

The Bill of Rights was ratified on December 15, 1791, after ample debate between Federalists and Anti-federalists over whether the Constitution should include provisions for citizens' rights and just how specific they should be. Fresh on the minds of Americans was the abuse they endured from the Stamp Act and writs of assistance, and they had no intention of losing their newly earned freedoms. The Bill of Rights was visual proof of the rights of the people and the limitations of government, which our founding fathers hoped would protect against future oppression. I believe James Madison said it best when he said no government is perfect and "that which is the least imperfect is therefore the best government." As good as it is, our government contains many imperfections, and it is the Bill of Rights that protects the principles of the founding fathers and prevents the government from going too far astray.

In the summer of 2007, I went to Cuba to volunteer on a mission trip with my church, St. Peters. While I was there, I got a first-hand look at just how important a bill of rights is for a country. In Cuba, citizens are denied many basic rights, including the freedom of expression, movement, assembly and privacy and the protection of due process under the law. Military soldiers line the streets to remind Cubans of the control the government has over them, and, if someone breaks a law, they are taken to one of the ninety prisons on the island that have substandard and unhealthy conditions. No Cuban is allowed to leave the country without permission from the government, which is rarely granted, and common freedoms we Americans enjoy, like owning computers and surfing the Web, are banned without prior consent of the government. While there, I learned I had to be very careful what I said and what I did, which was strange to me because I was so accustomed to expressing myself as I saw fit. Even though tourists don't fall under the same harsh control as Cuban citizens, it's scary to know that one wrong statement against the government could possibly result in my going to jail. My trip to Cuba showed me what life in America could have been like if no Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution.

In contrast, volunteering in the State Attorney's office showed me the positive power of the Bill of Rights. I volunteered at the State Attorney's Office about twice a week during my junior year, during which I was able to watch trials and see all the behind-the-scenes paperwork that precedes a trial. While I have always enjoyed TV shows like 'Law and Order' and 'L.A. Law' that dramatize the legal proceedings of a trial, it was a powerful experience for me to see real people following the principals outlined in the Constitution and see the Bill of Rights in action. Working in the Victims' Advocacy Unit, I saw people who were seriously wronged or injured. While I sympathized immensely with the victims I met, I had to remind myself that the people accused of hurting them were still protected by the Bill of Rights and had to be "assumed innocent until proven guilty." One promise of the Bill of Rights that many people forget is that our rights as Americans extend to all, even those accused of breaking the law, and it is through this protection that we avoid repeating past mistakes like the Salem Witch Trials.

Both in my time spent in Cuba and through my experience in the State Attorney's Office, I have learned the power of the Bill of Rights and the important role it plays within the structure and function of our government. The Bill of Rights can be used as a litmus test to make sure we do not stray too far from our founding principals. For example, during World War II, when we were fearful of the Japanese using spies in

America, we sent more than 110,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans to interment camps. Even though they were convicted of no crime, they were taken away from their homes and moved to “War Relocation Camps” until the end of the war. It wasn’t until 1988 that Congress passed and President Ronald Reagan signed an apology for “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.” Though our government proved itself imperfect, as James Madison predicted, the provisions set forth in the Bill of Rights allowed us to examine our national conscience and correct course. Our government will not always act rightly, but the Bill of Rights allows all of us as citizens to judge the actions of our government and decide if we are living true to the principles the founding fathers intended for this country. This is why the Bill of Rights is so important to me: It doesn’t guarantee a perfect government, but it does ensure a government that is self-correcting. It provides the promise that the rights America was founded on more than 200 years ago will extend far into the future and apply to my children and grandchildren.