

Chapter 2 The First Year

Setting Precedents With the election of a congress and a president, the new government was ready to start. Washington and Congress wanted to proceed carefully because, as Washington said, "I walk on untrodden ground." He meant that no one had ever done anything like this before.

The Big Question

What steps did the First Congress take to help establish a more organized system of government?

Vocabulary

precedent, n. an example for future actions or decisions

Almost every action they took might set a **precedent**. That is, every action they took might set a pattern that would be followed in the future. Washington wanted to set the right precedents by closely following the Constitution in carrying out his duties as president and protecting the liberties of the people.

For example, members of Congress tied themselves into knots over the proper way to address the president. Vice President John Adams suggested that the president be called, "His Highness, the President of the United States of America and Protector of Their Liberties." Others said that sounded too much like the way a king is addressed.



As the first U.S. president, George Washington set the precedent, or example, for other presidents to follow.

Some thought “His Excellency” was the right way. In the end it was agreed to address Washington simply as “Mr. President.” Today, the matter seems more amusing than important. But in 1789, it was taken very seriously.

Other precedents were more important. For example, the Constitution set up three branches of government: the **legislative**, **judicial**, and **executive** branches. The Constitution also said there will be “departments” in the executive branch of government to help the president. It does not say, though, what those departments will be. It also does not say how many of them there will be. It was up to Congress to fill in that empty space in the Constitution.

Congress decided to create three executive departments. One was the Department of State. That department was supposed to help the president in his dealings with foreign countries. Another department was the Department of War. That department was in charge of defending the country. A third department was the Department of the Treasury. That one was expected to collect **taxes**, pay bills, and take care of the government’s money. The head of each department was called a *secretary*.

Creating these departments led to another precedent. The Constitution says the president may seek advice from his

Vocabulary

legislative, adj. having the power to make laws

judicial, adj. having the power to decide questions of law

executive, adj. having the power to carry out and enforce laws

tax, n. money that people are required to pay to support the workings of the government

department heads. At first, Washington just talked to each secretary separately about the work his department was doing. After a while, though, President Washington felt he needed advice on many other matters. He began having all the secretaries meet with him at the same time to get their advice. The department heads came to be called the president’s *Cabinet*, which means a group of advisers. The first Cabinet also included an attorney general, who gave the president legal advice, and a postmaster general, who ran the post office. The meetings came to be known as *Cabinet meetings*.

The Constitution does not say anything about a Cabinet. Every president since Washington, though, has had one. Over the years,



Although it is not in the Constitution, every president has had a Cabinet to advise him. This was George Washington’s Cabinet.

Congress has added departments to the executive branch, and the president's Cabinet has grown.

Another of those empty spaces in the Constitution had to do with the courts. The Constitution says that there will be a Supreme Court. It does not say how many judges should serve on it. It says that Congress can establish courts below the Supreme Court. It does not say what those courts should do or how many there should be. All of that was up to Congress.

Therefore, in that very first year under the new government, Congress passed a law filling in details about courts and judges. It said the Supreme Court should have six judges. Congress changed that number several times over the years. Sometimes it was seven, then eight, then nine, then ten, then eight again, and nine again! (It has been nine for more than 130 years, so it will probably stay that way. But that is not to say that it cannot change again. It is possible, as the court is not constitutionally bound to nine members.) The Supreme Court, of course, is the top court in the country. Congress, however, also created enough other courts so that people in every part of the country could use the court system.

A United States Tax

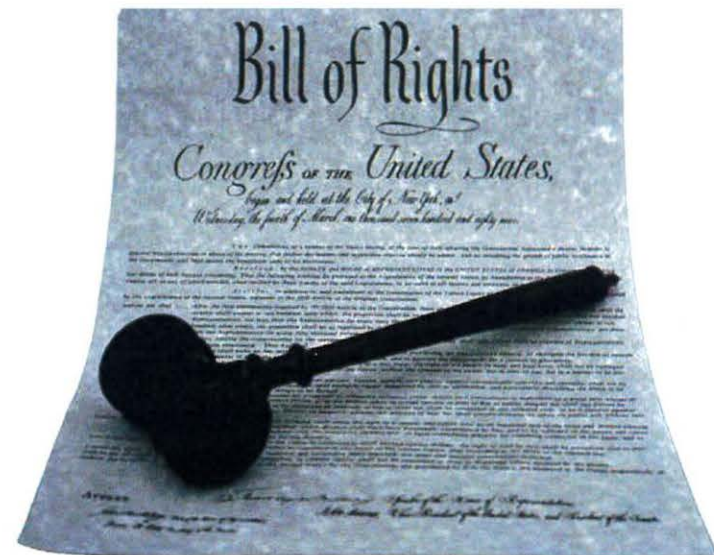
During that first year, Congress passed another important law regarding the government. In the old days, the central government did not have any money. The government also owed about \$79 million, including debt from the Revolutionary War. That was because the government did not have the power to tax. The new

Constitution changed that. In 1789, Congress placed a tax on more than eighty imported products—that is, products brought into the United States from other countries. It was not much of a tax, but it was enough. For the first time, the central government could start paying its bills.

The greatest success of the First Congress, however, was passing a **Bill of Rights**. James Madison was the author of these first ten amendments. He urged his fellow representatives to pass the Bill of Rights. They agreed, and the basic liberties of the people became the law of the land when the states ratified the Bill of Rights.

Vocabulary

Bill of Rights, n.
the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which list specific rights that must be protected



The First Congress added the Bill of Rights to the Constitution.