



# Worldbuilding? You'll Need Some Government

David Rodeback  
for Colorado Gold—September 2025

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- Born in Boulder, lived there until I was 10.
- Husband of one, parent of four, grandparent of two, uncle of 18
- CMTO of a Salt Lake City-area manufacturing firm, where I write stuff: C#.Net code, SQL queries, marketing copy, video scripts, company policies, etc.
- In a former life taught writing, Russian language, and Russian literature at BYU, Cornell, and elsewhere.
- Two award-winning collections of short fiction in print, plus assorted stories published here and there.
- First novel coming in November.
- League of Utah Writers 2025 Writer of the Year.

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## I had a pretty good year (August to August)

- 2024 **Silver and Bronze Quill** awards.
- Two of five **Notable Reads** in General Fiction in the 2025 Utah Book Awards.
- My fourth **Telly Award** (for commercial video, some writing, some acting).
- Wrote and associate-produced an hour-long **documentary** which premiered in May.
- Writing a **monthly column** on books, bookstores, reading, etc., for a local newspaper.
- Led workshops and taught at **writing conferences**.

(No wonder my first novel isn't ready yet for its November release.)

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### American Fork Citizen

#### OPINION: This writer and that marching band

By David Rodeback

#### OPINION: Poke the algorithms in the eye: Read books in 2025

#### COLUMN: "The Lusty Month of May"

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## Why me?

(I write mostly contemporary realism, not SFF.)

- BYU: Political Science (major)
- Cornell: Political Thought, Russian History (minor)
- 20 years of blogging about politics & government
- Decades on government committees and task forces
- Campaign manager and strategist (Utah and New York)
- Interned at US Senate
- Party precinct chair, county & state convention delegate

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## This just in: I need a photographer right here, right now.

A few good photos of me teaching.

See me afterward for my e-mail address and send them.

You get a free book.

I'd prefer a trained photographer. Do we have one?

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## In this hour

- Basics of governments in general
  - Framework
  - Lots of questions to ask
  - Don't have to mimic an existing government if you don't want to.
- Along the way:
  - Potential conflict, tension
  - Practice on small scale
- Where to start with government when you're worldbuilding and how much government you need
- Where to find me and my books

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## This is for you . . .

### **Especially if you're writing:**

- Science fiction
- Fantasy
- Near-future dystopia
- Contemporary in a fictional nation
- Realistic heroes or villains with big dreams
- Experimental societies, real or imagined

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This is for you . . .

**Or even if you're writing:**

- Political thriller
- Historical fiction
- History

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Possible side effect . . .

It may somehow influence how you view politics and government in  
(what passes for) the real world . . .

. . . but we're **not** talking about that here today.

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## A Scurry of Squirrels

Enmeshed, but not today's topics:

- Economics
- Philosophy & Religion
- Science
- Culture (broadly defined)
- Current, real-world political issues and conflicts

*Any thoughts you have about how today's material may apply to real governments and current issues and events are your own. Please keep them to yourself in this hour, and I'll do the same.*

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## More housekeeping

- The basics are not simple.
- We'll avoid being too academic, but in academic terms . . .
  - Political theory and comparative government (branches of political science)
  - We'll use common terminology. You don't have to know all the vocabulary. You can look things up at your leisure.
- We'll use the word **state** generically to refer to a nation or government generally, not a subdivision of the United States.
- The handout will help with review and expansion.

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## Get the handout

- It's with all the other handouts at <https://rmfw.org/2025-conference-handouts/>
- Or get it at [davidrodeback.com/download/colorado-gold](https://davidrodeback.com/download/colorado-gold):



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## A suggestion

Instead of trying to take notes on all the questions and all the bullet points, get the handout for those.

Take notes on ideas or questions that come to you **about your writing**.

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## 1. Only world-build as much government as you need


(and any scaffolding you need for consistency)

(and you have the whole story; no need to do it all at once)

(When your head is spinning, we'll come back to this.)

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## 2. Consider/define human\* nature

\*or your other sentient characters' nature(s)

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### Their nature

- How submissive are they?
- How capable of self-discipline?
- How individualistic? How group-oriented?
- Strong religious or philosophical culture of independence, interdependence, or submission?
- Conflicting natures/inclinations among different races, tribes, or species?
- Conflicting natures/inclinations among individuals?
- Conflicting natures/inclinations in the same individual?

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## Dmitri Karamazov

"God and the devil are fighting . . . and the battlefield is the heart of man."

*Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov*

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## James Madison

"What is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

*Federalist 51 (Madison or Hamilton)*

"If men and women were devils, government would be impossible."

(various, paraphrased)

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## No, not angels . . .

Niccolo **Machiavelli**:

- Ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous
- Capable of doing good, but only in self-interest

Thomas **Hobbes**:

- If two desire the same thing and only one can have it, they will be enemies.
- By nature (in state of nature, a society without rules) people are naturally at war; life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

**Benjamin**, son of Mosiah:

- “The natural man is an enemy to God, and will be forever . . . unless . . .”

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## Abraham **Lincoln**

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

“Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”

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## Thought experiment: The Ring of Gyges

Gyges:

- A shepherd in the king's service
- Found a gold ring with the power to make him invisible
- Became a messenger to the king's court
- Using his power, he "seduced the queen, and with her help murdered the King and seized the throne."

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## The Ring of Gyges, cont.

Imagine a just man with the ring of Gyges . . .

Glaucon in *Republic*:

"No one, it is commonly believed, would have such iron strength of mind as to stand fast in doing right or keep his hands off other men's goods, when he could go to the marketplace and fearlessly help himself to anything he wanted, enter houses and sleep with any woman he chose, set prisoners free and kill men at his pleasure, and in a word go about among men with the powers of a god. . . . Men only do right under compulsion. . . .

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## Exercise: The Ring of Gyges

“Granted full license to do as he liked, people would think him a miserable fool if they found him refusing to wrong his neighbours or to touch their belongings.”

(Plato, *Republic* II.359-360, tr. Francis MacDonald Cornford)

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## Opposing views

Have you read *Lord of the Flies*?


Now read about the boys of 'Ata.

► Google: “the real lord of the flies”

-> a May 9, 2020, *Guardian* article



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### 3. Nearly 20 questions to ask when world-building government

Take comfort! You'll almost never need every tool in this toolbox. One or two may be enough for your story.

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### 1. What entices and constrains these beings?

- What entices them to do good? (in whatever definition)
- What constrains them from doing evil? (in whatever definition)
- What entices them to do evil?
- What constrains them from doing good?
- **In what ways and to what extent is government the answer to these questions in your world?**

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## 2. What defines the nation, people, or tribe that is governed? What binds them together?

- Race, ethnicity, species
- Religion or other ideology
- Common language
- Customs, habit
- Place
- Shared experience or shared enemies
- Something else (be imaginative)

Tension points:

- Who belongs? Who doesn't? Who decides that? What consequences?
- Expansion or contraction
- Internal and external threats to whatever binds them together

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## 3. Where did this government come from? (We'll separate myth & reality later.)

- Evolved from a family
- Mutual cooperation for self-defense
- A broader social contract
- An idea
- Instituted by God(s)
- Imposed by a conqueror or colonial power
- Any combination of these
- Other (be imaginative)

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## 4. Who governs whom?

Lenin: Kto koro?

- Class
- Race
- Family/tribe
- Party
- Gender
- Education
- Species
- Other physical characteristics
- Something historical
- Be imaginative!

*Are these required attributes of ruler/ruling class or simply how it's been?*

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## WHAT I LEFT OUT

(because I write realism)

- Magic (for fantasy)
- Access to superior technology (sci fi)

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## 5. What form(s) of government?

(not mutually exclusive, and not even mentioning most of the -isms)

- Monarchy
- Republic
- Democracy
- Oligarchy
- Autocracy
- Military/civilian dictatorship
- Theocracy
- Feudalism
- Anarchy
- Bureaucracy
- Technocracy
- Ergatocracy, kleptocracy, kakistocracy, plutocracy

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## 6. Are the people subjects (property) or citizens?

- In practice and often in theory, traditional monarchy and other authoritarian systems consider the individual as belonging to the state, e.g. specifically as property of the monarch. (If that sounds like slavery or serfdom or USSR . . .)
- The basic meaning *republic* is “not a monarchy” – the people are citizens, not subjects or property of the state; they’re the source of government power, at least theoretically.
- Are non-government (private, civic, religious) organizations positioned between the people and the state? Are they important? (Tocqueville.)

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## On earth but theoretical: Marxism

- Basic Marxism: victims and oppressors
  - At first: economic haves and have-nots
  - Later: race, gender, etc.
- Often called a republic, but in effect it's not. The people belong to the state.
- Oligarchic: the elite who believe they should rule—but they rule in the name of the people—but they sometimes call it the dictatorship of the proletariat.
- Injustice to individuals is the price of group justice (victim tribe resisting oppressor tribe).

Tension points?

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## 7. Related: Where is a being's principal value and identity?

- As an individual, inherent (or God-given)
- As a member of a tribe or other group

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## Case studies

Would the state (or anyone else) be justified in doing justice to a group, if it requires doing injustice to individuals?

- My first grade class (a small polity!)
- Bangerter Highway and eminent domain
- Nuke them all and let the Lord decide.

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## 8. How are rulers chosen/designated?

- Old Testament: prophet chose King Saul, King David
- King Arthur and the sword in the stone
- Primogeniture
- King/queen choose among sons/daughters/both
- Election (could be an elected monarch or dictator)
  - Who gets to vote?
  - Fixed term, life tenure, or indefinite?
  - Term limits?
- Random chance (c.f. Athens, modern jury selection)
- Other? Be imaginative.
- Possible conflicts?

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## 9. What are the qualifications to rule?

- How do people prepare, or how are they prepared, to rule? (By whom?)
- Is marriage required? Who chooses the spouse and how? Is celibacy required? (a eunuch king?)
- What makes a good, bad, or great ruler?

Tension points?

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## A brutal thought experiment

- Was a hereditary monarchy, where the current ruler chose a child to be the next ruler. But generation after generation, the ruler's children kept either killing each other or starting civil wars.
- So they made a new law: When a man or woman becomes the ruler (by whatever means), all the new ruler's children and grandchildren are put to death, and the ruler is sterilized.
- What are some possible points of internal and external conflict?

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## 10. How are rulers removed?

(in theory and practice)

- ▀ Term expires (orderly succession?)
- ▀ Death
- ▀ Assassination
- ▀ Deposed
- ▀ Vote of no confidence
- ▀ Other?

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## 11. Short of removal, what happens when new ruler is unpopular?

- ▀ Popular resistance
  - ▀ Violent
  - ▀ Non-violent
- ▀ Resistance from within government
  - ▀ Open/structural (e.g. Congress vs. President)
  - ▀ Active or passive bureaucratic resistance
- ▀ Nature itself resists
- ▀ Other?

Tension points?

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## 12. How does the state maintain order?

- What degree of violence?
- What degree of fear?
- Indoctrination/propaganda?
- Telepathy?
- Drugs?
- Is there rule of law?
  - Procedural due process (same justice system for everyone)
  - Substantive due process (just results)
- Other?

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## 13. How does the government provide for external security (national security)?

- Military draft? Who is drafted, who isn't?
- Universal compulsory service?
- Mercenaries
- Slaves (conquered/captured/bought)
- Ad-hoc militias (own weapons or supplied by government)
- Machines
- Who is allowed to be a soldier? Who isn't? Can anyone become an officer?
- Do military forces operate domestically in peacetime?
- How avoid military coup?

Tension points?

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## 14. What, if anything, does the government do to safeguard economic security?

- Micro
  - Programs to help the poor/needy
  - Safeguard business transactions, inventory, transportation
  - Banking regulations
  - Weights and measures
  - Product safety
- Macro
  - Trade policy
  - Fiscal policy/currency

*Give me a plot that turns on currency.*

*Now give me a weirder one.*

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## 15. What public services does the government provide, and how?

- Law enforcement
- Roads and other transportation infrastructure (and services?)
- Education
- Health care
- Housing
- Food
- Arranged/supervised marriages and reproduction
- (Be creative)

Small scale: want to be a teacher or police officer

Large scale: taking food from the country for the city during famine

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## 16. What levels of government (local, regional, national, world)?

- Different levels of a unitary government?
- Federalism?
- Confederation?
- How much allowance for local variations, local initiative?
- Rivalries, tensions, hostilities among districts?

Tension points?

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## 17. How are laws made and enforced?

- Rule of law vs. rule of man (Do laws and processes apply equally to all people? Are lawgivers above their own laws? Etc.)
- Procedural and substantive due process
- Decree or other administrative order
- Democratic or representative legislative process
- Written laws?
- Written constitution (supreme law)?
- Does the law apply to the lawgivers?
- Plato: Who guards the guardians?
- Back to *Federalist*: "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

Tension points?

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## 18. Myths and realities

- Origin: mythology vs. reality
  - Monarch: really divine right?
  - US: Founders vs. Charles Beard vs. 1619 Project
- Function: myth vs. reality (how does it really work?)
- Also useful: ideals

Tension points?

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## 4. Where do I start?

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## Seriously? Answering a question with more questions?

To answer these questions . . .

- How much government do I need in my story?
- Which parts of government do I need?
- What type(s) of government will serve my story best?

. . . answer these questions . . .

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## Questions to answer questions

### Big Stuff

- Do government officials, processes, or institutions play a major role in your plot (or subplots)?
- Does political intrigue play a major role?
- Will government provide any of the tools your characters need to solve (or cause) problems?
- Will government provide any of the obstacles your characters face?

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## (Almost out of questions)

### Small stuff

- Does a character need to buy, carry, or make a weapon? Is that legal generally? Is it legal for that character? Is a permit required?
- Does a character need to travel inside or outside the country? Is this legal? Is a permit required? Must one check in with government when visiting a place?
- How is government involved in your world's equivalents of courtship, marriage, and/or reproduction?
- What other things are needed, or need to happen, which must be supplied or might be limited or denied by government?

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5. Whatever government(s) you build, some plots are universal

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## Plots and subplots

- Romance
- Corruption
- Power struggle/rivalry
- Revolution
- Succession
- Abdication
- Colonization/liberation
- War
- Founding
- Decay/fall
- Moral good vs. political necessity
- The good of the one vs. the good of the many
- Public vs. private persona, public vs. private life

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## 6. David's Laws of Politics

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Law of conservation of politics:

**If you mix \_\_\_\_ with politics, you get politics.**

(Ominously, these include our major paths to truth.)

Religion

Science

Art

History

Justice

Economics

Philosophy

Education

➡ *still considering: Romance, Family*

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Law of conservation of power:

**The amount of power in a system (or over a person) remains constant.**

*Compare laws of conservation of mass (matter), conservation of energy, and conservation of mass and energy in chemistry and physics.*

- To the extent that you have power over yourself, you are free.
- Freedom is another name for power, when it's your power over yourself.
- To the extent that someone or something else has power over you, you are in bondage.
- Lost freedom (lost power over oneself) becomes someone/something else's power (over you).
- Increasing your freedom reduces someone/something else's power.
- The total power over you (yours plus someone/something else's) is constant. The key question is how much or how little of that power over you *is yours*.

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## 7. We're winding down

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## Watch or read (history and theory)

- ▀ *The West Wing*—many plots and subplots
- ▀ *The Crown*—likewise, but monarchy (mixed)
- ▀ *Darkest Hour* (2017)—Churchill biopic
  
- ▀ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*  
(also film: *Lincoln*)
- ▀ Machiavelli, *The Prince* (etc.)
- ▀ *Federalist* 1, 10, 39, 51
- ▀ Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*

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## Fictional governments you've noticed in your reading

*You'll have to help me.*

Most interesting?

Most unusual?

Least imitative of known governments on earth?

*For ideas: Wikipedia, "List of forms of government"*

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## TL;DR


- Only build the parts of government your story needs.
- Be imaginative. Only mimic real-world governments to make a point.
- Consider the nature of your characters as you craft their politics and governments.
- Add large and small tension points based on government.
- Do enough scaffolding that the government and politics in your story make sense—then remove the scaffolding.
- If you have a point to make, let your story make it. Don't let your point make your story.

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~~Q&A~~ ASK ME **ANYTHING**

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Thank you!

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## About the League of Utah Writers

- The League has 22 chapters around the state and online (some hybrid). They're all different, tailored to meet the needs and interests of their members. You can also join the League without joining a chapter.
- League membership is only \$30 per year, and \$15 for an additional chapter.
- You don't have to be a Utah resident. We have members all over the country, even a few international members.
- Two conferences for members and non-members:
  - ▀ Pre-Quill—one day—April—\$40
  - ▀ Quills—four days—early August—member discount
- Publication opportunities in two yearly anthologies and a quarterly literary journal.
- Discounted entry to our spring writing contests—awards announced at Quills—most offer written feedback from professional writers—some offer cash prizes
- Outside Utah: We recommend the Blue Quill chapter for a general option, or there are targeted chapters for freelance editors, kidlit writers, screenwriters, and romance writers.



leagueofutahwriters.com

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## Where to find me and my books



E-mail: **author@davidrodeback.com**

Facebook: **authorDavidRodeback**

Slides: **davidrodeback.com/colorado-gold**

Handouts: **(same)**

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