

the different parts of the political system restrained each other, moderating excesses and limiting expectations. The interplay was the essence of the system. So although the difference between a good constitution and a bad one was easy to summarise – just as a healthy person is easy to tell apart from a sick one – a good constitution could never in itself be easily summarised. Indeed, if you could sum it up in a few sentences, it almost certainly wouldn't work. The American constitution, which was influenced by some of Montesquieu's ideas, is sometimes assumed to be a simple document, because it is relatively short by modern standards. But it is far from simple. If it were, it could hardly have lasted so long. Americans have spent more than two hundred years mining its depths, and they are nowhere near finished.

