

MAJOR SUPREME COURT DECISIONS

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Major Supreme Court Decisions



During its history, the Supreme Court has made decisions that have changed not only the lives of the people who brought their cases before it, but also the lives of Americans for generations thereafter. The court steeps its decisions in legal jargon, articulating the judicial philosophies of the justices as well as precedent from previous years. However, these cases stem from real, personal, and sometimes life-altering disputes between common people and others equally passionate about their own position. In *Gideon v. Wainwright* (1963), the court ruled that everyone is entitled to legal counsel—even a convict doing five years for burglary. In *Korematsu v. United States* (1944), the Supreme Court upheld the power of the president during wartime to relocate 120,000 Japanese Americans to internment camps solely because of their ethnicity. The decision in *Tinker v. Des Moines School District* (1969) reversed the suspension of 13-year-old Mary Beth Tinker for protesting the Vietnam War in school. In the case of *Roper v. Simmons* (2005), the court declared unconstitutional the execution of people under 18 years old. In the case of *United States v. Nixon* (1974), the court forced the president of the United States to end the Watergate cover-up and turn over evidence of criminal wrongdoing.

Constitutional Rights

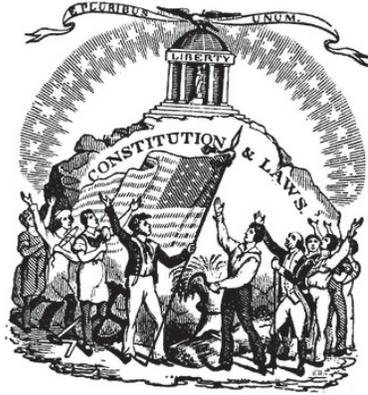
- Declaration of Independence introduced the fundamental rights provided by the Constitution
- Right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness
- Framers saw the government as unfinished and believed that rights would evolve over time
- Who possessed these rights—were they absolute, unlimited, and guaranteed in all cases?



From the the Constitution's inception to the present day, the United States government has been considered a great experiment of liberty under the law. Thomas Jefferson explained in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." In other words, people naturally have liberty; they create a government and grant it powers in order to protect their liberty.

Most of the Constitution's Framers had participated in a revolution to secure these rights and understood that the extent of these rights would continue to evolve over time. History had taught the Framers that different times call for different interpretations of a person's rights, and that such interpretations had changed before and would continue to change even as they wrote, debated, and compromised on the Constitution. The first words of the Constitution clearly state this understanding: "We the People, in order to form a more perfect Union..." Note that it does not say "to form a *perfect* union"; the Framers understood that this would be impossible. In examining Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence—that "all men are created equal"—and comparing these with the circumstances at the time, many questions arise. Are all men equal? Were they believed to be at the time? What about the issue of slavery? Does the word "men" mean males only, or is that term used to refer to all humans? Does it apply to all people, or only to U.S. citizens? Though Jefferson cited "inalienable" rights, questions remain as to whether these rights are absolute, unlimited, and guaranteed in all cases.

Constitutional Rights (continued)



- Constitution is a “living document” — adaptable to the times
- Supreme Court defines the meaning of the Constitution
- Boundaries within the government and between government and the people help safeguard the people’s rights
- The court’s rulings often reflect the times and are subject to change

From the beginning it was understood that since the Constitution would adapt to changing times and circumstances, the judicial system would decide on the meaning and extent of the rights defined therein. Chief Justice John Marshall helped define the power of the Supreme Court to interpret the law as embodied in the Constitution, stating, “This Constitution was intended to endure for ages to come, and consequently, to be adapted to the various crises of human affairs.” In the spirit of the Enlightenment, the Constitution established a government in which human logic and the power of reason trumped passion, self-interest, and violence. A court of law would settle disputes, not mob rule in the streets or an absolute ruler who only allowed a few to have rights.

To help decide these disputes, the Constitution establishes limits on the government in order to protect individual rights. These boundaries define divisions of power between federal and state governments, between the federal government’s three branches, and between the government and the people. The judicial system acts as a sort of border patrol, determining when and how the government or individuals have exceeded which limits, with the final word on such matters left to the Supreme Court. However, the last word is not always the best word: sometimes the court decides that established boundaries shouldn’t be exceeded, basing its rulings on tradition and precedent. At other times, the court acknowledges changes in the law or in the attitudes of the people and reverses an earlier decision. Similarly, the court may recognize a need for a more equitable society and adjust the boundaries, setting a new course for society.