

The Bill of Rights

The First 10 Amendments to the U.S. Constitution

by **Tom Head**

Updated January 25, 2018

The year was 1789. The U.S. Constitution, which had recently passed Congress and been ratified by a majority of states, established the U.S. government as it exists today. But a number of thinkers of the time, including Thomas Jefferson, were concerned that the Constitution included few explicit guarantees of personal liberty of the sort that had appeared in state constitutions. Jefferson, who was living abroad in Paris at the time as U.S. ambassador to France, wrote to his protegee [James Madison](#) asking him to propose a Bill of Rights of some kind to Congress. Madison agreed. After revising Madison's draft, Congress approved a Bill of Rights and ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution became law.

The Bill of Rights was primarily a symbolic document until the U.S. Supreme Court established its power to strike down unconstitutional legislation in [Marbury v. Madison](#) (1803), giving it teeth. It still only applied to federal legislation, however, until the Fourteenth Amendment (1866) extended its power to include state law.

It's impossible to understand [civil liberties](#) in the United States without understanding the Bill of Rights. Its text limits both federal and state powers, protecting individual rights from government oppression through the intervention of federal courts.

The Bill of Rights is made up of ten separate amendments, dealing with issues ranging from free speech and unjust searches to religious liberty and cruel and unusual punishment.

Text of the Bill of Rights

[The First Amendment](#)

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 Second Amendment

A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.

The Third Amendment

No soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.

The Fourth Amendment

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

The Fifth Amendment

No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a grand jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the militia, when in actual service in time of war or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offense to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.

The Sixth Amendment

In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the state and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the assistance of counsel for his defense.

The Seventh Amendment

In suits at common law, where the value in controversy shall exceed twenty dollars, the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact tried by a jury, shall be otherwise reexamined in any court of the United States, than according to the rules of the common law.

The Eighth Amendment

Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

The Ninth Amendment

The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

The Tenth Amendment

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the

states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people.