

compromise (an agreement in which each side gave up some of what it wanted). They created a legislative branch with two parts, called *houses*, one for each idea.

The delegates made many such compromises during four months of hard work. Finally, on September 17, 1787, they signed the final Constitution. By June 1788, 9 of the 13 states had approved it. The United States had a new government.

14.4 Making the Laws: The Legislative Branch

The main text of the Constitution is organized into parts called *articles*. Article I of the Constitution describes the legislative branch. The legislative branch, or Congress, has the responsibility of making laws.

Congress is made up of two houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives. Every state elects two members, called *senators*, to the Senate. But in the House, the number of representatives depends on the number of people who live in a state. States with more people have more representatives in the House.

To make laws, members of Congress write bills. A bill is an idea for a new law. If a majority in both houses of Congress votes to pass (approve) a bill, it is sent to the head of the executive branch, the president. If the president signs the bill, it becomes a law.

If the president refuses to sign a bill, Congress has the power to overrule the president's decision. But a two-thirds majority of both houses must vote in favor of overruling the president. Otherwise, the bill does not become a law.

In addition to making laws, the legislative branch has many other powers. The Senate has the power to approve or reject important appointments made by the president. For example, the Senate must approve the president's choice of ambassadors (representatives of the United States in foreign countries). The Senate must approve the president's choice of federal (national) judges. It also approves members of the president's **cabinet**.

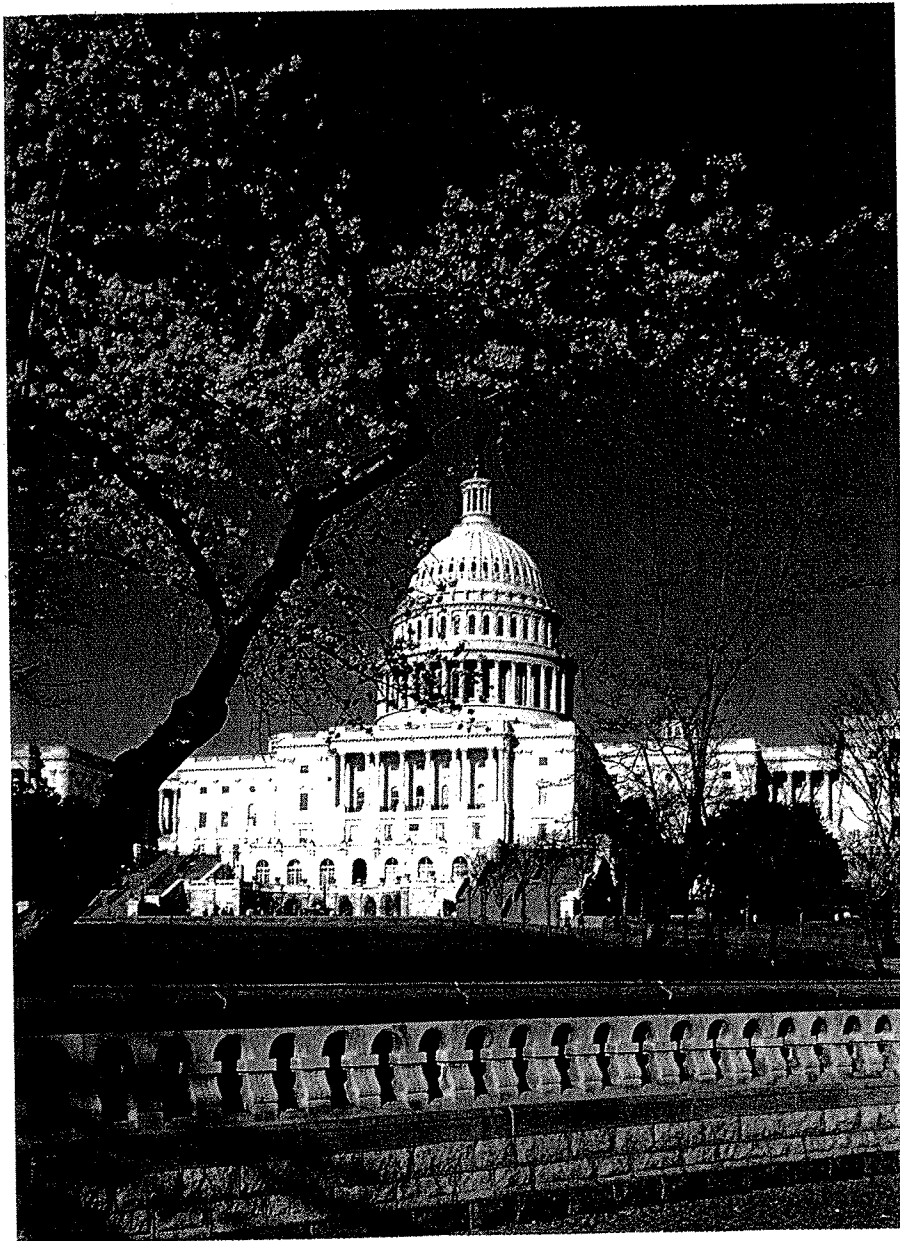
Congress has some special powers in foreign affairs (matters between the United States and other countries). Two-thirds of the Senate must approve any **treaty** between the United States and another country. And the United States can declare war on another country only with the approval of both houses of Congress.

cabinet: a group of advisors to the president, including the heads of important departments in the executive branch

treaty: a formal agreement between two or more nations

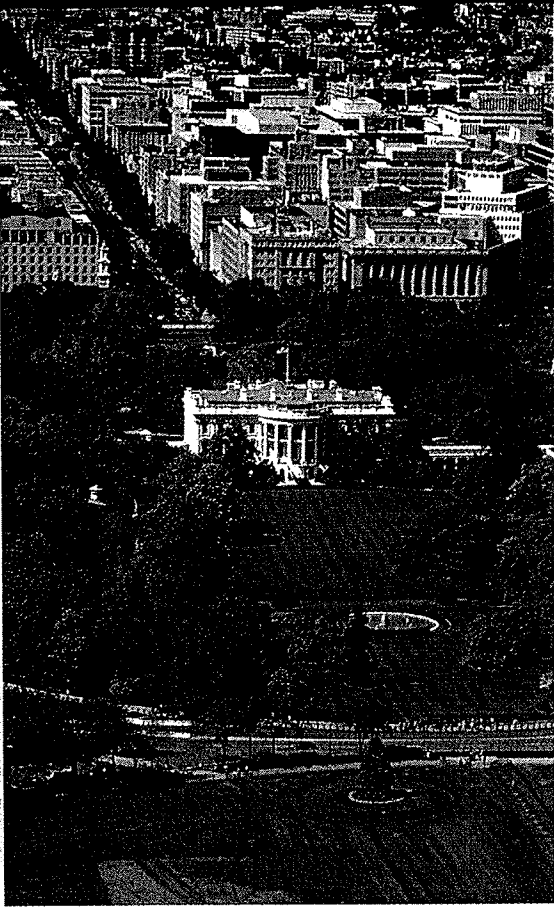
The Constitution also gives Congress the ability to control officials in the executive and judicial branches who abuse their powers. The House of Representatives has the power to accuse the president, judges, and other officials of serious crimes. This action is called **impeachment**. The Senate has the power to put an impeached official on trial. If the Senate finds the official guilty, the official must give up his or her job in the government.

Article I also lists other specific powers of Congress, including the powers to collect taxes and to create a national currency (system of money). Congress's powers make the national government much stronger than it was under the Articles of Confederation.



impeachment: the act of accusing a government official of serious crimes, as defined by the Constitution

Congress meets in the U.S. Capitol building, shown here.



The president, who is the head of the executive branch, lives in the White House, at center. Behind the White House are many office buildings, some of which are used by government officials.

veto: To reject a bill and prevent it from becoming a law. Only the president has the power to veto bills.

14.5 Carrying Out the Laws: The Executive Branch

Article II of the Constitution describes the powers of the executive branch. The executive branch is responsible for carrying out (“executing”) the laws of the country.

The head of the executive branch is the president. The president is often called the *chief executive*. Working under the president are the people and organizations that are needed to carry out the laws passed by Congress.

The men who wrote the Constitution did not want the United States to have its own kind of king. So they tried to limit the president’s power. For example, the Constitution gives the president the power to either sign (approve) or **veto** (reject) the bills passed by Congress. At the same time, the Constitution gives Congress the power to override (overrule) the president’s veto by a two-thirds vote.

Presidents cannot make laws, but they can try to lead the country by making proposals to Congress. One way that presidents make such proposals is by giving a State of the Union speech every year. Presidents use these speeches to suggest ideas for new laws.

The president has the power to call Congress together for a special session (meeting). This power is especially useful when a president believes that there is a national emergency.

The president shares power over foreign affairs with Congress. The president can sign treaties with other nations, but two-thirds of the Senate must approve them. As commander in chief, the president is in charge of the nation’s armed forces (such as the army and navy), but only Congress can declare war.

As chief executive, the president has the power to nominate (suggest) people for important jobs in the government. For example, the president nominates Cabinet members, ambassadors, and federal judges. However, the Senate has the power to accept or reject the president’s choices.

The president has the special power to grant pardons to people who have been found guilty of crimes against the United States. A pardon is a release from punishment. But the president cannot give pardons in cases of impeachment.

Even though the president is only the head of the executive branch and not a king, most people see the president as the leader of the country. In many ways, especially in relations with other countries, the president represents the United States.

14.6 Interpreting the Laws: The Judicial Branch

Article III of the Constitution describes the judicial branch. The judicial branch has the responsibility for interpreting the nation's laws, settling disagreements between states, and protecting the Constitution.

The judicial branch is headed by the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court is made up of nine judges. The Court's leader is called the *chief justice*. Justices are appointed by the president and approved by the Senate. Justices serve on the Court for life. Congress has the power to create other federal courts under the Supreme Court.

Over time, the judicial branch has gained some important powers. An especially important one is the power to decide whether a national or state law conflicts with the Constitution. Such a law is called **unconstitutional**. Because the Constitution is the most basic law of the country, the judicial branch can throw out laws that are unconstitutional.

The Constitution gives the judicial branch a similar power concerning treaties with other countries. If the courts find that a treaty violates the Constitution, it does not go into effect.

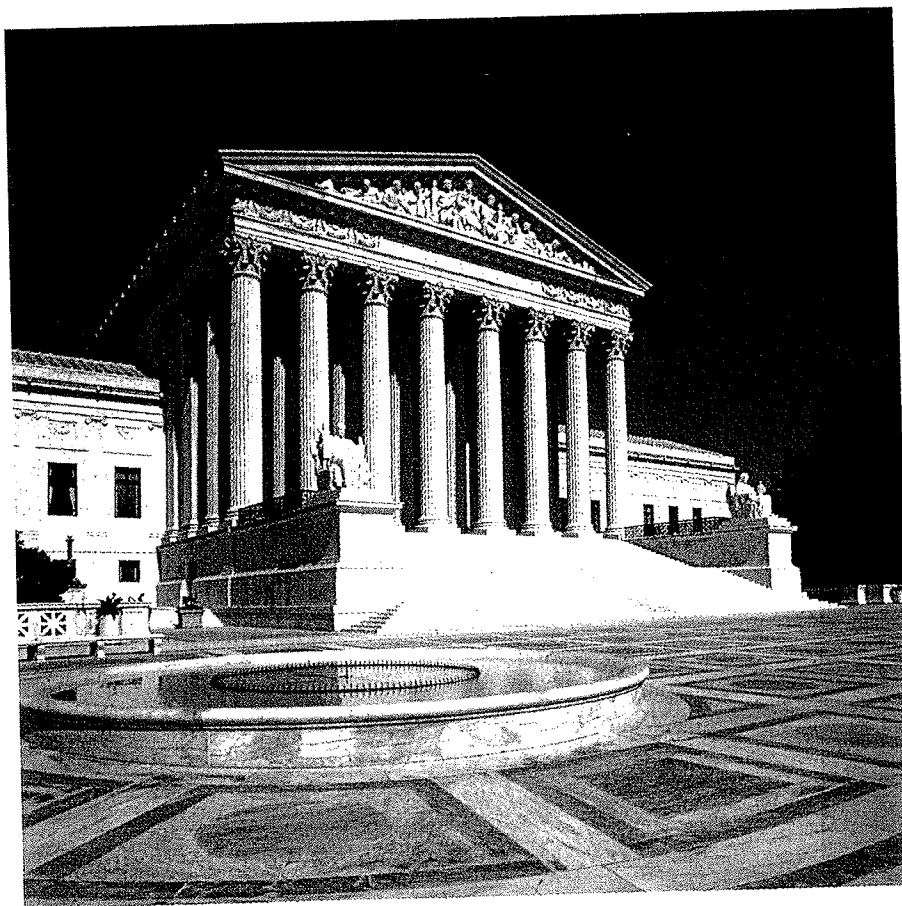
Importantly, the judicial branch also has the power to interpret the law. That is, the courts have the power to settle disagreements about what a law means or how it applies to a particular situation.

The judicial branch also has power during impeachment trials. Most notably, the chief justice acts as the presiding judge in such trials.

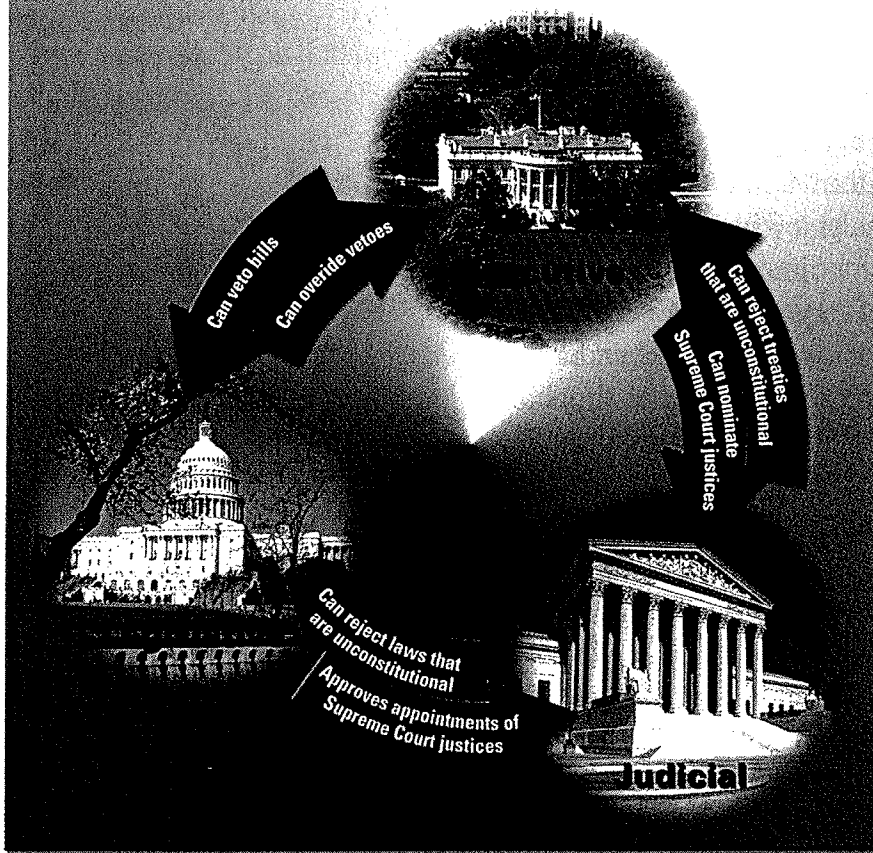
By using these powers, the judicial branch protects the Constitution and the rights of Americans. If the actions of the other branches conflict with the Constitution, the judicial branch tries to make sure that the Constitution always "wins."

unconstitutional: In conflict with the Constitution. Laws that do not conflict with the Constitution are called *constitutional*.

Here, we see the Supreme Court building, where the nine Supreme Court justices make many important decisions.



Checks and Balances in the Constitution



14.7 Limiting Power: Checks and Balances

The men who wrote the Constitution wanted a strong and lasting government. One way that they tried to achieve this goal was by designing a system of “checks and balances.” The Constitution gives each branch of government the power to “check” (stop) certain actions of the other branches. It also balances each branch’s powers with the powers of the other branches.

Checks and balances help to make sure that no one branch becomes too powerful. For example, Congress can pass laws, but the president approves or vetoes them. The president’s power is a check on

The Constitution gives each branch of the government the power to check, or stop, certain actions of the other branches. The men who wrote the Constitution wanted a balance of power among the branches. They didn’t want any one branch to become too powerful.

the power of Congress.

What if Congress and the president agree on a law that disagrees with the Constitution? If the law is challenged in court, the judicial branch has the power to decide whether it is unconstitutional. The court’s power is a check on the power of the other two branches.

How are the powers of the different branches balanced? Suppose the president wants one thing and Congress wants another. Congress cannot make laws without the president’s signature, and the president needs Congress to pass the laws he wants. Their powers balance each other. And even though the courts can declare laws unconstitutional, federal judges are appointed by the president with the approval of the Senate.

Another example of checks and balances is impeachment. Suppose members of the executive or judicial branch try to abuse their power. Congress can impeach them and remove them from office. In these ways, the Constitution tries to make sure that no one branch of the government becomes too powerful.