

A Lock on Liberty

Colonel William E. Merrill sat at his desk, scribbling out figures on the sketch of his optimistic engineering plan. Despite warnings of skeptical critics, Merrill knew that he could find a way so that water vessels on the Ohio River would not have to sit stranded in shallow water until another rain cloud came. Seven years later, Merrill's pencil sketch had become the first lock and dam system on the Ohio River, and the largest of its kind in that century. Only about a hundred years earlier, another man had drawn his quill pen across a similar blueprint. James Madison was drafting what would become the very foundation of the United States. Though a big slab of concrete and an operating nation would seem to bear no resemblance to one another, the systems behind them function in the same way.

Americans almost always refer to the first ten amendments, the Bill of Rights, when talking about protection of rights. They speak of their freedom to picket in front of the capitol building or to catch a fresh piece of venison with their new rifle. But what about that part of the Constitution that they did not make us memorize in elementary school? What about those mundane directions for the number of representatives in the House or for what days they will meet in the Capitol? Did these original articles of the Constitution not provide freedom for the people? Just as the minute and tiny engineering details are essential for protection against a collapsing dam, articles one through seven of the Constitution are the foundation that defends the rights of Americans. Because of the restrictions on federal taxes in article one, a family can hop on an airplane from their urban home to vacation on Florida's sunny coast with the assurance that an overbearing state government cannot charge them for the extra luggage they packed. Article three establishes that the Supreme Court is over all local and state courts. If an American thinks that his local court has made a ruling that contradicts the Constitution, he has the right to take his case all the way to the Supreme Court.

A dam holds back water and prevents it from becoming out of control. Articles one through seven function in this very same way, offering freedom through restriction. The water represents power of the government and the dam wall is our Constitution. Just as the waters crash against the dam wall, the power of the government is always pushing against the Constitution. If the wall of the dam is not strong enough, the waters will overtake it and flood the whole city. If our Constitution did not outline every detail for our system of government, power hungry politicians would take advantage of it and cause it to collapse just like a poorly engineered dam. Just as the dam engineers made the dam from more than one material for ultimate protection, the crafters of our Constitution separated power between branches to assure that our rights would not be drowned in the power of one untamed force. Because article two outlines the procedure of a president's removal should he be caught committing a crime, we have the freedom to know that we are not being led by a crook or a liar. We can be sure that we will not be subject to a law that one scheming senator decided he wanted to put in place for his own benefit. We are not bound by these things because the wall these articles provide shields us and holds these threats back.

A lock system often accompanies a dam, allowing water levels to shift so that ships can move between the varying depths of water. Article four leaves room for waves with a similar system that allows power and laws to be adapted to the different circumstances in different states. We have the freedom to have laws that are suited for our needs in our state. Cars can cruise through Montana's open plains while Delaware's more populated roads require more patience at the wheel. The Southerners tend to like selling sparklers and firecrackers while Northern states are more cautious about the risks of fireworks. They have the freedom to have different laws for their contrasting opinions.

Americans often fail to notice the rights we enjoy because of these articles, but what happens if the foundation of the Constitution rots and the dam collapses? Not only will ships be stuck in shallow water with no way to navigate, the waters that had been bound will be released, destroying and crashing over the ships it was designed to protect and benefit. The engineers of our Constitution built a structure that would not crumble. They sketched out a plan that would hold up even against the most turbulent waters. The seven articles are the concrete that is set in the floor of the waters. Though they seem secondary and even unimportant when it comes to protecting our rights, they are the foundation that keeps our country standing as a nation of liberty.