

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview.
Government Grab & Gaslight (12–15 Minutes)

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

Goal

Students simulate the recurring nature of government overreach, the constitutional checks and balances between branches, and the use of “noble cover stories” to make excuses for attempts to bypass legal checks on power.

Instructions

1. Read the instructions together.
2. Put students into groups of three.
3. Each student chooses a role: 1. PRESIDENT (Executive), 2. CONGRESS (Legislative), or 3. SUPREME COURT (Judicial). (Note: Students will rotate who acts as the primary “Overreacher” in each scenario.)
4. Give students 8–10 minutes to complete the activity.
5. Let groups present their ideas to the class.

Suggested Key (AWV)

1. The Supreme Court could label the President’s action as unconstitutional, since he doesn’t have the authority to simply declare things or make up laws. The President’s excuse: Something like this: “I’m only protecting the poor from greedy gas station owners who want to price-gouge you!”
2. The President vetoes it, saying it is impossible to enforce and unconstitutional. Congress’s excuse: “We aren’t tricking anyone; we’re just ensuring your children don’t inherit a trash-filled planet!”
3. Congress could refuse to provide funding for federal marshals to enforce the ruling; the President could nullify the ruling by refusing to execute it, or by pardoning every person convicted of violating it. The Court’s excuse: “We are just trying to help remind our confused, fragmented society of our shared values to keep the peace!”

Debrief Questions

- In all three scenarios, did the branch admit it wanted more power? Or did they always focus on their “good intentions”?
- Why does every branch of government (i.e., human beings in government positions) try to frame its power-grab as an act of kindness or necessity?
- How does the “check and balance” system work if the branch being checked simply makes up an excuse to ignore the check?
- Using the FDR/Court-packing example: Why do you think he chose “kindness to old men” as his excuse rather than saying “I want to be a dictator”?

Final Thoughts

1. This activity highlights that overreach is almost always sold as a virtue (e.g., protecting the poor, saving the planet, preserving peace).
2. Emphasize this: Power never says, “I want to dominate you.” Power says, “I want to help you.”

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Follow these three scenarios. In each, the specified branch overreaches, gets checked, tries to ignore the check, and must come up with a “kind-hearted” excuse to silence public/branch criticism.

Scenario A: The President’s “Energy Relief” Decree (President overreaches)

1. Overreach: President issues an Executive Order seizing all private gasoline reserves to “control prices.”
2. The Check: What might the Supreme Court do to check this President’s act?
3. The Bypass Attempt: The President orders the military to keep the seized gasoline anyway, citing “National Security.”
4. The Excuse: When the public protests, what “kind” excuse does the President give for grabbing the gasoline and ignoring the Court?

Scenario B: Congress’s “Fair Living” Tax (Congress overreaches)

1. Overreach: Congress passes a law taxing people \$1,000 if they don’t recycle, claiming it’s for the “General Welfare.”
2. The Check: What might the President do to check this Congress’s act?
3. The Bypass attempt: Congress attaches the tax to a “Must-Pass” Military Funding Bill to force the President to sign it.
4. The Excuse: When the public ridicules this trick, what “kind” excuse does the Congress give?

Scenario C: The Court’s “Moral Code” Ruling (Supreme Court overreaches)

1. Overreach: The Court rules that all businesses MUST display a federal “Morality Pledge” in their windows, claiming they have the power to define “legal culture.”
2. The Check: What might the President AND Congress do to check this Supreme Court’s act?
3. The Bypass attempt: The Court threatens to hold every Member of Congress in contempt for “obstructing justice.”
4. The Excuse: When the public calls this a judicial power grab, what “kind” excuse does the Court provide?