A Charter's Changing Power

Trace how a political settlement became a symbol of limited government.

AWH.C.10.4 "Analyze the origins, meanings, immediate effects, and legacy of the Magna Carta."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one cause of the 1215 agreement, circle one limit it placed on royal power, and mark an immediate effect with 1 and a later legacy with 2. Use your marks to trace how the charter's importance changed over time.

From Runnymede to Rights

1. In June 1215, King John met rebellious English barons at Runnymede, beside the River Thames. Years of costly wars, heavy taxes, and John's arbitrary demands had pushed many barons into revolt. They seized London, giving John a reason to bargain rather than fight at once. The written settlement, later called Magna Carta, or Great Charter, aimed to repair a political crisis, not create a modern democracy. Its sixty-three clauses dealt with debts, forests, trade, and the king's dealings with powerful subjects. Church leaders also sought protection for the English Church's freedom. The agreement reflected competing interests, not a single plan for equal rights.

2. One clause declared that no free man could be imprisoned or stripped of property except by lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land. Another promised that justice would not be sold, denied, or delayed. These limits challenged the idea that a king could act entirely as he pleased. Yet "free man" did not include the many people who were unfree, and the charter did not give everyone a vote. A council of barons was authorized to enforce its terms, a sharp check on John. The document protected particular groups and customs while setting out a broader principle about lawful rule.

3. The peace collapsed almost immediately. John asked Pope Innocent III to void the charter, and the pope did so in August 1215; civil war followed. John died the next year, and supporters of his young son Henry III issued revised versions to win allies. Later rulers confirmed the charter, including Edward I in 1297. Over time, English lawmakers and legal thinkers treated its promises about lawful judgment and justice as symbols of limits on government. Centuries later, people arguing for rights in Britain and America drew on those ideas. They often gave the charter a wider meaning than its authors intended in 1215.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the barons' revolt and capture of London help bring about Magna Carta?

2. What limit on the king did the clause about imprisonment set, and who did it not protect?

3. Why did Magna Carta fail to secure peace in 1215, despite being a written agreement?

4. How did later generations use Magna Carta in a way that went beyond its authors' aims?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 65 to 85 word museum label responding to the claim, “Magna Carta gave everyone equal voting rights in 1215.” Use evidence about why it was written, what one protection meant, what happened soon afterward, and how later generations used it.

ANSWER KEY

A Charter's Changing Power

HIGH SCHOOL · AWH.C.10.4

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one cause of the 1215 agreement, circle one limit it placed on royal power, and mark an immediate effect with 1 and a later legacy with 2. Use your marks to trace how the charter's importance changed over time. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the barons' revolt and capture of London help bring about Magna Carta?	**The revolt and capture of London increased pressure on John to bargain with the barons rather than keep fighting.**
2	What limit on the king did the clause about imprisonment set, and who did it not protect?	**The king could not imprison a free man without lawful judgment or the law of the land. The clause did not protect people who were unfree.**
3	Why did Magna Carta fail to secure peace in 1215, despite being a written agreement?	**John asked the pope to void it, the pope did so in August 1215, and civil war followed.**
4	How did later generations use Magna Carta in a way that went beyond its authors' aims?	**They used its promises about lawful judgment and justice to argue more broadly for rights and limits on government.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Magna Carta did not give every person equal voting rights in 1215. Rebellious barons forced King John to negotiate after his taxes and demands helped spark a political crisis. Its protection against unlawful imprisonment applied to free men, not everyone. The settlement soon collapsed when the pope voided it and war followed. Later generations used its language about lawful judgment to argue that rulers must obey the law, expanding its significance beyond what its authors intended.

Accept references to other protections in the passage if students accurately explain their limits. Part 3 should correct the voting claim and distinguish the charter's immediate failure from its later influence.