

Congressional Decisions Washington took charge of a political system that was a bold experiment. No one knew if a government based on the will of the people could really work. The new government began to take shape in the summer of 1789. First, people argued over what to call Washington. Some suggested “His Excellency,” but others argued that made the president sound as if he was a king. Finally, in keeping with the simplicity of a republic, Washington agreed to “Mr. President.”

The writers of the Constitution had left many matters to be decided by Congress. For example, the Constitution created a Supreme Court but left it to Congress to decide on the details. What type of additional courts should there be and how many? What would happen if federal court decisions conflicted with state laws?

To help answer these questions, Congress passed a federal court system under the **Federal Judiciary Act** of 1789. This act gave the Supreme Court six members: a chief justice, or judge, and five associate justices. Over time, that number has grown to nine. The law also provided for less powerful federal courts. Washington appointed **John Jay**, the prominent lawyer and diplomat, as the first chief justice of the Supreme Court.

Assembling a Cabinet The Constitution also gave Congress the task of creating departments to help the president lead the nation. The president had the power to appoint the heads of these departments.

Congress created the departments: state, war, treasury, justice and postal service. The State Department dealt with relations with other countries. The War Department was in charge of the nation’s defense. The Treasury Department was in charge of the nation’s economy, or financial security.

Washington chose talented people to run the departments. For secretary of war, he picked Henry Knox, a trusted general during the Revolution. For secretary of state, Washington chose Thomas Jefferson. He had been serving as U.S. minister to France. Washington chose the brilliant Alexander Hamilton to be secretary of the treasury. Hamilton was to manage the government’s money. The secretary’s ties to the president began during the war when he had served as one of Washington’s aides. To advise the government on legal matters, Washington picked Edmund Randolph as **attorney general**.

These department heads and the attorney general made up Washington’s **cabinet**. The Constitution made no mention of a cabinet, but Washington began the practice of calling his cabinet to advise him on official matters. Another high office, that of postmaster general, was not elevated to cabinet status until 1829.

EVALUATE Explain how the decisions made by the first Congress created political traditions.

George Washington’s first cabinet

