

CHAPTER
1
SECTION 3

Section Summary

THE CONSTITUTION

READING CHECK

What is federalism?

VOCABULARY STRATEGY

What does the word *constrain* mean in the underlined sentence? Use context clues in the surrounding words and phrases to figure out the meaning of *constrain*.

READING SKILL

Recognize Sequence Which constitution preceded the current United States Constitution?

After winning their independence from Britain, the former American colonies became states. Each state created a constitution and established a government. Most of these state constitutions included a **bill of rights**, a list of freedoms guaranteed by the state government.

In 1781, the 13 states adopted their first federal constitution. Under the Articles of Confederation, most power remained with the states. Without the ability to levy taxes, the federal government could not pay its immense war debt. Similarly, the weak confederation could not defend American interests on the frontier. The Spanish in Louisiana tried to constrain western American settlements by closing the port of New Orleans.

In May 1787, the states sent delegates to a convention to amend the Articles of Confederation. The small states wanted to keep a loose confederation of states. In contrast, **James Madison** of Virginia advocated a national union that was both strong and republican. The Great Compromise settled the differences between the two plans by creating a bicameral legislature: a House of Representatives and a Senate.

Even so, before the new Constitution would go into effect, 9 of the 13 states had to **ratify**, or officially approve, it. Supporters of the Constitution, known as Federalists, wanted the United States to have a strong central government. Opponents, known as Antifederalists, objected to the Constitution because they thought it gave the national government far too much power. Because the most powerful argument of the Antifederalists was that the proposed Constitution lacked a bill of rights, the Federalists promised to add a bill of rights. In 1789, states ratified the federal Bill of Rights.

The Constitution divided power between the states and the nation, which is known as **federalism**. The Constitution also promoted a **separation of powers** within the federal government by defining distinct executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Each branch had **checks and balances** on the others to prevent one branch from taking control of the government. At the same time, the founders worded parts of the Constitution to permit flexibility. Since its ratification, the Constitution has been amended 27 times.

Review Questions

1. Describe the weaknesses of the national government established by the Articles of Confederation.

2. What did the Federalists promise in order to secure ratification of the Constitution?
