

**THE BLOG****The Pet Constitution**

By Marty Kaplan

10/14/2007 12:06 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

“I’m writing a children’s book about the Constitution.”

— *Lynne Cheney to Jon Stewart, The Daily Show, October 10, 2007*

As you may know, boys and girls, the beginning of the Constitution is called the Preamble. “Preamble” is a fancy word that means “apology.” Our Founders were wise men who understood that government is bad, and since the Constitution establishes a government, they wanted to be sure to begin by saying how sorry they were for doing it.

The text of the Constitution itself is divided into seven Articles. “Article” means just what it does in modern English: it’s a story, like you’d find in a newspaper or on television. And just as with any media story, except for Fox News, the key is not to take the Articles on face value, but instead to look for hidden biases and correct for them. It’s also important to look in the text for things the Founders meant, but didn’t actually come out and say, perhaps because they didn’t want to be accused of being politically incorrect. This attitude toward reading the Constitution is called being a “strict constructionist.”

Okay, let’s take our first look at the Articles, paying special attention to the “tensions” between them.

For example, Article I says that Congress has the power to pass laws. But Article II says that the President can issue “signing statements,” which explain what the laws really mean.

Article I says that Congress has the power to declare war. But Article II says that the President doesn’t have to actually ask Congress for permission to declare war, because if he did, he wouldn’t be called the President, would he?

Article I says that Congress can’t suspend “the privilege of the writ of *habeas corpus*.” That means that people can’t be kept in jail without being promptly charged and tried. But Article II explains that a privilege is just what it sounds

like — a special treat, like being allowed to stay up late on your birthday — and that the President can take that treat away from someone if he doesn't deserve it.

Article I says that the Vice President is the President of the Senate, which is part of the legislative branch. But Article II says that the Vice President is part of the executive branch. Since no one can be in two places at the same time, this means that the Vice President doesn't have to obey any of the laws passed by Congress, and that he doesn't have to listen to the President, either.

To sum up what we've learned so far, the relationship between Article I and Article II — the legislative branch has some powers, but the executive branch has more powers — has come to be known as our system of "checks and balances."

Now let's move ahead with our overview of our country's wonderful charter.

Article III establishes the Supreme Court. The Court's most important power is overturning laws that the President doesn't agree with. The fancy term for this is "*stare decisis*," which is Latin for, "Sez who?"

Article III also says that if a President is impeached, you have to wait at least hundred years before doing it again, because it would be way too upsetting to put the country through that again so soon.

Article IV says that everyone in America, no matter what state they live in, has the same privileges. The only exception would be if, say, you lived in a state where there was a hurricane or something, and your governor was a real bitch.

Article V explains the process for amending the Constitution. An amendment is like a PS; it's something that the Founders forgot to say. Examples of things they forgot to say include: gay love is sin, abortion is murder, and flag-burning should be punishable by death.

Article VI says that no religious test should be required as a qualification for public office. Isn't that marvelous? In practice, this means that Christians never have to take a test to prove they believe in Jesus; that Jews get the benefit of the doubt because they're on the road to being perfected as Christians; and that Muslims have to swear on the Koran that they're not terrorists.

Article VII says that nine of the original thirteen colonies needed to ratify (that means "vote for") the Constitution in order for it to take effect. In today's terms, that would mean that if thirteen people voted in an election, nine of their votes would count.

Twenty-seven amendments to the Constitution have been adopted since 1791. The first ten of these are known as the Bill of Rights. The way I remember what they're about is a little lullaby that Dick and I used to sing to our daughters when they were small. It went like this:

Goodnight, freedom of religion,
Goodnight, freedom of speech;
Goodnight, freedom of the press,
Goodnight, fuzzy little peach.

Goodnight guns;
Goodnight torture;
Goodnight privacy,
Goodnight Rapture.