws. Often, those laws were ignored. So when the Constitution was introduced, many Americans looked at it the way many people today look at a self-driving car. They didn't trust it.

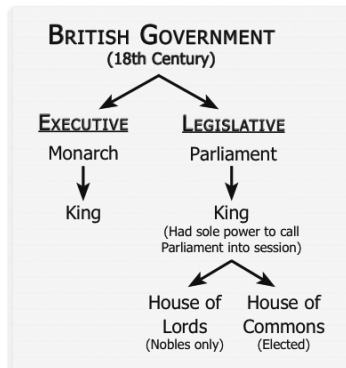
Whoa! Something's Missing

A lot of people freaked out when they learned about the Constitution. There were several reasons why, but it boiled down to one main issue: It seemed to give the government too much power, and it didn't seem to give the people any protection from government power. Specifically, the Constitution did not list citizens' individual rights. To understand how panic-inducing this really was, you need to know two things about the British government Americans were used to. First, British law *did* list individual rights. Some of these were in a document called the Magna Carta, which had existed for almost 600 years, and others were in the English Bill of Rights, written less than 100 years before America's revolution.



A version of the Magna Carta made in 1225 and held at the National Archives.

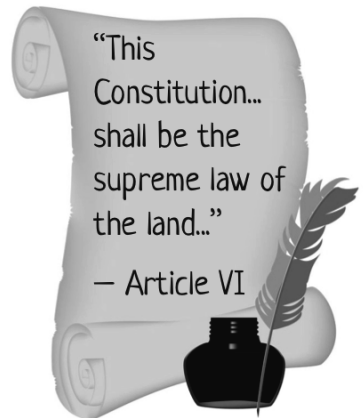
The Magna Carta represented the first demand for limits on the English king's power.



Second, the rights in these documents were citizens' only protection from a government that could be both abusive and unpredictable, and over which citizens had almost no control. In Britain, the monarch (king or queen) was the source of all government power. Although the British government had a legislative and an executive branch, the monarch controlled both. The right to become king or queen passed down through families, so there was no telling what each new king or queen would be like or what they would do with their power. Both the Magna Carta and the English Bill of Rights were written after a king had abused his power. Even then, the new rights were really just demands that the monarch agreed to.

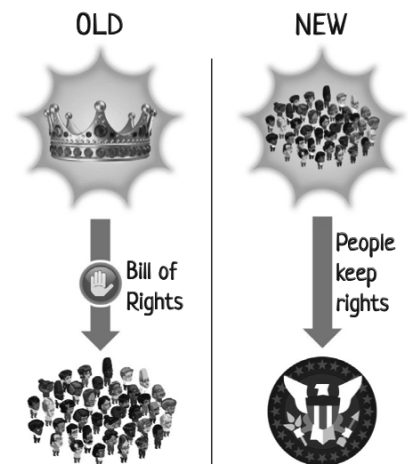
What Were They Thinking?

Those who wanted a bill of rights couldn't understand how the men at the Constitutional Convention could have left a bill of rights out of the Constitution when not only Britain but *every individual state constitution* had one. States that didn't have a formal bill of rights at least listed individual rights directly in their constitution. The U.S. Constitution didn't even do that. What it did do was say that the Constitution was the "supreme law of the land" and was superior to state laws and constitutions. So not only did the Constitution fail to protect individual rights, but it also overruled the protections in state constitutions? This seemed like madness, and people opposed to the Constitution saw their freedom headed down the drain.



A Different Kind of Government

When these Americans started bashing the Constitution for not listing individual rights, the men who wrote it gave a collective eye-roll. In their view, the Constitution didn't *need* to list individual rights because the government it created wasn't capable of abusing power. This new government was *different*. It got its power from the people, and the people only gave it a *little* power. Right from the start, this government could only do what the Constitution said it could do. So if the Constitution didn't say the government could limit freedom of speech, then guess what? It couldn't. From this perspective, protection of individual rights was baked right into the Constitution itself.



Not Buying It

FEDERALISTS

The name for people who supported the Constitution (and generally saw a bill of rights as unnecessary).

ANTI-FEDERALISTS

The name for people who opposed the Constitution, partly because it had no bill of rights.

For those who wanted a bill of rights, the baked-right-in argument was a load of malarkey. They read the Constitution and saw many ways that power-hungry leaders could get around the so-called limits on power. Between these loopholes and the history of government in Great Britain, they had absolutely no faith that the Constitution would work the way its authors said it would. They pointed to human nature, arguing that once people get a taste of power, they tend to want more. This would cause America's leaders to take advantage of the Constitution, and anyone who believed that could never happen had their head in the clouds. Without a bill of rights, Americans would be completely unprotected when the constitutional government one day became as powerful and tyrannical as the rest of the world's governments.

It's All There, Anyway

People opposed to a bill of rights pointed out that several rights actually were listed in the Constitution. They argued that three of these in particular were the most important "securities to liberty":



- "The Privilege of the Writ of Habeas Corpus shall not be suspended." A **writ of habeas corpus** is a court order requiring the government to show that it is detaining someone lawfully.



- "No Bill of Attainder or ex post facto Law shall be passed." A **bill of attainder** is a law that punishes someone for a crime, usually without that person being given a trial. An **ex post facto law** is a law that makes something a crime or increases the punishment for a crime, and then applies it retroactively to people who committed the crime before the law was passed.

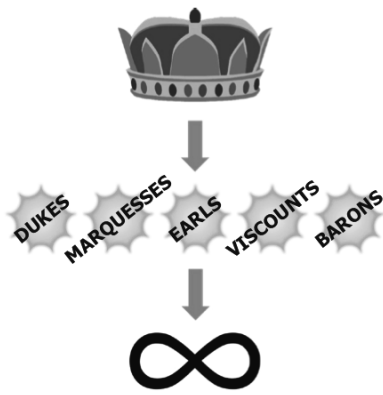


- "No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States." A **title of nobility** is a rank granted to someone by a king or government giving that person greater status than common people.

Those who believed a bill of rights was unnecessary argued that the first two things on this list protected Americans against some of the worst threats to liberty—random, unjustified imprisonment and creation of crimes after the fact. Both of these had been huge problems in the course of Great Britain's history. But the third thing, nobility, was in a league of its own.

No Bill of Rights, No Deal

Name: _____

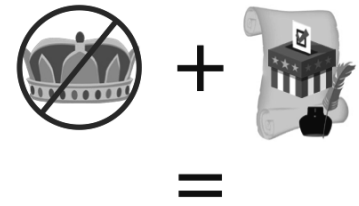


Let's Talk About Nobility

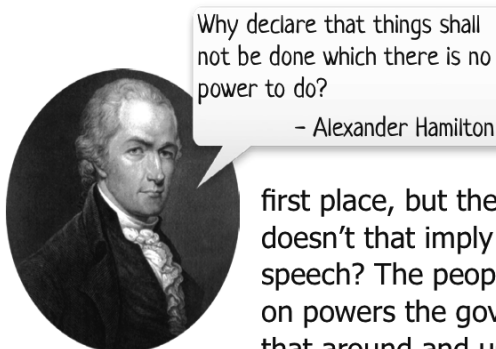
Americans on both sides of the bill of rights debate agreed that Britain's system of nobility had no place in a free society. What they didn't agree on was whether refusing to grant titles of nobility was enough to protect anyone's liberty. Throughout Britain's history, the system worked like this: The king or queen had the power to grant special status to people. Those people became "nobles" with titles like Duke, Earl, or Baron, and they automatically joined Britain's government as both members of the legislature and advisors to the king. The status of nobility passed down through a person's family. This meant that a huge amount of government power was concentrated among a few families that could never be voted out of office.

No Nobility, No Problem

The issue of nobility was a big deal to early Americans. In many ways, they saw the system of nobility as the root of all threats to liberty. So when they said no title of nobility would be granted, they were really saying America's government power would never be in the hands of anyone with a special, natural-born right to power. To the Constitution's supporters, this did not need further explanation. The American constitutional government would always be "of the people," and freedom would never be in any real danger. Those opposed to the Constitution saw plenty of opportunities for danger without a bill of rights.



What are you worried about?



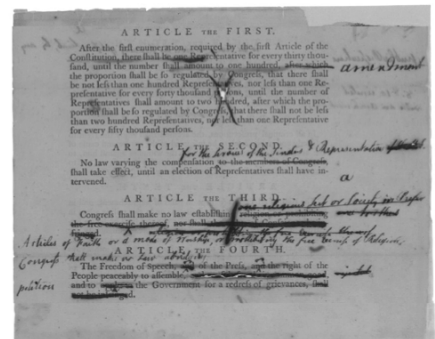
Danger, Danger Everywhere

Meanwhile, Constitution supporters argued that including a bill of rights could be even more dangerous than leaving it out. Their reasoning went like this: If the Constitution doesn't give the government power to limit freedom of speech in the first place, but then you say that the government cannot limit freedom of speech, doesn't that imply maybe the government *does* somehow have the power to limit speech? The people opposed to a bill of rights didn't like the idea of putting limits on powers the government didn't even have. They feared future leaders could twist that around and use it against the people.

Compromise

The terms of the Constitution said that it would become effective after just nine states ratified it. But as state approvals started rolling in, some came with conditions. Several states requested changes or additions to the Constitution—and (surprise!) most of these requests involved listing individual rights. In order to get key states on board, those who supported the Constitution finally agreed to add a bill of rights as soon as the Constitution was ratified.

Ultimately, the pro-Constitution people weren't nearly as afraid of having a bill of rights as the anti-Constitution people were afraid of not having one. They understood the fear, and the agreement was a gesture of goodwill meant to bring everyone together around the new Constitution. Above all, those who supported the Constitution wanted to see the United States become a nation of unified people.



Edits made by the Senate after receiving proposed amendments from the House. The Constitution was ratified 1788, and the ten amendments that became the Bill of Rights were ratified three years later.