

Constitution Now

A Study Guide

The Constitution is perhaps one of the most pliable documents our country has ever known. Besides being a veritable Rorschach test to every politician since the beginning, it has been well-used, abused and employed in a variety of causes, many of them good, many more of them of questionable virtue.

This brief study guide is designed to prepare students to better understand the material that will be presented during the play. In many cases the ideas come fast and furious with there is little time to reflect while hearing about and seeing these events.

SYNOPSIS

The play begins with a recitation of older documents men have created by which to guide governments and rule over people. In some cases you will be amazed at the principles given as reasons.

It then moves on to a brief historical timeline of the genesis of the Constitution. Its major sections are explained and related to the sudden appearance of political parties arriving on the scene during Washington's term of office.

We then explore the relationship among the three branches of government and the push-and-pull that has defined this relationship.

The play then explores some of the extreme measures taken by early Presidents and Congresses to keep the population in line. Various time periods show the cyclical nature of these measures.

Pivotal events covered include the Civil War, slavery, WWI, WWII, various amendments along the way, ending with a brief overview of Vietnam. All through the show, commentary by cast members as they change from character to character throw light on the events from various perspectives. Cast members play almost 100 characters by the end of the hour.

QUESTIONS FOR THE THOUGHTFUL VIEWER

In most cases there are no right or wrong answers to these questions. But we promise that even thinking about them will give you a deeper appreciation and enjoyment of the play.

1. Why did the founders feel it necessary to replace the original Articles of Confederation with the Constitution?

2. What was the purpose behind having three co-equal branches of government?
3. What made the Constitution the most unique and advanced political document in all of history?
4. In the beginning, the office of the President was conceived as the weakest branch of government. Why do you suppose the founders did this? (Hint: What was this a reaction to?)
5. The Bill of Rights was an addition to the Constitution insisted upon by Thomas Jefferson, who refused to throw his support behind it otherwise. Why might he have distrusted the original document? (Hint: It's not because he was out of the country when it was being written.)
6. Federalists and Republicans were the first political parties in the new U.S.A. How would you define the spectrum of thought they represented and why is this still important after 230 years?
7. The First Amendment has come to signify the entire Constitution for many Americans. Often, when the cry of "unconstitutional" is heard, the text most-oft cited is the first amendment. Has history rendered the balance of this document obsolete? In other words, have all other questions relating to a government's relationship to its citizens been settled?
8. The Constitution is sometimes referred to as a document of negative rights. Whose rights is it designed to limit?
9. What were the purposes of the Alien Friends and Sedition Acts?
10. What is federalism? Why did the founders insist on keeping this concept alive?
11. How were Senators originally elected? The President? The House of Representatives? (Hint: Madison insisted upon "election by dissimilar means")
12. What made the 16th amendment different from any amendment that had preceded it? (Hint: What is the purpose of ANY amendment?)
13. The sponsor of the 16th amendment withdrew his support before it was ratified. Why might he have done this? (Assuming he wasn't blackmailed, of course)
14. What is sedition? (Hint: You can't sue someone for it, but you can be arrested for it.)
15. Why did Woodrow Wilson reanimate the Sedition Act during WWI?

16. Do you think it is sedition to criticize the government of the United States?
17. How did the 18th amendment transform the Constitution from a document of “negative rights” into a document of “positive rights”? (Hint: whose rights are being restricted here?)
18. What is an “Executive Order”? How does it relate to the Constitution? (Hint: Who is the head of the executive branch?)
19. What role has the mass media played in the formation of a dialogue between our government and its citizens?