

## Lesson Twenty-Five

# Checks And Balances

### LESSON IDEA

To show how the Constitution, through a complex laticework of checks and balances, was specifically designed to prevent the misuse of government power.

### PREPARATION

Make enough copies of the Washington quote on page four to distribute to each member of the family after this lesson. Study the section of *Your Rugged Constitution* suggested in "During The Week" and decide how to use it for home study.

**T**HE CONSTITUTION of the United States, as adopted by the 13 former British colonies, created a unique system of government. It shocked the rulers of Europe. Never, they claimed, had a government (theirs) been so badly treated. The Americans, they fumed, had dissected its power, then placed the pitted the parts in opposition to one another. They hampered and hamstrung it until it looked like a giant pinned down by myriad small ropes. How could they expect it to function?

Why was the Constitution such a shock to the rulers of Europe? Why did they not adopt a similar document for their own countries? [Encourage everyone to express an opinion.]

Government, in the minds of kings and court ministers, was meant to entail virtually unlimited power, and the authority do about as it pleased to the governed. It was to be serve as a divine powerhouse driven by kings appointed as Earthly emissaries of God Himself. Should menial subjects fail to appreciate a kings' exalted position as the sources of wisdom, severe physical punishment would often follow. This could mean the firing squad, guillotine, hangman's nooses, prison, and/or beatings. While it may never have occurred to some rulers that their policies and actions were reprehensible, and merely served to bolster their own lust for power, few if any of those beaten, imprisoned, and otherwise mistreated had any such delusions.

**N**EITHER DID George Washington. He was fully aware of the tendency of government to exceed its proper bounds and brutally abuse its powers. "Government," he believed, "is not reason; it is not eloquence; it is force! Like fire, it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master."

Do you think that Washington's conclusion was justified? Why did he compare Government to fire? Why is fire a dangerous servant? When is it a fearful master? [Encourage discussion. Make sure that everyone understands why powerful governments based on communism, Nazism, fascism, socialism, or other big-government "isms" tend to become as fearful to their subjects as raging forest fires become to the wildlife in their path. Also, make the point that even when a government is held in check, as the American government was by the Constitution for many decades, it is nevertheless similar to a bonfire serves as a necessary and beneficial source of heat and light, but can quickly become a conflagration if left unattended and unchecked.]

Like Washington, many delegates to the Constitutional Convention wanted no part of creating yet another "fearful master." They believed that government should be a servant of the citizenry; a legal apparatus that would act as a referee between individuals and groups, keeping the rules fair and the game clean, but leaving citizens free to enjoy liberty in their own way, provided only that they did not infringe the liberties of others. Government was not to protect individuals from the folly of their own mistakes (an effort that would inevitably lead to oppression and loss of freedom). It was, however, designed to protect the nation from threats posed by foreign powers.

Yet, creating a federal government with even minimal power was, as Washington had indicated, a dangerous venture. Power does strange things to those who wield it. As John Emerich Dalberg-Acton (Lord Acton) succinctly phrased it: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The Founders believed that it was

