

“Freedom exists only where the people take care of the government.” — Woodrow Wilson

In the wake of protests that turned violent in the nation’s capital, it is time to remind ourselves of the role of government. The legacy that our forefathers left us was a system of government that emphasized cooperation. The only way to make that system of government work is for people to have faith in each other.

Why Do We Have A Government?

People know that we have a government, but some do not know what our government means. They may not understand what government does and why we have it. They may not realize how it affects our lives or why taxes are necessary.

An easy way to decide what government means to our society is to imagine what life would be like without it. With no government, there would be no United States, no Illinois. There would be no order of loyalty in our lives other than in our immediate family. All the government services we take for granted, from the post office to the armed forces, would not exist. We would have no protection against those who would do us harm, and we would be at the mercy of anyone. The strong would dominate the weak. Our lives would be filled with uncertainty and danger.

Belief in government and the willingness to support it makes us citizens of our nation and mark us as civilized persons. This support gives us government services and advantages we could not attain on our own.

What Can You Do For Your Country?

But there is more to a government than what government does for us. To have the advantages of a governed, civilized society, a citizen must give in return. As President John F. Kennedy said in his first inaugural address, “. . . *ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.*”

Each citizen must abide by rules or laws and give up a bit of his or her absolute freedom to make our government progress for everyone’s good. The government is effective only as long as people respect it and work for it. People who expect the blessings of a democracy must be ready to meet the obligations of a democratic government. For every right, we may find a corresponding duty. For example, the right to trial by jury has the corresponding duty of jury service when a citizen is called. A citizen who expects the right to be represented by intelligent and honest representatives has the corresponding duty to vote wisely and to keep informed of government issues.

Government exists so that we might enjoy our rights and meet our duties.

Exercise Your Freedom Responsibly

But what happens if I do not agree with the government or the rules established by our leaders? Let’s review our supreme law of the land, the U.S. Constitution:

“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.”

– *The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution*

The First Amendment protects the right of people to peacefully assemble. People may protest for a variety of reasons:

- To voice their opinion on a law or policy;
- To show their support for a candidate or policy;
- To raise awareness for a cause;
- To express their disapproval.

There are times when the government must put limits on a protest. The government can break up a protest if there is a “clear and present danger” — meaning that violence is imminent. Government officials can place limits on the time, place, and manner in which people can assemble, as long as there’s a reason for these limits and the limits apply to all protestors.

Students should remember that the *Bill of Rights*, including the First Amendment, was not easily created, with no debate by our Founding Fathers. Rather, it arose through great contention and controversy, illustrating the early — and continuing — workings of U.S. government and our legal system.

QUESTIONS

TRUE OR FALSE? Write a **T** or **F** in the space provided.

- ___ 1. A government is optional for a civilized society.
- ___ 2. The First Amendment applies to everyone.
- ___ 3. Serving on a jury is considered a civic duty.
- ___ 4. The government is not allowed to put any limits on a protest.
- ___ 5. The Constitution is considered our “supreme law of the land.”
- ___ 6. Voting is required by the Bill of Rights.

SHORT ANSWER - Name the five freedoms protected by the First Amendment.
