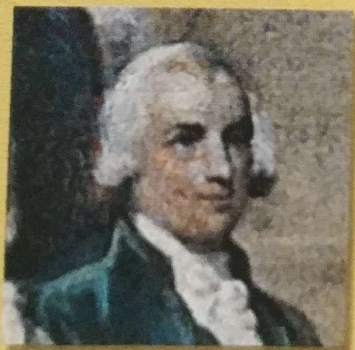
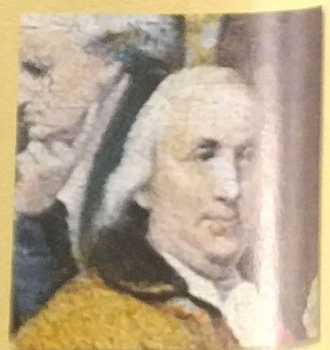


George Washington



James Madison



Benjamin Franklin

What did each of these
delegates do at the
Constitutional Convention?

The Constitution

14.1 Introduction

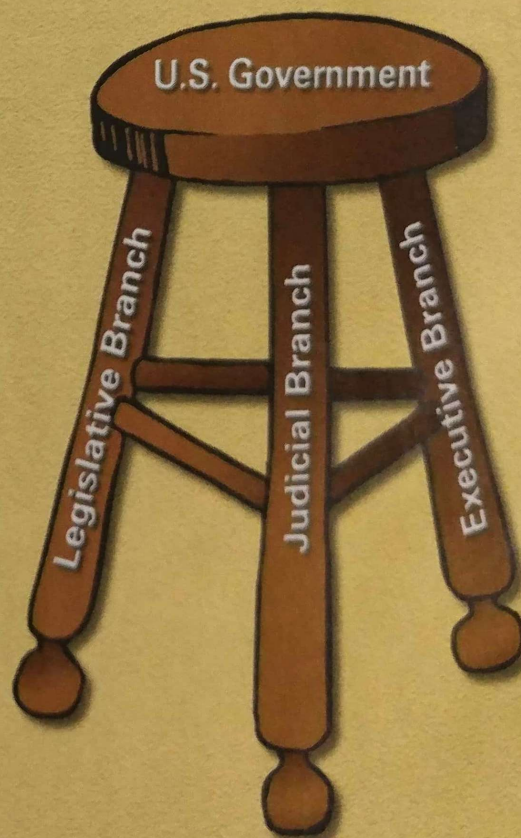
In Chapter 13, you learned how Americans won their independence in the Revolutionary War. Now they needed their own government to protect their freedoms and maintain order. In this chapter, you will learn how a national government was created by the Constitution.

Americans first tried to set up a national government in a document called the **Articles of Confederation**. But this government had very limited powers, and it was too weak to keep order. So, in 1787 the states called a meeting to improve the Articles of Confederation. This meeting was called the **Constitutional Convention**.

Instead of revising the Articles, the convention delegates decided to describe a new government in a document called the **Constitution**. The Constitution created a strong national government. It also divided the U. S. government into three parts, or **branches**, each with its own powers and responsibilities. To keep any one branch from becoming too powerful, the Constitution included a system of **checks and balances**. Under this system, each branch limited the powers of the others.

Some say the Articles of Confederation were as weak and unsteady as a one-legged stool. Look at the drawing of the stool on the right. As you read this chapter, think about how this stool can be compared to the Constitution. How is the Constitution like a three-legged stool?

The Constitution: Like a Three-Legged Stool



14.2 The First American Government: The Articles of Confederation

After declaring their independence, the 13 American states (the former colonies) created a government to fight the war against Britain and to solve common problems. They described this government in a document called the *Articles of Confederation*.

The government created by the Articles was very weak. It had a Congress that could make war and pass other laws. But making laws was difficult, because every law had to be approved by 9 of the 13 states. In addition, the government did not have a president, and it did not have a court that could settle disagreements between states.

The Confederation Congress succeeded in directing the Revolutionary War. But once the war was over, Congress had a difficult time solving the new country's problems. For one thing, it had no power to collect taxes or to force the states to give it money. It could not even pay the soldiers who had fought in the Continental Army.

Imagine losing your home because you can't pay your bills. That is what happened to many former soldiers and poor farmers. Some of them were even put in jail. One farmer

complained, "The great [rich] men are going to get all we have, and I think it is time for us to rise and put a stop to it."

In Massachusetts, a former soldier named Daniel Shays tried to do just that. Shays and hundreds of other men took up their guns and tried to stop the courts from taking people's property. Their fight against the government became known as *Shays's Rebellion*.

Shays's Rebellion frightened many leaders. More and more, they wanted a strong government that could pay the nation's bills, settle arguments between states, and maintain order.

A farmer attacks a government official as others cheer him in this scene from Shays's Rebellion. Shays's Rebellion frightened many leaders. They saw the rebellion as a sign that the Articles of Confederation were not working.



14.3 Inventing a New Government: The Constitutional Convention

In May 1787, delegates from 12 of the 13 states met in Philadelphia. Their task was to improve the Articles of Confederation, but they ended up writing an entirely new document. Today, their meeting is known as the Constitutional Convention.

The 55 delegates included some of the best-known leaders in America. As a group, they were well educated and richer than most Americans. All were white men. Many were lawyers, but the group also included doctors, merchants, farmers, and soldiers.

Several delegates were especially important at the convention. As president of the convention, George Washington kept the debates respectful. Eighty-one-year-old Benjamin Franklin wisely stepped in when tempers flared. James Madison of Virginia brought his plan for a powerful national government with him and argued strongly for it. Gouverneur (his first name) Morris of Pennsylvania wrote much of the final draft of the Constitution.

All through the hot, sticky summer, the delegates worked behind closed doors. Some, like Madison, favored a strong, united government. Others were afraid of losing freedoms if the national government was too strong.

In the end, the delegates agreed to have both state governments and a strong national government. They also agreed to divide the national government into three parts, or branches. The **legislative branch** would make the laws. The **executive branch** would carry out the laws. The **judicial branch** would settle disagreements over the meaning of the laws.

One of the convention's fiercest debates concerned the number of representatives in the legislative branch. Larger states wanted the number to be decided by the number of people living in a particular state. Smaller states were afraid of losing power in such a plan. They wanted every state to have the same number of votes in the legislative branch.

This disagreement was so intense that at times it seemed the convention would fall apart. Eventually, the two sides reached a



Independence Hall in Philadelphia, shown here, was the site of the Constitutional Convention.

legislative branch: the branch of government that makes laws (Another word for “make laws” is *legislate*.)

executive branch: the branch of government that carries out (“executes”) laws

judicial branch: the branch of government that interprets laws and settles disagreements about them (“Judicial” is related to the word *judge*.)

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