¶ 1.1

POLS 120 B Lecture 1



Welcome to the Course.

Gemini Notebook

The Blueprint of American Government

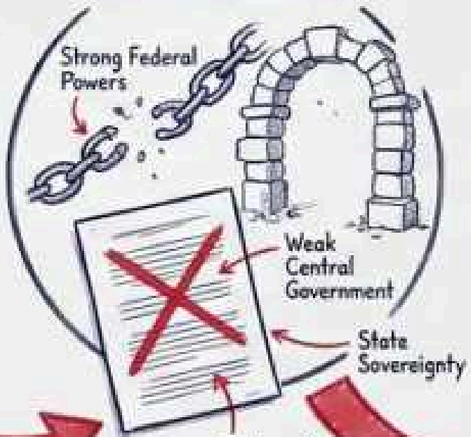
¶ 1.2

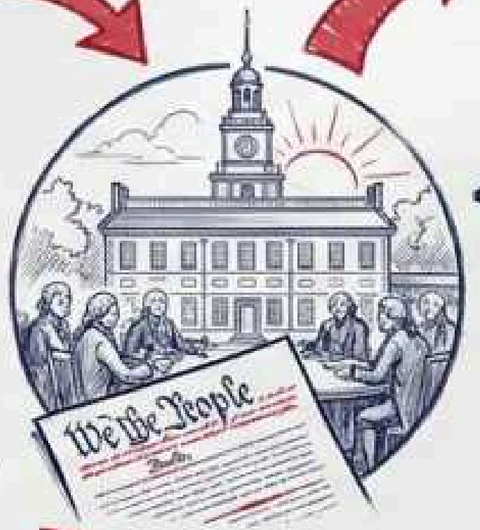


Colonial Assemblies



Declaration of Independence

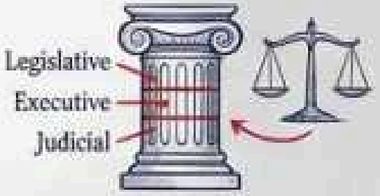




Convention of 1787

The Great Ideas:

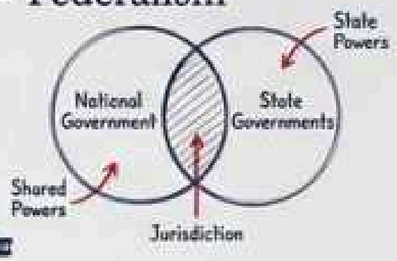
- Separation of Powers



- Checks & Balances



- Federalism



Gemini Notebook

¶ 1.3

Roots of Self-Government

Americans did not invent self-government from nothing.

1215

Magna Carta (Limiting rulers)



1689

English Bill of Rights



1700s

Colonial elected assemblies & town meetings



Core Insight: Colonists inherited these as ingrained rights of free people.

Gemini Notebook

¶ 1.4

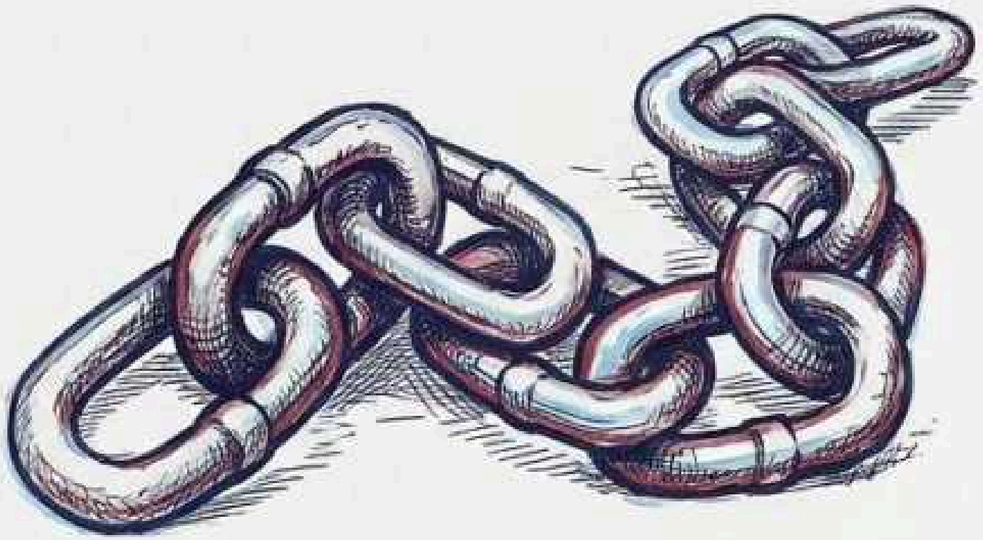
The Declaration of Independence (1776)

Author: Thomas Jefferson



The Principles

- Rights are inherent (not granted by government).
- Power stems from the consent of the governed.
- A statement of principle and a declaration of war.



The Contradiction

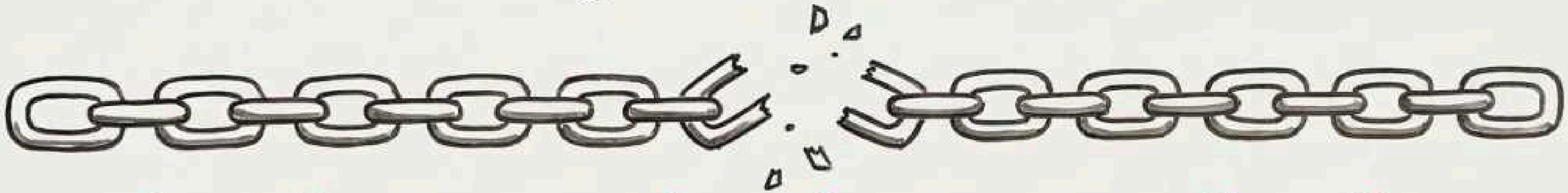
Sat beside the fact of slavery—a contradiction that shaped everything that followed.

Gemini Notebook

The Articles of Confederation (1781)

¶ 1.5

Structure: Loose league of states; 1 State = 1 Vote.



[No President] + [No National Court] + [No Taxing Power]

Amendment Formula: Required 13/13 states to agree.

Result: The framers feared a distant tyrant, so they built a government purposefully too weak to act.

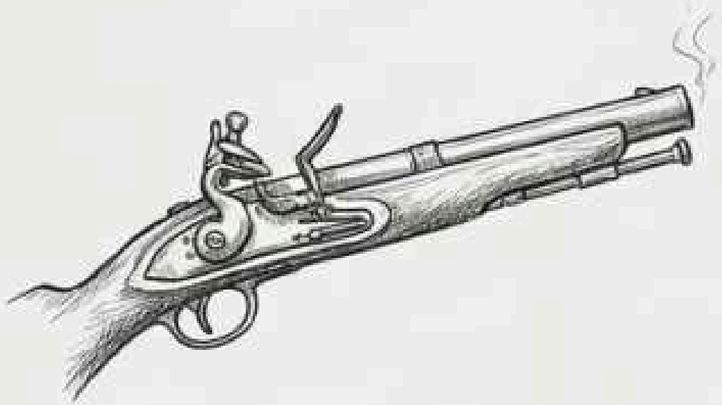
Gemini Notebook

The Breaking Point

¶ 1.6



Symptoms: Interstate trade quarrels + Unpaid national debts.



The Catalyst (1786-87): Indebted farmers in Western Massachusetts rise up (Shays' Rebellion).

The Failure: National government lacked the money or army to intervene.

Conclusion: Leaders conclude the Articles require massive repair, not just minor minor fixes.

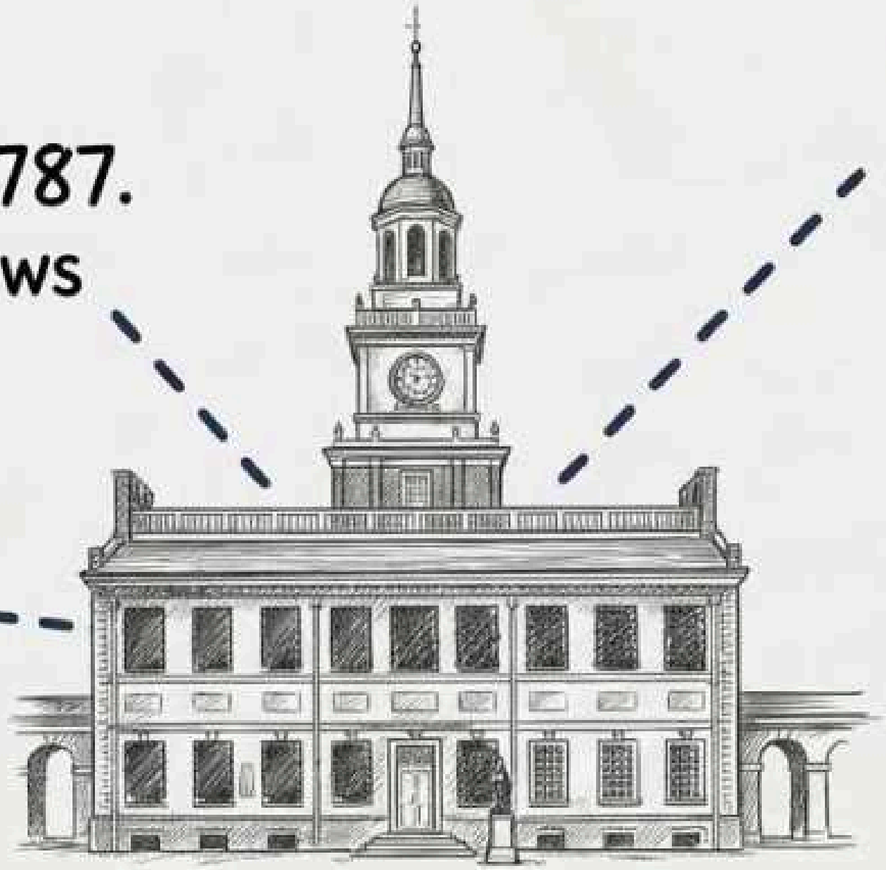
Gemini Notebook

The Convention of 1787

¶ 1.7

Location/Atmosphere:
Philadelphia, Summer 1787. Secret meetings, windows shut against the heat.

Attendance:
55 delegates from 12 states (Rhode Island stayed away).



Key Figures: George Washington (Presiding), James Madison (Took fullest notes).

The Pivot: Sent to revise the Articles → Wrote an entirely new plan instead.

Gemini Notebook

The Great Compromise

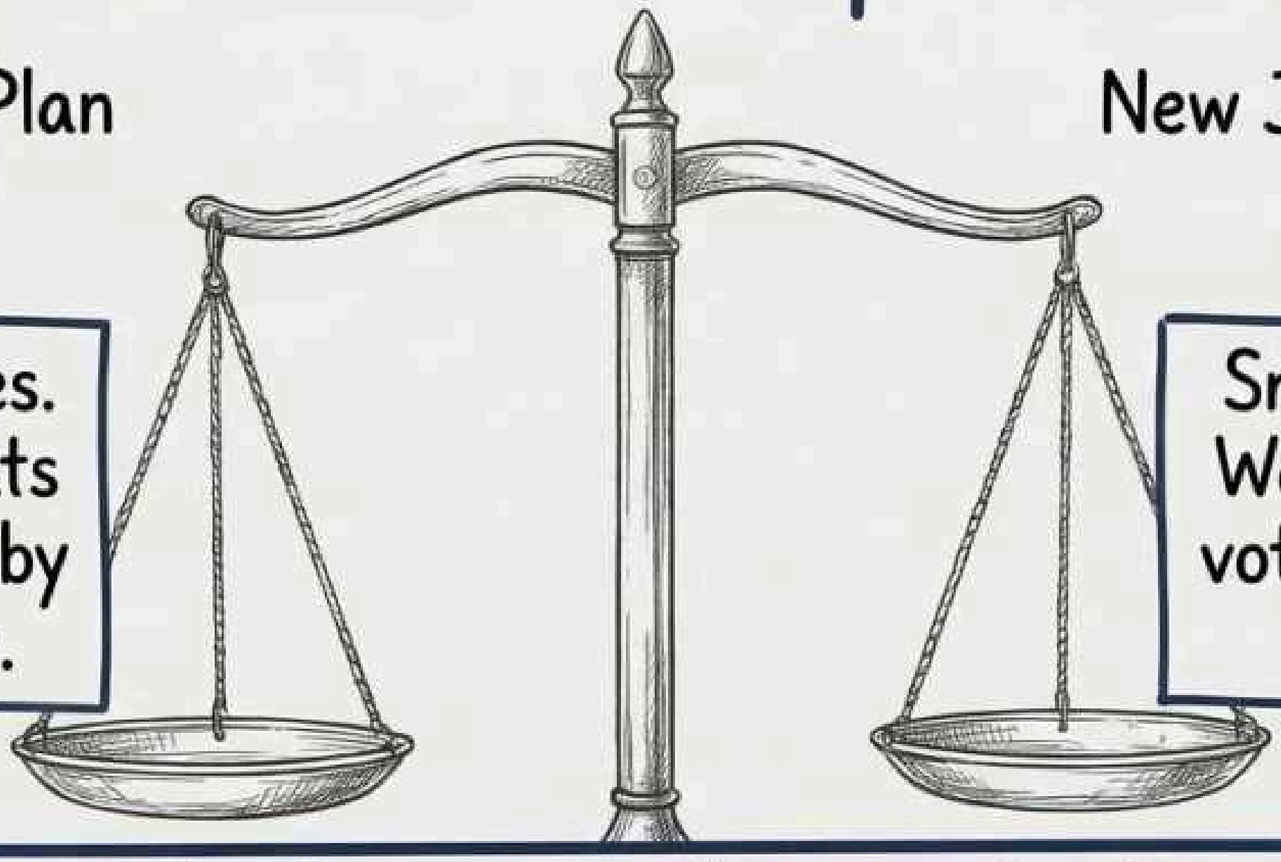
¶ 1.8

Virginia Plan

Large States. Wanted seats determined by population.

New Jersey Plan

Small States. Wanted equal votes for every state.



The Compromise (Bicameralism)

- House of Representatives = Proportional to Population
- Senate = 2 Senators per state

Gemini Notebook

Slavery and The Three-Fifths Compromise

¶ 1.9

The Conflict: South wanted enslaved people (who could not vote) counted for House seats.

1 Enslaved Person = $\frac{3}{5}$ Person

(for representation and taxes)

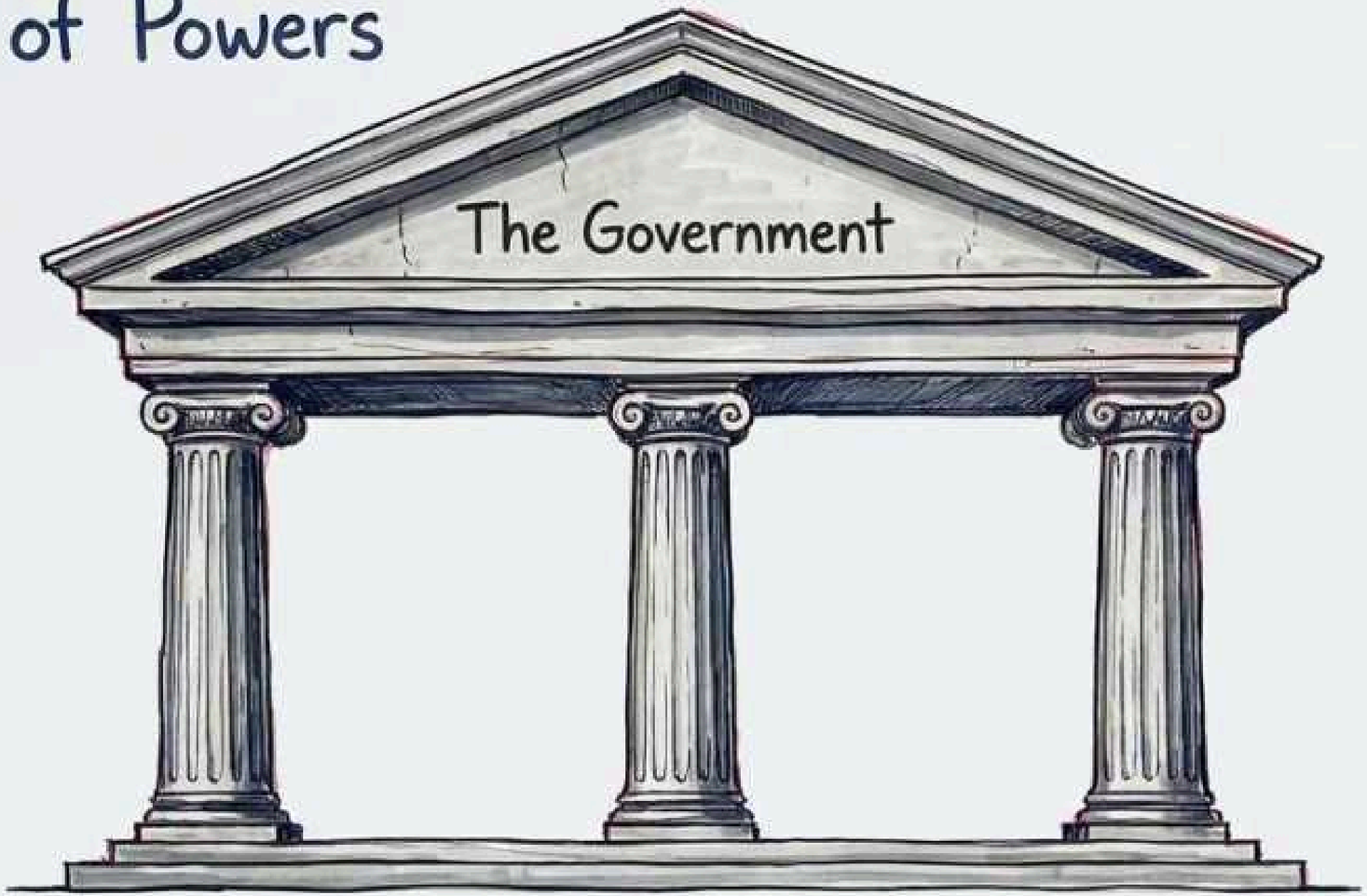
The Protections:

- Congress barred from ending slave trade before 1808.
- The word slavery was omitted from the text, but the institution was explicitly protected.

Gemini Notebook

Separation of Powers

¶ 1.10



Article I
(CONGRESS)
→ Power to MAKE laws.

Article II
(PRESIDENT)
→ Power to CARRY OUT laws.

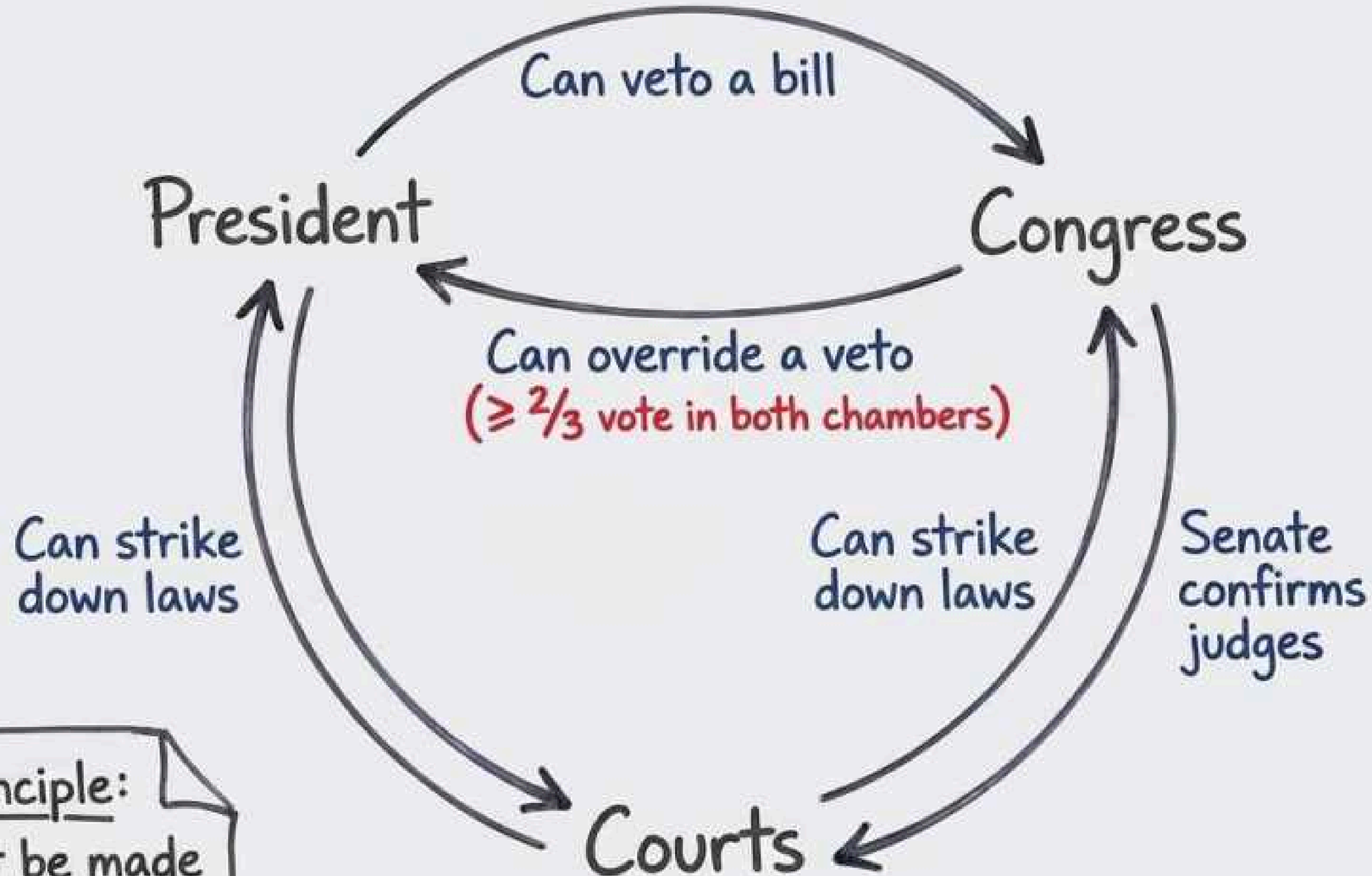
Article III
(COURTS)
→ Power to DECIDE cases.

Theoretical Root: Montesquieu warned that liberty is endangered when one person or body holds all power.

Gemini Notebook

Checks and Balances

¶ 1.11

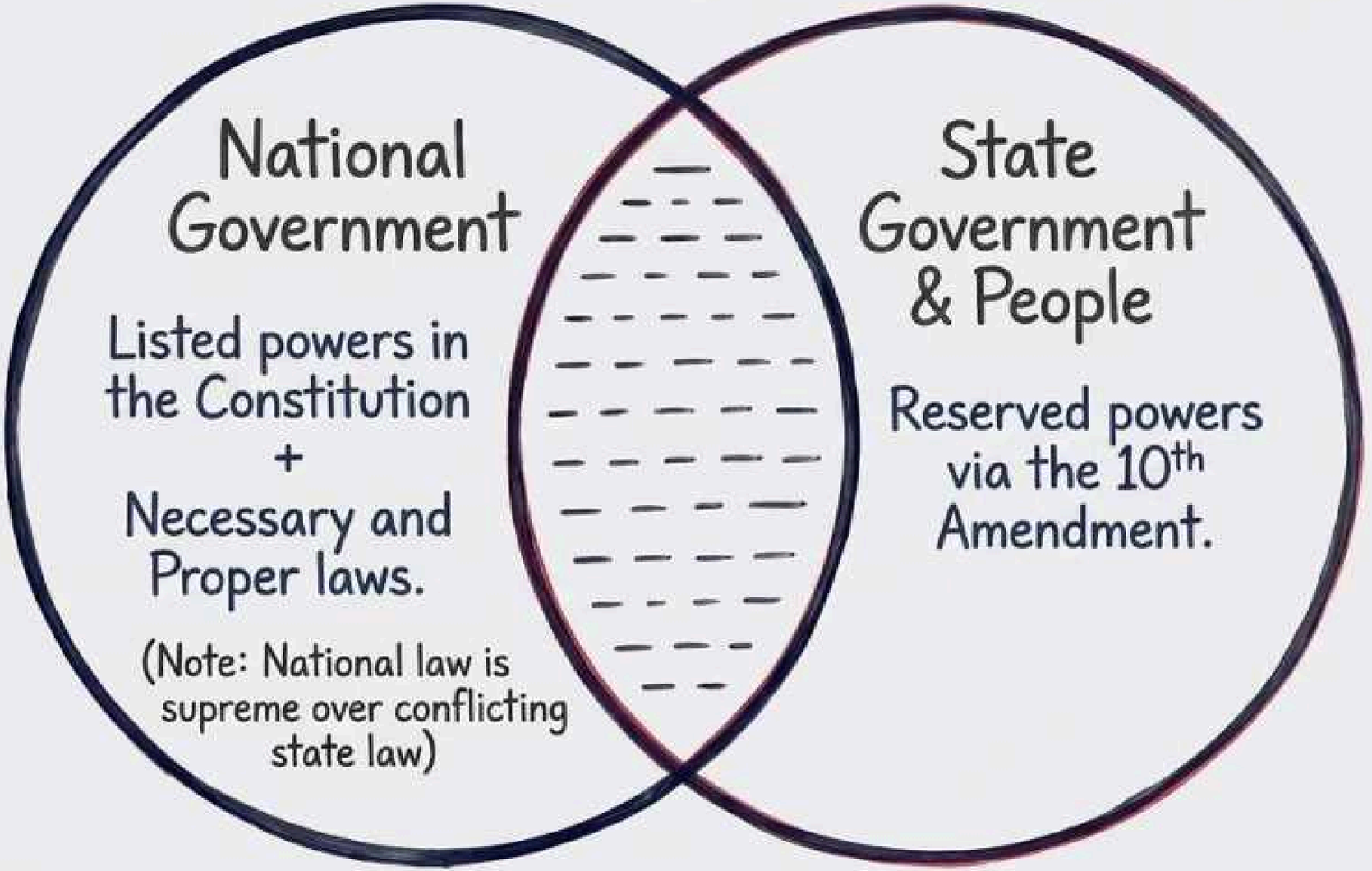


Madison's Principle:
Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.

Gemini Notebook

Federalism

¶ 1.12



Definition: Federalism is the constitutional division of power between the nation and the states.

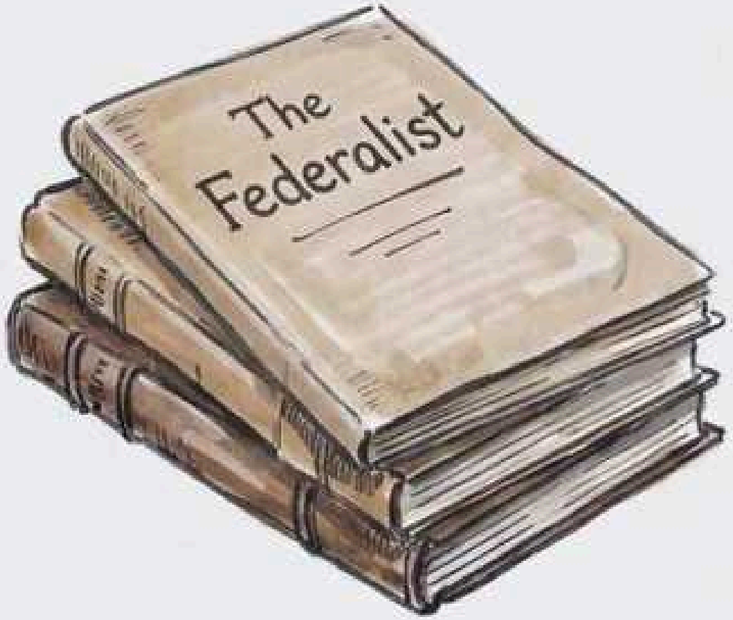
Gemini Notebook

Ratification & The Federalists

¶ 1.13

$$\frac{9}{13}$$

The Requirement:
Approval by 9 of 13 states, acting through special conventions.



The Advocates:
The Federalists (Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay writing as as Publius).

The Core Argument: A large republic with divided powers is the best way to protect liberty.

Gemini Notebook

The Anti-Federalists & Victory

¶ 1.14

The Anti-Federalists

- ✓ The Fear: Strong national government will crush the states and the people.
- ✓ The Objection: The document lacked a Bill of Rights.



The Resolution: Several states ratified only after being promised amendments.

Victory

- ✓ The Milestone: New Hampshire becomes the 9th state to approve (June 1788).
- ✓ New government begins in 1789 with Washington as first president.



Gemini Notebook

¶ 1.15

The Bill of Rights (1791)

The Promise Kept: Drafted by James Madison; 12 sent to states, 10 ratified by Dec 1791.



Guarantee of fair trials.



Freedom of religion, speech, press, and assembly.



Guard against unreasonable searches.

Crucial Caveat: At first, these amendments limited ONLY the national government, not the states.

Gemini Notebook

The Amendment Process

¶ 1.16

Step 1: Proposal

$\frac{2}{3}$ of both houses of Congress

OR

$\frac{2}{3}$ Convention requested by 2/3 of the states (never happened).

Step 2: Ratification

$\frac{3}{4}$ of the states (Today: 38/50).

Result: Only 27 amendments in history. The Constitution can be changed, but only with great effort by design.

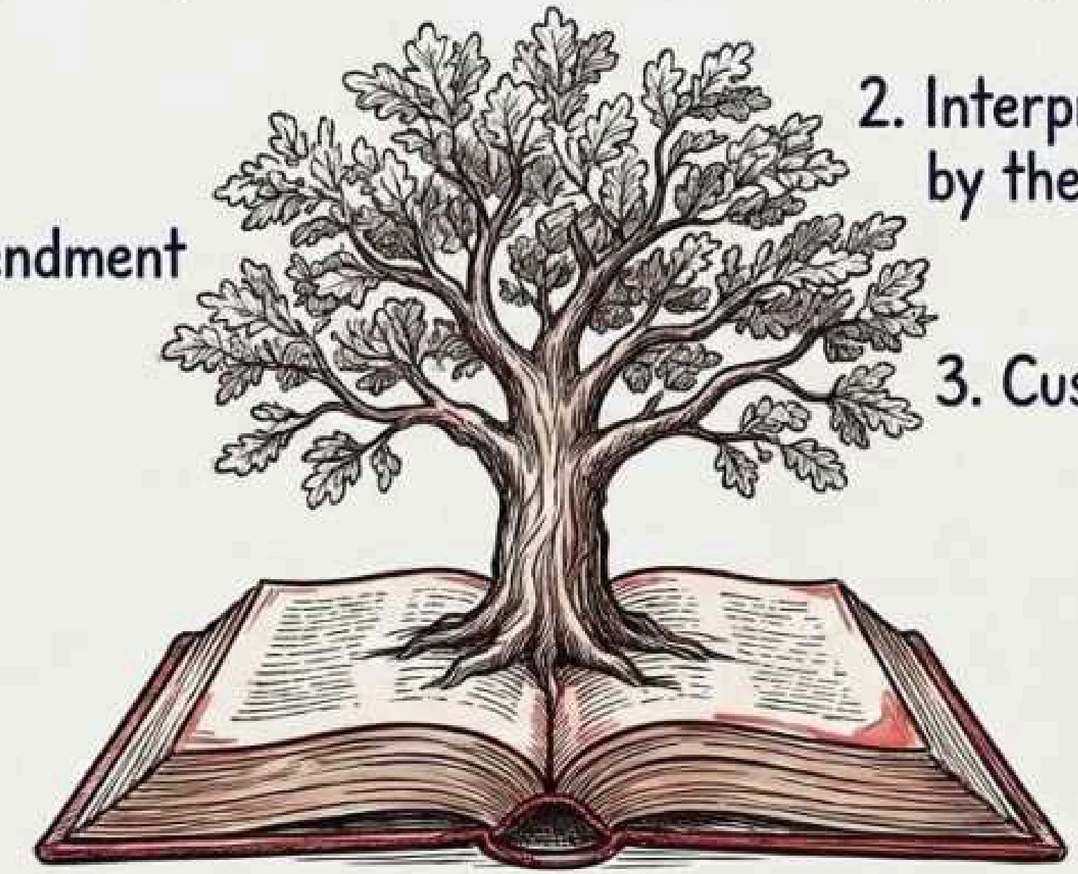
Gemini Notebook

A Living Document

¶ 1.17

Brief but Mighty: Short enough to read in an afternoon, yet governs a massive nation.

1. Formal Amendment



2. Interpretation by the courts

3. Custom and practice

Unwritten Innovations: Political parties, the President's cabinet, and the congressional committee system appear nowhere in the original text—they grew because the system needed them.

Gemini Notebook

Lecture Recap

¶ 1.18

1.

The Shift: Weak Articles of Confederation proved inadequate, necessitating the new 1787

Constitution.

2.

The Structure: Power is fractured (3 branches + Nation/State split) and wired with checks and balances to tyranny.

3.

The Safeguards: Ratification was secured via the Bill of Rights; the whole system is designed to be exceptionally hard to amend.

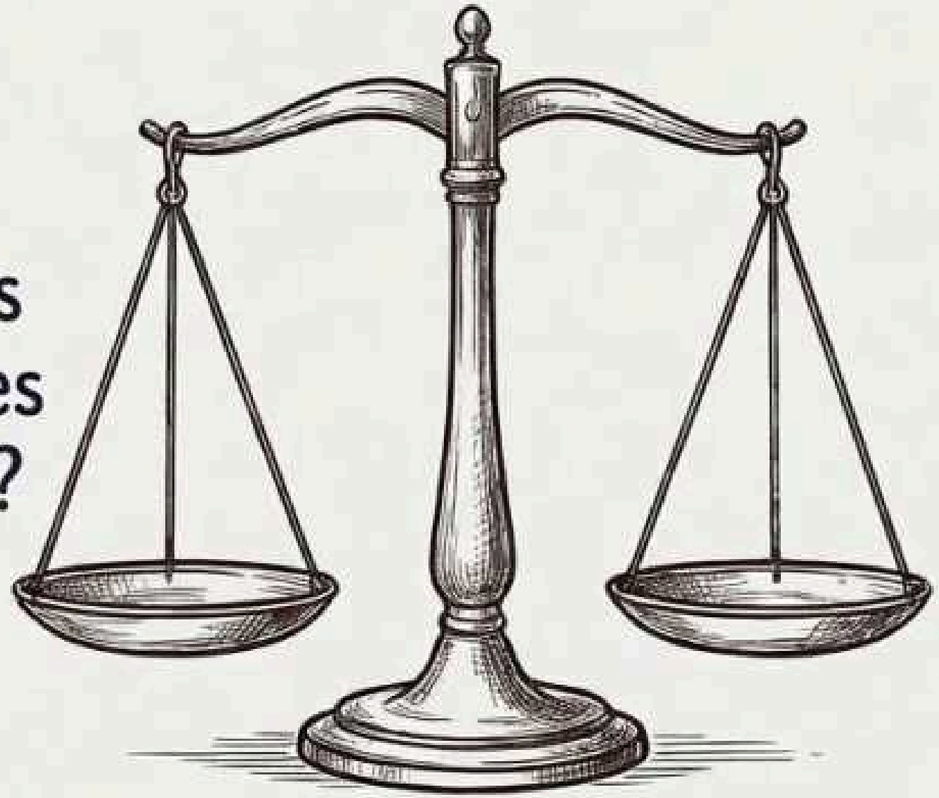
Gemini Notebook

¶ 1.19

Question to Take Away

The Framers' Design: Driven by a fear of tyranny, they built a system that is slow and hard to change.

What are the benefits of a system that makes quick action difficult?



What are the costs?

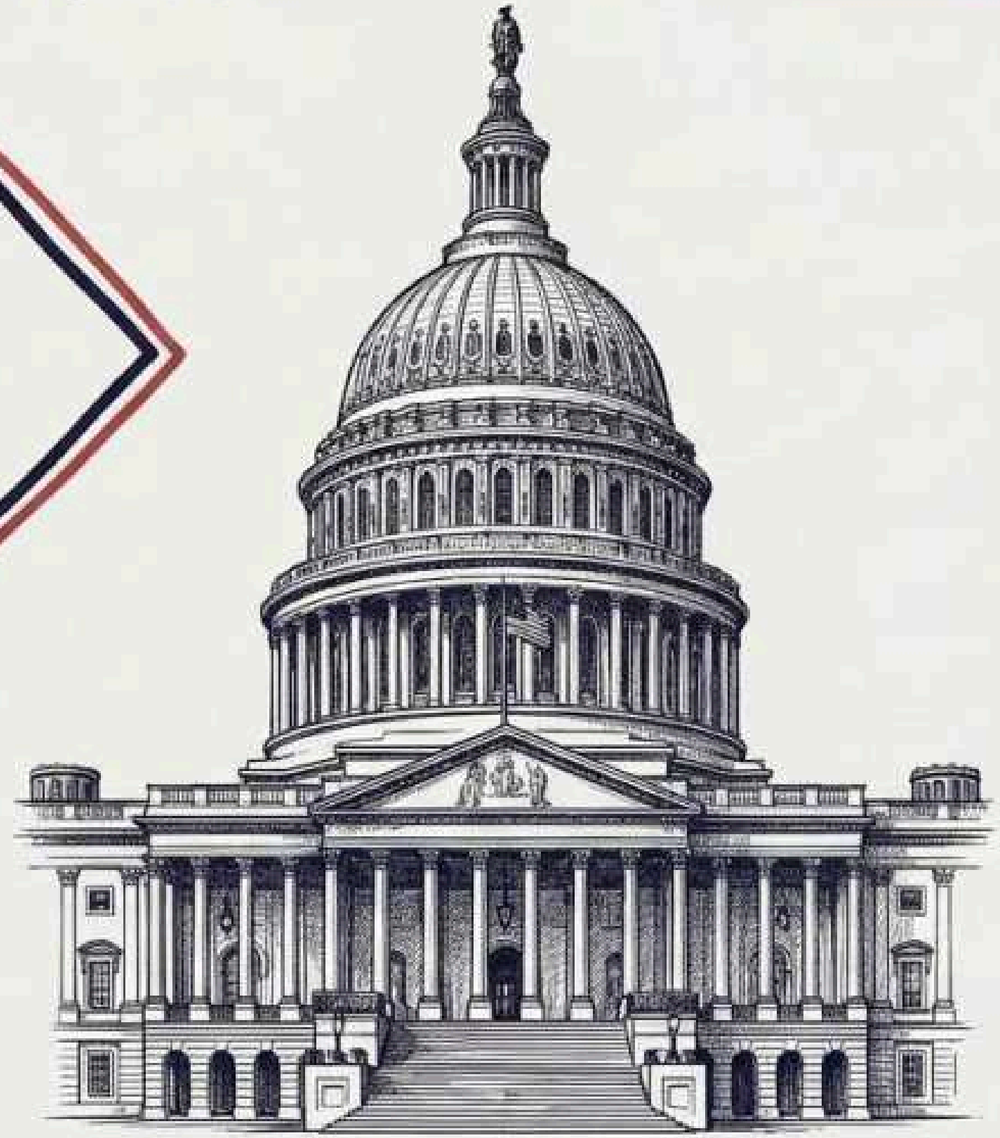
Think about a recent political issue: Which side did this constitutional design help?

Gemini Notebook

Next Lecture Preview

¶ 1.20

Up Next: We turn to Article One:
The Legislative Branch.



Focus Areas:

- Congress and how its two distinct chambers differ.
- The mechanics of how districts are drawn.
- The pathway of how a bill becomes a law.

Gemini Notebook