Power on Trial

Read George Mason's objections to the proposed Constitution.

8.C.3.3.B "Explain criticism posed by Anti Federalists, such as George Mason, regarding concerns over the potential abuse of power by a strong central government and the omission of a national bill of rights."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB As you read, underline two national powers Mason feared could be abused, circle the protection he said was missing, and number two reasons he wanted limits on the new government.

Why George Mason Refused to Sign

1. Imagine a federal tax collector arriving at your door with orders from a new national government. In 1787, delegates in Philadelphia wrote a Constitution that would let Congress collect taxes and raise armies. Supporters argued that these powers would help the country pay debts and defend itself. George Mason of Virginia helped write the Constitution but refused to sign it. He feared that the proposed government could grow too powerful. Like other Anti-Federalists, Mason wanted citizens to ask what might happen if national leaders misused their new authority.

2. Mason warned that Congress could use its broad powers to burden people with taxes, while a national army might be used against them. He also worried that the new government could take power away from the states, which were closer to the people. These were warnings about possible abuses, not claims that such abuses had already happened. Supporters of the Constitution pointed to elections and divided branches as checks on power. Mason doubted those checks alone would always protect ordinary people if officials chose to ignore their rights.

3. Mason's strongest objection was that the proposed Constitution had no national bill of rights. Some state constitutions listed freedoms, but Mason wanted clear protections against the new federal government. Without them, he argued, citizens might have no stated national protection for freedom of the press or against unreasonable searches. He had helped write Virginia's Declaration of Rights in 1776, so he knew such protections could be put in writing. His demand did not stop ratification, but it helped build pressure for amendments. The Bill of Rights was added in 1791.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Supporters saw taxes and armies as useful. Why did Mason see those same powers as a danger?

2. Why did Mason worry about the national government taking power from the states?

3. Why did rights listed in some state constitutions not answer Mason's main objection?

4. How did Mason's criticism of the proposed Constitution connect to the change made in 1791?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a five-sentence letter to a voter in 1788 from an Anti-Federalist's point of view. Explain two concerns about national power, give one possible abuse, respond to a supporter's argument, and propose a written protection.

ANSWER KEY

Power on Trial

GRADE 8 · 8.C.3.3.B

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

As you read, underline two national powers Mason feared could be abused, circle the protection he said was missing, and number two reasons he wanted limits on the new government. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Supporters saw taxes and armies as useful. Why did Mason see those same powers as a danger?	**He feared Congress could burden people with taxes or use a national army against them.**
2	Why did Mason worry about the national government taking power from the states?	**He believed states were closer to the people, so shifting power away from them could leave people less protected.**
3	Why did rights listed in some state constitutions not answer Mason's main objection?	**He wanted written protections against the new federal government in a national bill of rights.**
4	How did Mason's criticism of the proposed Constitution connect to the change made in 1791?	**He objected to the lack of a national bill of rights and helped build pressure for amendments. The Bill of Rights was added in 1791.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Dear voter, a national government needs money to defend us, but its power to tax could be used to demand more than families can afford. A distant Congress might also weaken states that understand local needs. Supporters say elections will stop unfair officials, but voters cannot undo every harm as soon as it happens. Imagine federal officers searching a home without good reason while claiming they are enforcing a tax law. We should demand a national bill of rights that protects people against unreasonable searches before trusting these new powers.

Accept other passage-supported explanations of Mason's concerns, including his fear that elections and divided branches would not always prevent abuses. For the letter, accept a different plausible abuse or written protection if it fits the Anti-Federalist position.