

UNIT 4 STUDY GUIDE

CONSTITUTION & FIRST PRESIDENTS (1787-1800)

Unit Overview

Following American victory in the Revolutionary War, the newly formed United States of America faced a number of social, political, and economic challenges. The Articles of Confederation, which served as a framework for the Constitution, provided too much power for individual states. As a result, changes needed to be made in order to create a balance of power. In addition, the three branches of government, executive, judicial, and legislative, were established with a system of checks and balances.

The Constitution would also include a Bill of Rights in order to provide citizens with personal liberties and protections, many of which were inspired by the treatment of citizens by the British during the Colonial and Revolutionary eras.

The Articles of Confederation

The Articles of Confederation served as a rough draft for what would eventually become the Constitution. The Articles were written and ratified during the Revolutionary War. The Articles gave too much power to the individual states and left the national government virtually powerless. The Articles of Confederation were written during a time in which the British government had too much power over the colonies; therefore, its writers gave almost no legitimate power to the national government.

The Constitution

The Constitution is the “law of the land” of the United States of America and has a total of 27 amendments, the last of which was added in 1993. The first ten amendments of the Constitution, referred to as the Bill of Rights, provide personal freedoms and liberties for all U.S. citizens. The rights are inalienable, meaning that they come from God and can never be taken away. Each of the amendments of the Bill of Rights may be directly attributed to British rule over colonists, and how the framers of the Constitution wanted to assure citizen rights as a whole.

Branches of Government

There are three branches of government in the United States, the executive, judicial, and legislative. Each branch of government serves a specific purpose. Framers of the Constitution called for a system of checks and balances for the branches of government, assuring one branch does not have too much power over another.

Executive Branch: responsible for enforcing the laws of the United States. The President of the United States serves as the head of the Executive Branch and is arguably the most powerful and influential person in the world. The president is the head of state and commander in chief of the U.S. military. The presidential cabinet includes heads of departments, including the State, Treasury, and Defense. Each cabinet position falls in the line of succession to the presidency. There have been 46 presidents in our nation's history.

Judicial Branch: responsible for interpreting the laws of the United States. The Supreme Court, composed of nine justices, has final appellate jurisdiction. The Supreme Court has the ability to select cases to hear and is the final step in the appeal process. The Chief Justice serves as the head of the Supreme Court. Unlike any other position in government, Supreme Court justices may serve for life.

Legislative Branch: responsible for making or creating the laws of the United States. The Legislative Branch is composed of the House of Representatives and the Senate. There are 435 members of the House of Representatives and 100 members of the Senate. The Speaker of the House is the head of the House of Representatives and the Vice President of the United States is the head of the Senate. Members of the House of Representatives serve two-year terms with no term limit, while members of the Senate serve six-year terms with no term limit.

George Washington: First President of the United States

Having previously served as the commander of the Continental army during the Revolutionary War, George Washington became the first president of the United States in 1789. Washington, a well-known and well-respected Virginian, was asked to define the role of President and set precedent for the future. Washington's vice president was John Adams, the runner up in the first presidential election. Adams would later become the nation's second president.