

- Ask students to read Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address of 1863. (See [lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/gadd/](http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/gadd/) for an online version of this speech.) Encourage them to analyze the document to determine the relationship that this statement of American political ideas has to the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. What does Lincoln refer to in saying that "our forefathers" founded the nation "four score and seven years ago"? Why is this reference significant in an address on a Civil War battlefield? What does he mean by the idea of "a new birth of freedom"? Why do students feel that this Address is considered to be so significant in the history of American government?
- In groups, students can develop a time line of the history of United States government. What do they feel are the key events that need to be included on this time line? Encourage students to compare making a time line containing ten events with a time line containing fifty. How would these time lines differ? What rubrics could students develop to decide which events should be included? (See [campus.northpark.edu/history/WebChron/USA/USA.html](http://campus.northpark.edu/history/WebChron/USA/USA.html) for an example of a chronology of the United States.)
- Divide students into groups and provide each group with a segment from the writings of Locke, Montesquieu and Machiavelli. Students can read these primary source documents and determine the key concepts about government being presented to share with the rest of the class. (See [history.hanover.edu/early/locke/j-12-001.html](http://history.hanover.edu/early/locke/j-12-001.html) for an online version of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*; [www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/montesquieu-spirit.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/montesquieu-spirit.html) for *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu; and [www.ilt.columbia.edu/projects/digitexts/machiavelli/the\\_prince/title.html](http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/projects/digitexts/machiavelli/the_prince/title.html) for *The Prince* by Machiavelli.)
- Encourage students to imagine that they were present at a significant event in the history of American government, such as the fighting of the Revolutionary War or the drafting of the U.S. Constitution. Research the event thoroughly and then write an eyewitness account, either in letter or journal format.
- Turn your classroom into the Constitutional Convention of 1787! Students can select a particular delegate to the Convention and research his philosophies about government. Then students can reenact the debates of the Convention. (See [memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwfr.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwfr.html) for detailed information about the content of the Convention.)

### Suggested Internet Resources

Periodically, Internet Resources are updated on our Web site at [www.LibraryVideo.com](http://www.LibraryVideo.com)

#### • [bensguide.gpo.gov](http://bensguide.gpo.gov)

"Ben's Guide to U.S Government for Kids" is a wonderful site with grade-specific material (from kindergarten through 12th grade) on the character and history of American government. (Continued)

- [www.access.gpo.gov/su\\_docs/locators/coredocs](http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/locators/coredocs)  
This U.S. Government Printing Office site features the full text of the most important documents in the history of American government, including the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution.
- [www.nara.gov/exhall/charters/charters.html](http://www.nara.gov/exhall/charters/charters.html)  
"The Charters of Freedom" is a site sponsored by the National Archives and Records Administration, which provides an account of the background to and creation of the essential documents of U.S. government. A Founding Fathers page offers details about the people who were responsible for the development of American government.

### Suggested Print Resources

- Bjornlund, Lydia. *The U.S. Constitution: Blueprint for Democracy*. Lucent Books, San Diego, CA; 1999.
- Bober, Natalie S. *Countdown to Independence: A Revolution of Ideas in England and Her American Colonies*. Atheneum Books, New York, NY; 2001.
- Freedman, Russell. *Give Me Liberty: The Story of the Declaration of Independence*. Holiday House, New York, NY; 2000.
- Nardo, Don. *Democracy*. Lucent Books, San Diego, CA; 1994.

### TEACHER'S GUIDE CONSULTANT

Charles F. Bahmueller, Ph.D.  
Center for Civic Education, Los Angeles

### COMPLETE LIST OF TITLES

- |                                      |                                                 |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| • COMPARATIVE GOVERNMENT             | • THE PROCESS OF U.S. GOVERNMENT                |
| • THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE    | • RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES OF U.S. CITIZENSHIP |
| • THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH               | • THE U.S. CONSTITUTION & THE BILL OF RIGHTS    |
| • THE HISTORY OF THE U.S. GOVERNMENT | • THE U.S. FEDERAL SYSTEM                       |
| • THE JUDICIAL BRANCH                | • U.S. FOREIGN POLICY                           |
| • THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH             |                                                 |

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## THE HISTORY OF THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

Grades 5–12

This guide is a supplement designed for teachers to use when presenting programs in the video series *United States Government*.

**Before Viewing:** Give students an introduction to the topic by relaying aspects of the program overview to them. Select pre-viewing discussion questions and vocabulary to provide a focus for students when they view the program.

**After Viewing:** Review the program and vocabulary, and use the follow-up questions and activities to inspire continued discussion. Encourage students to research the topic further with the Internet and print resources provided.



## Program Overview

What is the history of United States government? Throughout most of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Great Britain had ultimate control over the American colonies, although colonists developed assemblies of representatives that made decisions on local matters. These colonial assemblies helped to give colonists a great deal of experience in self-government. The desire for even more control led the colonists to declare their independence from Great Britain and to fight the Revolutionary War. However, winning the Revolution was only the first part in the development of the United States; a new government had to be created to unite the colonies as one nation. The first attempt was a government under the Articles of Confederation, but because this framework did not provide for a strong central government, it presented problems for the fledgling states. State representatives met in Philadelphia in 1787 to generate a new plan. For several months, they debated and discussed political ideas that originated from philosophers such as John Locke, Baron de Montesquieu and Niccolò Machiavelli. The document that evolved became the blueprint for an entirely new form of government. The U.S. Constitution was based on the ideals of democracy, liberty and the public good, and while it answered the need for a strong central government, it also addressed the rights of individual states. The new government also included the concept of separation of powers and provided checks and balances to prevent any one branch of government from becoming too powerful. In 1791, a Bill of Rights was added to ensure that the rights of individual citizens could not be violated.

For over 200 years, Americans have lived under their unique type of government, a government that has inspired nations around the world to embark on similar experiments in freedom.

## Vocabulary

**government** — Institutions and procedures through which a society is ruled.

**democracy** — A form of government in which political control is exercised by all citizens either directly or indirectly through elected representatives.

**sovereignty** — The highest or supreme power in a political system or state.

**consent of the governed** — The idea that people agree to set up and live under a government.

**citizen** — A member of a politically organized society or state who owes allegiance to it and is entitled to protection by and from the government.

**Enlightenment** — A 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century movement beginning in Europe during which a group of philosophers emphasized the use of reason to better understand the world.

**republic** — A form of government in which power is held by the voters and is exercised by elected representatives.

**civic virtue** — The striving of citizens for the public good, or the good of the whole, even at the expense of their own private interests.

**constitutionalism** — The use of constitutions, usually written, to empower and limit government. *(Continued)*

**separation of powers** — The concept of dividing the power of government among groups to keep excessive amounts of power from being exercised by any one group.

**liberalism** — A philosophy that emphasizes individual liberty.

**constitutional amendment** — A change to the U.S. Constitution through a legally defined process.

## Pre-viewing Discussion

- Encourage students to brainstorm a list of reasons why America needs to have a government. Which reasons do students feel are most important? Why?
- Ask students to describe the form of government in the United States. See if they can identify some of the key ideas that defined the American form of government at its 18<sup>th</sup>-century origins.
- The U.S. Constitution is the oldest written national constitution in operation. Students should generate ideas as to why the U.S. government has lasted so long.
- Probe students' understanding of what democracy is and if democratic ideals were being implemented when the United States began. Can they think of other nations with democracies? How about nations that don't have democratic governments? How do they think these governments are similar to and different from the American form of government?

## Focus Questions

1. Describe the conflict between the rights of the individual and the good of the whole.
2. What does sovereignty of the people mean?
3. In practice, how can people consent to the American form of government?
4. Who were the Founding Fathers and what did they found?
5. What are some of the benefits of government?
6. What does the word "democracy" mean, and what are the origins of democracy?
7. What was the Enlightenment? How did it influence the founding of the United States?
8. What is republicanism, and what are its origins?
9. What does constitutionalism mean? How did this concept influence the development of American government?
10. What does liberalism mean? How did this idea play a role in the history of U.S. government?
11. Describe the kind of government in the colonies before the American Revolution.
12. Why was the Declaration of Independence written and issued, and what are its main ideas? *(Continued)*

13. Why did the newly independent Americans need to change their constitution in 1787?

14. What are some key features of the U.S. Constitution?

15. Why was the Bill of Rights passed? Why is this document important in the history of American government?

## Follow-up Discussion

- Discuss with students how problems with American government, such as the lack of the right to vote by various groups, have been resolved in the course of U.S. history. What do students think of this process? Is it effective for resolving issues in the United States? Do students feel that America's laws have been changed enough over the course of its history to give everyone the rights they deserve, or should more changes be made? Why or why not?
- The balance between individual rights and the good of the whole is at the heart of the history of U.S. government. Help students to identify examples of this conflict in America. Discuss with them possible ways to maintain this delicate balance.
- Both Locke and Montesquieu suggested implementing limits on government. Help students to identify ways in which the U.S. government is limited. Students can also generate examples of governments that are not limited. What are some characteristics of these governments? How do they differ from the government of the United States?

## Follow-up Activities

- The governments in ancient Athens and Rome provided inspiration for the American form of democracy. Encourage students to research the governments in Athens and the Roman Republic, and to compare these forms of government with that in America. Do students think they are more similar or more different? Which do students think is a more effective form of government, and why?
- The constitutional amendment process has enabled the U.S. Constitution to remain flexible and dynamic. Encourage students to select an amendment and to research its significance. Why was this amendment passed? What was the historical context surrounding the passage of the amendment? Who were the significant people involved in getting the amendment passed? How does this amendment have relevance in today's world?
- Many great thinkers inspired the development of the United States, such as Machiavelli, Locke and Montesquieu. Encourage students to imagine that they could conduct an interview with these important figures today. Students can draft questions to ask and recreate possible responses, based upon research about these scholars. What might these individuals think of American government today? *(Continued)*