



The Locked Room and the Four Pages

WisdomForge Booklet — Ages 5–10

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About This Book

This is a story about a room in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787. The windows were shut. The doors were locked. Fifty-five men argued for months. They were told to fix the old government. They wrote a new one instead.

The paper they made is called the Constitution of the United States. It is not a speech. It is not a fairy tale. It is a set of rules for how a country will share power. The oldest written national constitution still in force began as a secret meeting.

WisdomForge already has sittings for this story. The six chapters in this book match those sittings: the locked room, power against power, the losers' list of rights, the counting that was about power, the court that said no, and the way the paper can change.

You will hear real words from the Constitution and from people who argued about it. The words are old. They are still real. This book will not pretend the men in the room all agreed. They did not. It will not pretend everyone in the country got a vote. They did not.

Magna Carta was pulled from a king in a field. The Constitution was designed by a convention behind shutters. Both papers try to put a fence around power. This booklet is about the American fence: how it was built, who was left outside, and how later sentences tried to open the gate. The middle booklet has tables. The high booklet has debates. Stay here if you want the story first.

Each chapter has a story, words to remember, a big idea, something to try, and a question to ask a grown-up. The questions are not tests. They are doors to walk through together. A grown-up who wants Marbury, originalism, or the three-fifths math should use the middle or high booklet.

Chapter 1: The Room No One Could Leave



Illustration for Chapter 1

Imagine a classroom where the teacher locks the door and says, "We will not leave until we write the rules for the whole school." That is a little like Philadelphia in 1787. It is not a perfect picture. The men were not children. The paper they wrote would rule a country. But the feeling is close: nobody outside was supposed to hear.

The old rules were called the Articles of Confederation. They made a "firm league of friendship" among thirteen states. Friendship is not a government. Congress could ask states for money. States could say no. There was no President. There were no national courts. Britain still held forts. Spain closed the Mississippi. Paper money went bad. People said it was "not worth a Continental."

Then farmers in Massachusetts rose up. Many had been soldiers. They could not pay debts. The national government could not raise an army to stop them. State militia did. Grown-ups called it Shays's Rebellion. The lesson the men in Philadelphia took was this: a government that cannot tax, cannot enforce, and cannot defend is not a government.

They were sent to revise the Articles. They decided the Articles could not be fixed. Rhode Island did not even come. George Washington sat in the chair. James Madison took notes. Benjamin Franklin was eighty-one and had to be carried in. They argued about representation, slavery, and how strong a President should be.

Think of two teams who will not share a ball. One team is big. One team is small. The big team wants votes by how many people live in a state. The small team wants one vote each. They split the difference: a House that counts people, and a Senate that counts states. That deal is called the Great Compromise. It was not a poem. It was a bargain.

A year before Philadelphia, a smaller meeting in Annapolis tried to talk about trade. Only five states came. Alexander Hamilton wrote a call for a bigger meeting in May. A meeting about wagons and ports became a meeting about everything.

On 17 September 1787, thirty-nine men signed. Three men in the room would not: Randolph, Mason, and Gerry. They wanted a list of rights first. Gouverneur Morris wrote much of the final wording, including the famous opening. Franklin's last speech said he expected no better, and he was not sure it was not the best. The public did not watch. They saw a finished paper. The arguments stayed inside Madison's notes, which he edited when he was old. Notes are not a camera. They are one man's record.

A child might ask: if they were not allowed to start over, why does anyone still care? Because the country used the paper anyway. Nine states had to say yes. New Hampshire was the ninth, on 21 June 1788. Some votes were close. Close is not the same as easy.

Article VII said nine states were enough. The Articles had required every state to agree to a change. Lowering the bar was part of starting over. Whether that was allowed is a grown-up fight. Whether the country was falling apart is clearer.

Go back to the locked door. One side has old instructions. The other side has a new plan. What they write in a locked room can still become the rule people point to later. That is the first surprise of this book.

Words to Remember

*"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union..." —
Constitution of the United States, Preamble*

That means: the paper speaks as if the people made it, even though only some people were in the room, and only some people got to vote on it.

Big Idea

The Constitution was designed in a locked room. It was not handed down. It nearly failed. The men who wrote it had been told to fix the old rules, not to throw them out.

Try This

1. Draw the room. Put Washington in the chair, Madison with a notebook, Franklin in a seat. Label the door: locked. 2. Write three problems the Articles had, in short words: no tax, no courts, no army. 3. With a grown-up, press a coin into play dough. That is a seal of "this is official." Talk about why a stamp is not the same as everyone agreeing.

Ask a Grown-Up

If you are told to fix a game and you invent a new game instead, is that fair? When is starting over the only way?

Chapter 2: Ambition Against Ambition



Illustration for Chapter 2

If everyone were kind all the time, you would not need a referee. People are not always kind. The men who wrote the Constitution did not trust one person with every job. They split the jobs into three teams.

Congress makes the laws. That is Article I. The President carries out the laws and leads the army. That is Article II. The courts decide what the laws mean in a fight. That is Article III. No team is supposed to do all three jobs.

Splitting is not enough. Each team also has a way to stop the others. The President can say no to a law. That is a veto. Congress can override the veto if enough members agree. Congress can impeach. The Senate must approve judges. Courts can say a law does not fit the Constitution. The design is slow on purpose. Slow is safer than one person who can do everything today.

James Madison wrote about this in a newspaper essay called Federalist 51. He used a name that was not his real name: Publius. The essays were meant to get New York to say yes. They are not the Constitution. They are the argument for it.

Think of three siblings who share a kitchen. One cooks. One shops. One keeps the list. If the cook also shops and also keeps the list, the others go hungry when the cook is in a mood. If each can stop the others from taking the whole kitchen, dinner still happens, but it takes longer. That is checks and balances, in a house instead of a capital.

Montesquieu, a French writer, had said liberty dies if the same hands make the laws and carry them out. Madison borrowed that idea and mixed the jobs on purpose. Pure separation would be three locked boxes. The Constitution is leaky boxes that can still grab each other's keys.

The split is not perfectly clean. Presidents write orders. Congress investigates. Courts make big choices when they explain a short sentence. The sitting for this chapter says: do not pretend the lines are painted on the floor forever. Article VI also says the Constitution, federal laws, and treaties are the "supreme Law of the Land." That sentence is how national rules can beat state rules when they clash.

A government that cannot act quickly is less scary than a government that can do anything in an afternoon. The framers preferred waiting to a king by another name. Hamilton wanted even more energy in the executive than the room would give him. His plan for long terms did not win. The paper you can read is the paper that survived the argument, not the paper every man in the room wanted.

Words to Remember

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary." — James Madison, Federalist 51

That means: people need rules because people are not perfect. The people who run the rules are not perfect either. So the rules must watch the rulers.

Big Idea

The Constitution divides power so no branch can do everything. Each branch can stop the others. The design is built on distrust, not on wishing everyone were nice.

Try This

1. Make three cards: Congress, President, Courts. Write one job on each. 2. Add one "stop" on each card: veto, override, strike down. 3. Play a tiny game: one person tries to make a rule. The others use their stop. Notice how slow it feels.

Ask a Grown-Up

Would you rather have a family rule that is slow and hard to change, or a rule one person can change tonight? Why?

Chapter 3: The Losers' List



Illustration for Chapter 3

The Constitution almost did not pass. In Massachusetts the vote was 187 to 168. In Virginia it was 89 to 79. In New York it was 30 to 27. Those are not landslides. They are squeaks.

The people who said no were called Anti-Federalists. They feared a government far away. They wanted a written list of things the new government could not do to you. The people who said yes were called Federalists. Many of them said a list was not needed. The government only had the powers written down, they argued, so it could not take rights it was never given.

The no side lost the vote. They still won the list. Madison promised amendments. In the First Congress he drafted them. Ten were added in 1791. We call them the Bill of Rights. The sitting title is "The Losers' List," because the people who lost ratification shaped the most famous part.

The First Amendment is one long sentence. It protects religion (two ways), speech, press, assembly, and petition. The Fourth Amendment is about searches. The Fifth Amendment says the government cannot take your life, liberty, or property without due process of law. Those last words grew from Magna Carta's old idea of the law of the land. The Sixth Amendment is about a fair trial. The Eighth Amendment is about cruel punishment.

Here is a hard fact for a child: at first the Bill of Rights only tied the federal government. States could still do things the list forbade Congress to do. Later the Fourteenth Amendment, after a war, helped carry many of those protections onto the states. This booklet will not pretend the list covered everyone in 1791.

Madison started with more than two hundred state ideas and boiled them down. Congress sent twelve amendments. Ten passed in 1791. One about pay became the Twenty-Seventh Amendment in 1992 — more than two hundred years later. One about House size never passed.

The Ninth Amendment says listing some rights does not erase others. The Tenth says leftover powers stay with the states or the people. Those two sentences are quiet. They matter when someone says, "If it is not on the list, you do not have it."

The list also did not free enslaved people. It did not give women the vote. It did not give Native nations a seat at the table. A list of "no" for Congress is not the same as a country that includes everyone.

Rhode Island ratified last, 34–32, in May 1790, after the new government was already running. North Carolina came in after the Bill of Rights was on the way. A country can start while some states still say no. That is not a cartoon of unity. It is a messy start.

Think of a playground rule written because the losing team demanded it: "You may not take the ball without asking." The winning team did not want that sentence. They agreed so the game could start. Years later, everyone points to that sentence first. That is this chapter.

Words to Remember

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." — First Amendment (1791)

That means: Congress is told five times, in one breath, what it may not crush.

Big Idea

The Bill of Rights is the losers' legacy. The people who opposed the Constitution gave it its most famous part.

Try This

1. Copy the First Amendment. Circle the five protections. 2. Make a "cannot" list of three things a grown-up in charge of a game should not do to players. 3. Ask: if the winning team writes the rules, should the losing team still get a cannot-list?

Ask a Grown-Up

Have you ever lost an argument but still changed the rules afterward? What did that feel like?

Chapter 4: The Compromise That Counted People as Numbers



Illustration for Chapter 4

This chapter is hard. It is supposed to be hard. The Constitution counted enslaved people as three-fifths of a person for representation and taxes. That sentence is in Article I. It is not a rumor.

A common mistake is to say the clause meant enslaved people were worth three-fifths of a human being. That is not what the fight was about. The fight was about power in Congress.

The South wanted enslaved people counted fully. More numbers meant more seats in the House and more Electoral College votes. Enslaved people could not vote. Counting them would give extra power to the people who held them in bondage.

The North wanted them counted as zero for representation. They said: you treat them as property. You do not get extra votes from property.

The deal was three-fifths. The South got extra seats. The North got extra tax counting on the South. The people who were counted had no vote. Their existence made their enslavers stronger in the capital.

The Constitution does not use the word "slaves" in that clause. It says "all other Persons." The framers avoided the word. Avoiding the word did not avoid the deal.

Think of a classroom vote where some children are not allowed to speak, but the teacher still counts them to give their table extra votes. The extra votes do not belong to the silent children. They belong to the table. That is an ugly picture. It is the right kind of ugly for this chapter.

There was another slavery deal in the same summer: Congress could not ban the foreign slave trade until 1808. Twenty years of delay was also a bargain. The Constitution also had a fugitive slave clause. This chapter names three-fifths because the sitting names it. The other clauses are the same family of deals.

The Fourteenth Amendment later counted "the whole number of persons" after slavery was abolished. The original bargain was not a small footnote. It shaped who won elections. Harry's pack says it helped slave states in the early House and in the Electoral College, and that Jefferson's win in 1800 was part of that math. Numbers in a clause can elect a President.

This book will not tell you enslaved people were "almost counted as people" as if that were kindness. Counting without a voice is not kindness. It is a tool.

Words to Remember

"Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States... by adding to the whole Number of free Persons... three fifths of all other Persons." — Constitution, Article I, Section 2, Clause 3

That means: the paper counted enslaved people as a fraction for seats and taxes. It did not give them a vote.

Big Idea

The three-fifths clause was not a score of human worth. It was a deal about power. The people counted had no representation. Their lives gave extra power to the people who enslaved them.

Try This

1. With a grown-up, read the clause slowly. Circle "all other Persons." 2. Draw two columns: "who wanted full counting" and "who wanted zero." Write South and North. Write why. 3. Write one sentence in your own words: counting is not the same as having a voice.

Ask a Grown-Up

If a rule uses people as numbers but does not let them speak, who does the rule really help?

Chapter 5: The Court That Gave Itself the Power to Say No



Illustration for Chapter 5

Open Article III. Look for the sentence that says the Supreme Court may throw out a law. It is not there.

Article III says there will be one Supreme Court. It says judges keep their jobs during "good Behaviour," which means they can stay a long time. It says courts hear cases. It does not say courts can erase a law Congress passed.

In 1803 a case called *Marbury v. Madison* arrived. William Marbury wanted a job paper that had been signed but not delivered. The new President would not deliver it. Marbury asked the Court to order it delivered.

Chief Justice John Marshall wrote that Marbury had a right, and that the Court still could not help him in the way he asked, because a statute had given the Court a power the Constitution did not. Then Marshall said something bigger: it is the job of courts to say what the law is. If a law fights the Constitution, the Constitution wins.

Marbury lost his paper. The Court gained a tool. We call the tool judicial review. It is the American way of enforcing limits without 25 barons and swords. Magna Carta tried armed enforcement. The Constitution, through this case, tried judges and opinions.

Is that fair? People still argue. Unelected judges can stop elected lawmakers. That is a real problem with a long name: the countermajoritarian difficulty. You do not need the long name. You need the picture: five or nine people in black robes can say no to a whole Congress.

The sitting for this chapter says: do not tell children the power was always written down. It was built. It has been used for more than two hundred years. Using it a long time is not the same as finding it in Article III.

Hamilton, writing as Publius in *Federalist* 78, called the courts the "least dangerous branch" because they have no army and no purse. Judgment only. Marshall turned judgment into a veto of statutes. Dangerous and least dangerous can both be true in different years.

Think of a game where the rulebook does not name an umpire. Midway through, someone stands up, reads the rulebook, and says, "I decide when a play is illegal." If the players accept that, the umpire becomes real. If they do not, the game breaks. America accepted Marshall's umpire. Magna Carta once tried twenty-five barons with force. That clause did not last. Courts lasted. Lasting is not the same as being written on day one.

Words to Remember

"It is emphatically the province and duty of the judicial department to say what the law is." — Chief Justice John Marshall, Marbury v. Madison (1803)

That means: Marshall claimed it is the courts' job to announce what the Constitution means when a law collides with it.

Big Idea

Judicial review is not a sentence in the Constitution. The Supreme Court took that power in 1803. It has been the main way courts say no to unconstitutional laws ever since.

Try This

1. Look at a copy of Article III (a grown-up can show a short printout). Hunt for "strike down." You will not find those words. 2. Act out Marbury: one person is Marbury wanting a paper, one is Madison not delivering, one is Marshall writing. 3. Talk about umpires. Who picks them? What happens if they were not in the original rules?

Ask a Grown-Up

If a referee was not in the original rules, but everyone uses the referee now, is the referee real? Who could take the whistle away?

Chapter 6: The Constitution That Can Change



Illustration for Chapter 6

The Constitution is not a stone that never chips. Article V tells how to change it. Two-thirds of Congress propose. Three-fourths of the states say yes. That is a high fence. It is supposed to be a high fence. Twenty-seven amendments have climbed it.

The first ten are the Bill of Rights. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery. The Fourteenth promised equal protection and counted whole persons. The Fifteenth said race could not be used to deny the vote. The Nineteenth said sex could not. The Twenty-Sixth lowered the voting age to eighteen. Each of those sentences corrected something the original paper got wrong or left out.

The framers built the fence because they knew the document was not perfect. Treating it as perfect makes the fence higher than they drew it. Changing it is hard on purpose. Hard is not the same as never.

There is a second path in Article V: a convention called by the states. It has never been used. All twenty-seven climbed the Congress path.

Think of a tree with rings. Each ring is a year the tree lived. An amendment is a ring the country added on purpose. The trunk is still the trunk. The tree is not the same height it was in 1787.

"We the People" in 1787 did not include women as voters, enslaved people as citizens, or Native nations as equal makers of the paper. The amendments are how some of those exclusions were fought in writing. The fight was not only writing. It was war, marches, and years. This booklet will not pretend an amendment is a magic wand. It is a hard door that sometimes opens.

Some changes came without a new amendment. Courts explained old words in new ways. That is faster than thirty-eight states. It is also less of a public vote. This book will not tell you which path is always better. It will tell you both paths exist, and Article V is the path the framers drew in ink.

The last chapter of this book is not "and then it was finished." The last chapter is "the paper can still grow, and growing is supposed to be difficult."

Words to Remember

"The Congress, whenever two thirds of both Houses shall deem it necessary, shall propose Amendments to this Constitution..." — Constitution, Article V

That means: change is allowed. Change is not easy. The writers left a door, not a wall with no door.

Big Idea

The Constitution was designed to change. It has been amended twenty-seven times. Each big amendment corrected a flaw or widened who counts. The process is slow. Slow was the point.

Try This

1. Make a timeline with four dates: 1791 (Bill of Rights), 1865 (13th), 1868 (14th), 1920 (19th). Draw who gained something at each date. 2. Count to three-fourths of fifty. That is thirty-eight states. That is the ratification fence today. 3. Write one rule in your house that should be hard to change, and one that should be easy. Compare the fences.

Ask a Grown-Up

If a rule is sacred, can it still be fixed? What is the difference between respect and worship?

For the Grown-Up Reader

This band follows the six sittings in `civics-constitution.ts`: Philadelphia 1787, power against power, Bill of Rights as losers' legacy, three-fifths, judicial review as self-made, amendment chain.

Quotes are Constitution text, Federalist 51, and Marshall in Marbury. No invented sayings. No family names. No medical, legal, or pastoral advice.

Hard edges from the sittings hold here: the Convention exceeded its instructions; ratification was narrow; the Bill of Rights was the Anti-Federalist price and originally bound Congress, not the states; three-fifths was about enslavers' power, not a score of human worth; judicial review is not in Article III; the Constitution was built to be amended.

Harry's research files under `content/us-constitution/` are the source spine. There is no `INVENTORY.md`; README lists 42 content files complete. The handoff note is stale. This booklet is typeset prose, not gold. If a video says the Founders all agreed, close it and come back to Chapter 1.

About WisdomForge

WisdomForge turns founding documents and great thinkers into booklets for every age. Each figure or document gets four booklets: ages 5–10, 11–14, 15–18, and adults. The same text, told at the right depth. Because the Constitution is not a costume of liberty. It is a locked room, four pages, and a long afterlife, and every generation has to read it again.

Read the four pages before you read a summary of the four pages. The National Archives keeps a public text. Use it. Keep the four pages nearby.