The Argument

Understanding the Constitutional underpinnings of the US government is crucial to understanding many factors of today’s politics and institutions. Much of the groundwork was laid in the 1780s, between the end of the Revolutionary War and the ratification of the Constitution. Before our first day of class, please read the chapter from Joseph Ellis’s book *American Creation* entitled “The Argument.” This reading first delves into the problems America faced under the Articles of the Confederation, then into the Constitutional Convention, and finally the debate over ratification. One of the central figures is James Madison of Virginia, who played a crucial role in both drafting the Constitution and securing its ratification.

As you read, please answer the following study guide questions. Please use complete sentences and, where appropriate, cite specific quotes from the text. Each response should be a short paragraph. These will be collected the first day of class.

1. Describe the national government under the Articles of Confederation. What were the views Americans had of their national government at the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783?
2. Why were Americans skeptical of strong central governmental power? How did James Madison and George Washington differ from most Americans in their views?
3. Describe the four key events of 1786 that the text states were catalysts for the Constitutional Convention.
4. What was the ideal that Madison had of what the national government should be? What “vices” did he see in the state governments?
5. According to the text, one of the flaws of the Constitution was on the issue of sovereignty. What does this mean? How would blurred sovereignty end up being a strength rather than a weakness?
6. What advantages did the Federalists have in the ratification debate? What advantages did the Antifederalists possess?
7. Why could the James Madison-Patrick Henry debates of 1788 be described as “the most consequential...in American history”?
8. The text describes the drafting and ratification of the Constitution as more “the product of painful compromise and elegant improvisation than any pure and sustained argument of political theory.” What does this mean to you? What evidence in the reading do you find to support your thoughts?