

A Civics Lesson from 1836.



The following excerpts are from a geography textbook published in 1836. They show the view of government held by early Americans. What has changed and what remains the same?

930. A state is a body of people, connected under the same government, and yielding obedience to the same laws. It is called a duchy, principality, kingdom, empire, or republic, according to its form of government.

931. In every government there are three distinct powers to be exercised;

- 1. The power of making laws, or the legislative, which sometimes belongs to one man, and sometimes to a number of men called a legislature.*
- 2. That of administering justice, or the judicial power, usually in the hands of judges.*
- 3. The power of executing the laws, or the executive, which generally belongs to the chief, king, president, duke, or other supreme head of the government.*

932. The ruler of a country is usually assisted in his duties by a number of persons chosen by himself, called ministers, councillors, or sometimes, as in the United States, secretaries. As he also consults with them on affairs of importance, they are called his cabinet, or council, and in Turkey, the divan. The prime minister in Turkey and Persia is called the vizier.

933. The three principal forms of government are monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy.

A democracy is a government in which the people assemble to make laws. A pure democracy is rarely found, except in towns, or very small states. A republic is a democratic government, administered by rulers chosen by the body of the people ; as in the free states of North America.

934. A confederation, or federal republic, is a union of several independent states, for mutual aid and defence, under the direction of a general assembly; as in Germany, Switzerland, and the United States of North America.

935. *An aristocracy is a government in the hands of a few persons, usually called nobles. Aristocracies are sometimes called republics; as was that of Venice.*

936. *A monarchy is that form of government in which the supreme power is in the hand of one man (styled a monarch), life. In almost all the monarchies now existing, the throne is hereditary; that is, it descends to a member of the same family.*

937. *In an absolute monarchy, the monarch makes laws at his own pleasure, without any control from others; as in Russia. If he governs without established laws, and merely, according to His own will, the government is usually called a despotism; as in Persia.*

938. *When the power of the monarch is limited by a constitution, or an assembly of the people, the government is called a limited monarchy; as in Great Britain.*

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960. *The independent states of Switzerland and the United States, are the principal examples of republican governments.*

Some of the states, or cantons of Switzerland, are democratic in their government, and others aristocratic.

The individual states of the American Union are democratic republics, governed by assemblies, and a governor chosen by the people for a limited time. There are usually two houses of representatives, which are united with the governor in making laws. The executive power is vested in the governor and his subordinate officers; and the judicial power, in judges, appointed in different ways, but usually for life.

961 . *The Spanish American states in Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia or Upper Peru, Chili, and La Plata, have republican governments.*

The island of Hispaniola or St. Domingo, forms the Republic of Hayti ; a government established by Africans, who were formerly slaves to the French inhabitants of the island.

962. *The principal confederations of states now existing, are the United States, Germany, and Switzerland. In these countries a number of independent states are united for mutual defence; but each retains, to a certain extent, its own government within its own limits.*

963. *The states forming the confederation of the United States, are more intimately connected than those of Germany. The general government has the power of raising taxes, and collecting revenue in the individual states, as well as of making war and peace, collecting armies and establishing fortresses.*

The United States were formerly colonies or provinces of Great Britain. On the 4th of July, 1776, they were declared independent; and a few years after, the present constitution or system of

government was formed. There are now 24 separate states, united into one republic, and four territories, beside the western territory formerly known as Louisiana.

964. The laws are made by the congress, which consists of a House of Representatives, chosen every two years by the people of each state, according to their population; and of a Senate of two from each state, chosen for six years.

By this feature of the constitution, the power of the large and small states is in some measure equal. In the House of Representatives, the large states prevail by the greater number of representatives. In the Senate, the small states have power equal to the larger, in preventing the passage of the law.

965. The law are executed by the president, who is chosen every four years, by electors appointed by the respective slates. He is assisted by the Secretary of State, and the Secretaries of

War, of the Navy, and of the Treasury, who form the Cabinet. The President, with the approbation of the Senate, appoints the inferior officers of government, and those of the army and navy; most of whom can be removed also in the same manner.

966. The Judges of the United States are appointed by the President and Senate for life; and cannot be removed except by a public impeachment and trial for ill conduct. Their duty is to decide causes arising under the constitution and laws of the United States, or those in which both parties are not subject to the laws of any single state.

Source: William Channing Woodbridge. *A System of Universal Geography*. Hartford: Published by John Beach, 1836. <https://archive.org/details/woodbridgeandwi00willgoog>