

U.S. History I Honors
Mr. Brennan
Summer Reading Assignment
Dr. Carol Berkin – *A Brilliant Solution: Inventing the American Constitution*

Your first assignment as a sophomore if you choose to be an honors student enrolled in U.S. History I Honors is to acquire a copy of the book, read it carefully and completely by the start of the 2016-2017 academic year, and be prepared to write an essay on the book during the first month of next school year. Below, you will find guided reading questions you should complete as you work your way through the book. These answers may help you with the assigned essay and will be collected during the first week of school when you return from summer break.

You may find this book at the bookstore in town, order it online from Amazon, or download the e-book. If there are any questions, you should e-mail me over the summer at my e-mail address located on my website. The questions below should be answered in complete sentences and should be typed in 12 point font. A paragraph for each will be sufficient. Please cite the text to strengthen your answers.

Reading questions for *A Brilliant Solution: Inventing the American Constitution*

- 1) When the American Revolutionary war ended in 1783 the country was mired in economic depression. Berkin writes that the Continental Congress “faced a host of angry creditors, foreign and domestic, clamoring for repayment of wartime loans. The Continental Congress had no means to put money into the empty federal treasury, its source of revenue being the generosity of the states. Relations between the states were poor, and many questioned whether they would remain united.” What role do you think economic circumstances played in the gathering in Philadelphia?

- 2) According to Berkin, did the original framers of the Constitution meet in Philadelphia to tear up the Articles of Confederation? Berkin writes: “Wherever one looked, the competing interests of creditors and debtors, rural farmers and urban merchants, artisans and importers, acted as centrifugal forces, dividing the nation” (p. 14). How much were delegates aware of this and what pressures do you think it placed on them?

- 3) How does Berkin explain the ways in which the delegates dealt with issues of class, gender, and race? At one point she notes none of the attendees was “a man of ordinary means, a yeoman farmer, a shopkeeper, a sailor or a laborer” (p. 49) How does this figure into her story?

- 4) The Constitutional Convention was, in the end, all about power. Berkin writes: “Every delegate knew that in a tug-of-war between the states and the central government, any power granted to one must of necessity, diminish the autonomy of the other” (p.45). How did the delegates balance what Berkin refers

to as the fear of the mob vs. the fears of a new centralizing power? What other critical issues required compromise as the CC wore on?

5) On p. 172 Berkin describes Alexander Hamilton as cautiously optimistic that the Constitution will be ratified by the states. Hamilton argued that the document's supporters had "the very great weight of influence of the persons who framed it."

Were today's news media pundits around back then, do you think the framers could have stuck it out, found numerous compromises through the myriad divisions in the new nation and rewarded Hamilton's cautious optimism?