

Proposed Lectures



JAMES COLL

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James Coll is an adjunct professor of American and Constitutional history at Nassau Community College. He has written numerous articles for Politico, The Hill, City Journal and Newsday among other periodicals and is the founder of ChangeNYS.org, a not-for-profit dedicated to promoting honest, open, responsive and limited government in our state. In addition, James served in the NYPD for over 21 years and retired in the rank of detective. He lives in Seaford.

The Police and the Constitution (Single or Multi-Session Program)

Throughout American history, our legal system has struggled to maintain a delicate balance between two sometimes-opposing objectives: the preservation of individual liberty and the obligation to ensure public safety. Highlighting circumstances and Supreme Court decisions, this discussion will illustrate how Founding-era ideals have been applied to the evolving powers and limitations of the police in modern society.



The Opinion of the Court: The Death Penalty and the Constitution

Supporters and opponents of the death penalty would agree that no government power is more in demand of scrutiny than the ability of the state to take a life. In this lecture, we will explore the issue through the context of the Constitution's prohibition against "cruel and unusual punishments" and what Chief Justice Earl Warren described in a 1958 opinion as the "evolving standards of decency."



Electing the President

What were the Founders thinking when they created the Electoral College? This lecture will provide an overview of the constitutional road to the White House. The focus will be on the complex system designed to decide who gets to be our nation's Chief Executive—and whether it still needs to be so complicated.



Supreme Court: Year in Review

Few Supreme Court terms have been as consequential as the most recent. In this discussion, we will focus on selected "cases" and "controversies" before the justices as well as events beyond the bench that have impacted the highest courtroom in the nation.

Understanding the Supreme Court



This lecture will examine the evolving role of the U.S. Supreme Court in American history. Our objective will be to get a better sense of how the Court works, how it deals with (or fails to deal with) controversial issues and how the "least dangerous branch" has secured its unique place in the American constitutional structure.

Race and the Constitution

Although the document contains no express references to race until 1870, the way issues like discrimination and civil rights are dealt with in the US Constitution have had a profound impact on our American story. In this lecture, we will discuss clauses dealing with slavery and its abolition, the still-present march towards realizing equality and how a 150-year-old amendment has been utilized as a voice for freedom in our time.

"My Name is Alexander Hamilton"

In this lecture, we will explore the life and political philosophy of the New York Founding father currently dancing his way across a Broadway stage. Singing by attendees not required but will be encouraged.

Free Speech and the Constitution

“Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech...”

Despite the absolutist wording of the amendment excerpted above, the Supreme Court ruled in a 1919 decision that free speech does not “protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic.” As a consequence, the government routinely makes laws preventing people from speaking or expressing themselves in every instance without recourse. So if free speech is not an absolute right then when are government restrictions permitted? In an informative lecture, circumstances and other landmark Supreme Court decisions will be discussed to analyze the challenge of balancing this important civil liberty and public safety in America.



Understanding the Census, Gerrymandering And What They Mean

Article I of the US Constitution mandates that an “actual enumeration” be conducted every ten years to determine the number of people living in the United States. In this discussion, we will analyze the history of the census, the provisions for the process and the way the counting is used after it is conducted. Our analysis will also include the way states are carved into districts and how that process has both changed and remained the same over the history of our republic.

Technology and the Constitution

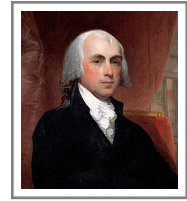
This lecture will focus on how the Supreme law of the land—many of its clauses written in the 18th century—has been applied to new technology. Our discussion will include some speculation about how our courts might continue to blend the document’s original text and modern reality in the future.

Thinkable: Recognizing the Active Shooter Threat

Headlines dominated by reports of mass shootings in our public spaces and the devastating results of these tragedies have challenged our discussion about the balance between public safety and personal liberty. In this lecture, we will discuss the active shooter threat by analyzing three tragic events and the way law enforcement has modified its own protocols in response.

What Was James Madison Thinking?

From his advocacy for a powerful national government to the intentional omission of a bill of rights, this discussion will analyze the biography and political thinking of the fascinating Virginian who was known even in his lifetime as the "Father of the Constitution."



Madam Justice: The Women of the US Supreme Court



"I urge the Senate's swift bipartisan confirmation so that as soon as possible she may take her place on the Court and her place in history." Since President Ronald Reagan spoke these words at the appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor to the Supreme Court in 1981, four other women have been nominated and serve on the Highest Court in the land. In this lecture, we will discuss the lives of the Madam Justices and their impact on our understanding of the Constitution, the law and our nation.

The Near-Death, Life and Legacy of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

This lecture outlines the tradition of civil rights in the United States and the difficulties presented in getting this important legislation passed during the turbulent sixties. The discussion will also focus on the impact of the law on America today.

The Opinion of the Court: Understanding *Roe v. Wade* and the Right to Privacy

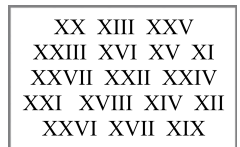


Rarely has an issue created as much fervor as the debate over a woman's right to make her own reproductive decisions and the rights of the unborn. In this lecture, we will discuss the origins of the judicial interpretation, progress of the legal controversy following *Roe*, including the recent *Dobbs* decision, and the continuing legacy of the decision beyond the issue of abortion.



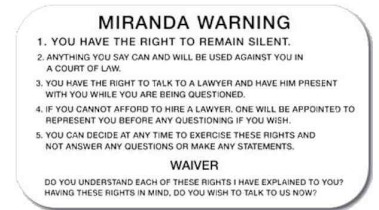
The Other Amendments

Ask the average American about the amendments to the U.S. Constitution and they will no doubt discuss the first ten, known collectively as the Bill of Rights. In this lecture, however, we will discuss some of the *other* amendments that, in spite of providing structural and fundamental changes, have received far less attention.



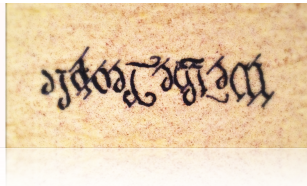
The Opinion of the Court: Understanding *Miranda v. Arizona*

“You have the right to remain silent.” This sentence, and the others that inevitably follow, has been an ingredient of American criminal procedure for the past half century. During this time these words have not only become a component of our legal system but a part of our popular culture as well. While the admonitions of the accused are familiar to most of us, the circumstances surrounding the case that created them remains in relative obscurity. In this lecture, we will discuss elements of the opinion, including judicial interpretation, legal technicalities and the continuing impact of *Miranda* on law enforcement today.



The Undemocratic Constitution?

The U.S. Constitution is celebrated for providing a unique framework of government that has lasted for generations. And yet there are some provisions--some well-known and some obscure--that illustrate a counter-majoritarian impulse. In this discussion, we will examine the parts of the supreme Law of the land that prompt us to ask the question about the principle of democracy in the founding document.

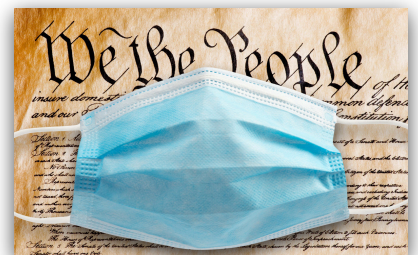


Religion and the Constitution

This informative lecture examines the development of the First Amendment protection of religious freedom. Circumstances and Supreme Court interpretations of the first 16 words of the Bill of Rights will be considered to illustrate how Founding-era ideals have been applied to the controversial issue of religion and government interaction in America.

COVID-19 and the Constitution

The outset of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 forced each of us to respond in unprecedented ways to protect ourselves and our families. Government at every level also responded extraordinarily. In this lecture, we will analyze some of the decision-making at both the state and federal level in the context of real-time challenges and compliance with the U.S. Constitution.



"...unreasonable searches and seizures..."

The Constitution's Fourth Amendment protects us from unlawful intrusion by the government. Yet how do we determine between reasonable and unreasonable when simultaneously protecting public safety and ensuring individual liberties? The issue, older than the republic yet complicated by new technology, will be discussed by analyzing Supreme Court cases.

How the JFK Assassination Changed the Constitution

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy was a defining moment in American history. Yet the story of how JFK's untimely death led to a change in the U.S. Constitution is less well known. In this discussion we will examine constitutional provisions dealing with a premature vacancy in the presidency and legal changes over time in the order of presidential succession.

Slavery and the Constitution

The word is never mentioned in the Constitution as it was written in 1787. Yet slavery, from the three-fifths compromise in Article I to the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865, is a reoccurring theme throughout much of the document. In this lecture, we will discuss the permeation of the 'peculiar institution' in the Constitution as well as nineteenth century Supreme Court cases that both helped and hindered its abolition.

The Opinion of the Court: Understanding *Marbury v. Madison*

Few cases argued before the U.S. Supreme Court have been as consequential as the one brought by William Marbury against James Madison in the earliest years of the nineteenth century. Yet, despite the importance of the outcome, the specifics of the landmark case remain in relative obscurity to most Americans. In this lecture we will discuss the many different factors of the dispute including legislative initiative, executive prerogatives, judicial interpretation, legal technicalities and, of course, the politics of personal disagreement.

Ratifying the Constitution

Following the drafting of the U.S. Constitution in 1787, the document was sent to the states to be contemplated and debated in specially-held conventions. In this lecture, we will discuss the arguments for and against the Constitution's approval, the process for state ratification and the impact of this period on the future of constitutional history.

The Opinion of the Court: Understanding *Brown v. Board of Education*

In the early 1950's, Oliver Brown filed a lawsuit on behalf of his daughter claiming that a Kansas state law segregating public school students based on race was unconstitutional. The decision in the landmark case has had monumental consequences on education in America and, to many historians, marks the starting point for the 20th century civil rights movement. In this lecture, we will discuss the legal development of the case and the definition of 'equal protection' that remains part of its legacy.



'Forever Free:' Lincoln, Civil War and the American March To Emancipation

In this lecture, we will discuss the American legal and political struggle towards the abolition of slavery. The talk will focus on the structure and impact of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation as well as post-war Constitutional developments regarding the 'peculiar institution.'

The Opinion of the Court: Understanding the Second Amendment

“A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”



For more than 200 years, the Supreme Court has remained largely silent in interpreting whether the 27 words cited above provide an individual or collective right to own a gun. The Court has attempted to resolve some questions relating to the Second Amendment with two recent decisions. In this lecture, we will discuss the impact of these cases, the role of legislative initiative at the state and federal levels and the evolving status of this debate.

Impeachment: A Historical and Constitutional Interpretation

With the recent 150th and 20th anniversaries of the impeachments of Presidents Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton and the more recent impeachments of Donald Trump, we will visit the constitutional provisions defining this legal device as well as provide an examination of the circumstances surrounding these events.

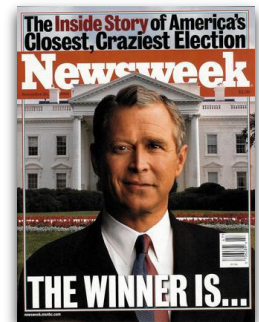
Understanding the Presidency (Single or Multi-Session)

“The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America.”

Created by Article II of the Constitution, much of the power of the presidency can be found in the actions of those who have occupied the office. In this discussion, we will analyze the intent of the Framers and the text of the supreme law of the land regarding the chief executive.

Understanding *Bush v. Gore*

Few political contests have produced as much confusion, consternation and conjecture as the 2000 presidential election. In this lecture/discussion we will analyze the impact of the voters, “dimpled” chads and the electoral college as well as the Supreme Court opinion that came 36 days after Americans cast their votes for who would become the 43rd president.



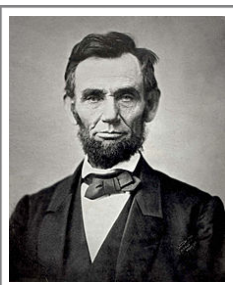
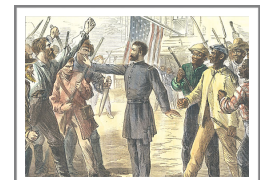
The National Government v. The States: Who Wins?



Few debates have been as lasting as the struggle to define the relationship between the states and the national government. In this lecture we will analyze the concept of Federalism--the balance of power between these two structures--envisioned by the Founders both in the constitution and in practice today.

Reconstruction and the Constitution

While the Civil War transformed the nation, the years following the conflict transformed the Constitution. In this discussion, we will analyze the three amendments added to the '*supreme law of the land*' during Reconstruction and their impact on ending slavery, promoting civil rights, curtailing the power of the states, enfranchising voters as well as other significant developments.



Lincoln and the Constitution

The legal challenges presented by the Civil War remain unparalleled in American history. As a divided nation struggled with the issues of states' rights and slavery, Abraham Lincoln used the Constitution to expand executive power in unprecedented and controversial ways. In this lecture we will discuss how Lincoln led during what he defined as “so grave a matter as the destruction of our national fabric.”

The Federalist Era

With the 1st Session of Congress and the swearing in of George Washington as president, the young nation and its leaders faced serious challenges in the attempt to make a success of the American experiment. In this lecture we will discuss economic and political circumstances of the period as well as the legacy of the decisions made during this founding era.

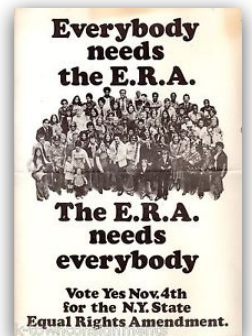
'The Supreme Court Said What?'

The highest court in our land often speaks in regal terms about the majesty of the law. But sometimes their opinions leave us scratching our heads trying to figure out exactly what they said and why they said it. This discussion will introduce us to cases we heard of but know little about (*Marbury v. Madison*), cases we heard of and know the Court got wrong (*Dred Scott v. Sandford*), cases we still fight over (*Bush v. Gore*), and cases which we think we know what to think (*Citizens United v. FEC*), among a handful of others that have us perplexed, concerned or just a bit curious.



What Happened to the ERA?

In this lecture we will discuss the fate of the Equal Rights Amendment. Intended to bring "equality of rights" to women, our discussion will focus on the text of the proposed amendment, its historical journey and why it failed to gain ratification to be part of the U.S. Constitution.

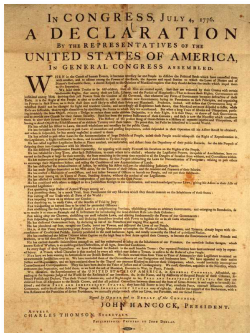


The Constitution in American Today

"Does it still matter?" a recent Time Magazine cover story asked about the U.S. Constitution. This program will analyze the important question and the status of the supreme law of the land in the life of our nation. Active participation is encouraged

Selling the President

The use of the media to run for president transformed the way we learn about our candidates for Chief Executive. In this non-partisan lecture, we will discuss some of the ways candidates have sought to define themselves and their opponents through television and other advertisements.



What Did the *Declaration of Independence* Actually Declare?

Few documents have had as much impact on world history as the one-page writing that formalized the severing of ties between the American colonies and England. In this lecture, we will discuss the road to the declaration, the constitutional underpinnings of its necessity and the historical basis of its premise.

The Road to City Hall

Few political contests are as interesting as the election of a new mayor in New York City. In this discussion, we will focus on the issues and personalities that shaped the previous one. In addition, we will look at the impact of some of the city's other recent mayoral contests with an eye towards the future of the Big Apple.



A Wartime Constitution?

A dominant motivation in adopting the U.S. Constitution was to provide the people with a "guardian of the national security," as Alexander Hamilton wrote in 1788. That same document added a protection of individual rights in 1791. Despite the sometimes-opposing objectives in the balance of personal liberty and the preservation of public safety, the Constitution's application and interpretation during wartime will be the focus of our discussion.

Is *Stop, Question and Frisk* Still Legal?

Recent controversies involving the police have raised questions about whether a custodial interrogation conducted on the street is legal. In this lecture, we will discuss the case that ignited this reexamination in New York City and how its outcome impacts our relationship with law enforcement.

Equal Protection Of The Laws: The History & 150+ Year Legacy of the 14th Amendment

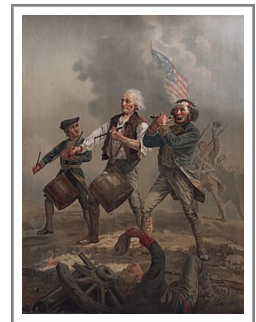
Our nation has grappled with the notion of equality since its founding. Beyond the question of freedom, equal protection of the law recognizes individual identity and a compact ensuring fairness for all. Reality over the course of the past two centuries has told us a different story. In this lecture, we will explore the struggle to write and ratify the various sections of the 14th Amendment. Our discussion will focus on the concept of equality, how it has manifested itself in varying forms in government venues over time and how our representatives, our courts and we, the people, have struggled to further define and make real this fundamentally important concept.

What Happened To The Founders' Congress?

The most alarming contemporary feature of the government drafted by the Framers over 230 years ago has been the self-imposed impotence of the Congress. This lecture will analyze the vision of our legislative branch by those who created the *Supreme law of the land* and decreasing congressional relevance ever since.

The Road To Revolution

The American Revolution was the product of decades of grievances felt by many colonists to be originating from the seat of power of the British Empire. While most discussions about this time period focus on its military history, we will instead analyze the series of actions from both sides of the Atlantic that led to the declaration that “these united Colonies are, and of right ought to be Free and Independent States.”



Use of Force and the Police: Understanding *Graham v. Connor*

Decided by the US Supreme Court in 1989, *Graham v. Connor* set up a controversial framework for how we evaluate use of force by the police under the law. In this discussion, we will analyze the history of the case as well as the ramifications of this decision.

The Bill of Rights and the Roberts Court



The Roberts Court—so named since the confirmation of Chief Justice John G. Roberts in 2005—has helped to define individual rights through “cases” and “controversies” before the U.S. Supreme Court over the past fifteen years. In this lecture, we will analyze a selection of opinions to gain a better understanding of the justices and their impact on the Bill of Rights.

Can Albany Be Fixed? (And Your Role in The Solution)

This non-partisan discussion presents structural and political considerations for New York State government. The forum presents a civic understanding of our state government and highlights ideas for transforming NYS government to be more efficient and more responsive to our fellow citizens.



A Conversation about the Supreme Court (Q-and-A Format)

Join us with your curiosity—and your questions—for this interactive dialogue about the US Supreme Court. This q-and-a format discussion will address the judiciary envisioned by the Framers as well as our contemporary view of the nation’s highest court.

The Classroom and the Constitution

Few issues in America generate as much debate as the controversy surrounding the rights of students and teachers in the classroom. The difficulty in preserving individual liberty while providing a safe and productive learning environment has produced decades of legal action in an attempt to find the balance between these sometimes-opposing objectives. In this lecture, controversies & Supreme Court decisions are analyzed as a way to comprehend the application of the Constitution in our schools. Whether a parent, a teacher, a student or simply a concerned citizen, we will provide a unique understanding of an important topic that impacts all.

The Lives & Constitutions Of Antonin Scalia & Ruth Bader Ginsburg

In this lecture, we will examine two of the most important (and controversial) Supreme Court justices of the modern era. One heralded by the right and the other by the left, our analysis will look at their lives, their impact on the high court and some of their important constitutional opinions and dissents.

Supreme Court Year In Review: 1969

In this lecture we will analyze a snapshot of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1969. From the appointment of a new Chief Justice to important decisions that still impact our lives, the closing year of this decade heralded transformative change in our constitutional law and those who framed it.

Terror In America: The DC Sniper Attacks

Few can forget the terror that gripped the nation when seemingly-random shootings in the DC area began in the Fall of 2002. In this lecture, we will analyze the circumstances of these tragic events, the role of law enforcement in the dramatic saga and the ongoing legal battle that resulted.

John Marshall and the Supreme Court

Chief Justice John Marshall is the most influential jurist to ever serve in the federal judiciary. In this lecture, we will analyze his path to the high bench, the impact of his influential decision-making and why his tenure from 1801 to 1835 forever redefined the Supreme Court and the Constitution.

The Right To Vote And The Constitution

Few would argue that participation is a key ingredient of successful representative government. In this lecture, we will discuss the various ways the US Constitution addresses—or fails to address—the essential right to vote and the ongoing debate about how to interpret the law of the land on this topic.

The Progressives and the Constitution

Spanning from the end of the nineteenth century to just beyond World War I, few periods in U.S. history have witnessed a more dramatic transformation in both the real and perceived role of government than the Progressive Era. In this lecture, we will analyze how these reformers championed amendments that would structurally transform the Constitution to fit their goals and how their efforts continue to impact our lives today.

Can The Government Tell You What To Wear? Compelled Speech And The Constitution

Most of our understanding of free speech rights come from when the government is attempting to prevent someone from expressing themselves in the way they choose. Conversely, in this lecture we will analyze recent Supreme Court decisions that have evaluated the role of government mandating speech and an individual or a group of individuals resisting the compulsion.

“I have the right to vote” and other Constitutional Myths

What we think the Constitution says and what it actually says can sometimes be two different things. In this discussion dealing with the presidency, free speech, gun rights, privacy, the police, religion and others, we will explore selected text of the supreme law of the land that may contradict what we always thought to be true.

Understanding the First Amendment (Single or Multi-Session Program)

The US Constitution provides a framework for the structure of our government. Yet few would dispute the important role the First Amendment has played in protecting our most cherished and personal individual liberties. In this course, we will analyze the impact of Supreme Court cases to get a better understanding of the balance between the need to maintain our rights and the government’s frequent attempts to regulate them.

Understanding the U.S. Constitution (Single or Multi-Session Program)

This course surveys the historical development of the United States Constitution. Topics covered include the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and the relationship between the various branches of government. Emphasis is placed on how political, social and ideological change effected the structure, function and content of this supreme Law of the Land. Particular attention is given to examining the impact of influential events at the state level during the late 1700s and the weakness of the Articles of Confederation.

Understanding the Bill of Rights (Multi-Session Program)

In this program, we will discuss aspects of the Bill of Rights that have been instrumental in protecting individual civil liberties in our country. Our discussion will focus on the specific text of various Constitutional amendments and how they have been interpreted in important Supreme Court opinions and by Americans today.