

■ 13.4 The Modern President's Job

President John F. Kennedy once said, "No easy problem ever comes to the President of the United States. If they are easy to solve, somebody else has solved them." Lyndon Johnson, who assumed the presidency after Kennedy's assassination, called the job an "awesome burden." After looking at the modern president's many duties, one scholar noted, "All that is missing is Mover of Mountains and Raiser of the Dead."

The Many Roles of the President

Given the complexities of the modern world, the job of president has grown more challenging. To carry out their duties as chief executive, presidents must assume many different roles. The diagram on the facing page shows the various roles the president plays on any given day.

Chief executive. As the country's chief executive, the president acts much like the head of a large

corporation. In this role, the president presides over the federal **bureaucracy**, or the various agencies and organizations that carry on the daily business of government. To keep that bureaucracy running, the president is responsible for appointing close to 2,000 federal officials. These officials, in turn, oversee the work of nearly 2 million civilian employees of the federal government.

As chief executive, the president has the power to issue executive orders. A president is most likely to use this power during an emergency or when Congress fails to take action on an important issue. For example, in 1948, Congress was divided over a bill to desegregate the armed forces. Rather than waiting for Congress to act, President Harry Truman issued an executive order abolishing segregation in the military.

Chief of state. The president also acts as chief of state, the ceremonial leader of the government. In many countries, different individuals hold the positions of chief executive and chief of state. In Great Britain, for example, the prime minister is the chief executive, while the monarch is the chief of state. In the United States, however, the president wears both hats.

As chief of state, the president represents the United States at official functions, both at home and abroad. For example, the president greets foreign leaders and hosts state dinners at the White House. Chief of state duties also include acts to promote national spirit, as when the president lights the national Christmas tree or throws out the first pitch of the major league baseball season.

Commander in chief. The job of commander in chief is one of the president's most challenging roles. As head of the armed forces, the president is responsible for the operations of the U.S. military and the overall security of the nation.

The framers believed it was important for the nation's top civilian leader to have control over the armed forces. But they also set limits on the president's control by giving Congress the power to declare war. Since World War II, however, the president has often committed troops to action without a formal declaration of war. In 1973, Congress passed the War Powers Act, which requires the president to get congressional approval to wage war.

But presidents still find ways to stretch this law. As one scholar noted, the military role of the president is “whatever Congress lets him get away with.”

Chief diplomat. Another key role for the president is that of the nation’s chief diplomat. In this role, the president oversees U.S. foreign policy, holds talks with foreign leaders, and negotiates treaties.

The Constitution directs the president to seek the advice and consent of the Senate in making treaties. Taking this wording literally, President Washington went to the Senate in 1789 to seek its advice on a proposed treaty with the Creek Indians. After some debate, the senators referred the matter to a committee. Washington left in disgust, preferring after that

The President’s Many Roles

The president performs many roles as head of the executive branch. Here are the most important roles the president plays.



to communicate with the Senate in writing. All other presidents have followed his example. Presidents do consult with individual senators, however, and they must still obtain the consent of the Senate to get any treaty approved.

Chief policymaker. Since Franklin Roosevelt's administration, the president has served as chief policymaker for the nation. Although Congress makes the laws, the president has significant influence over the legislative process. The president normally sets a policy agenda for Congress in the annual State of the Union address. The president may also propose legislation or pressure members of Congress to support or oppose certain bills. Other executive powers, such as the power to call Congress into special session and to veto bills, are more key tools the president can use to shape policy.

Chief manager of the economy. The president has no formal power over the economy. However, the president does work with Congress to write a federal

budget and set tax policy. The president also appoints members of the Federal Reserve Board, which works to control the money supply and keep the economy growing at a sustainable pace.

Chief of party. The president is the leader of his or her political party. Presidents tend to have deep loyalty to their party and exert great influence over party members in Congress. They typically work to ensure that their party does well in congressional elections, in hopes of gaining or strengthening a congressional majority. They may take part in campaign fundraising or other campaign events. They also typically reward loyal party members with political favors or appointments to federal office.

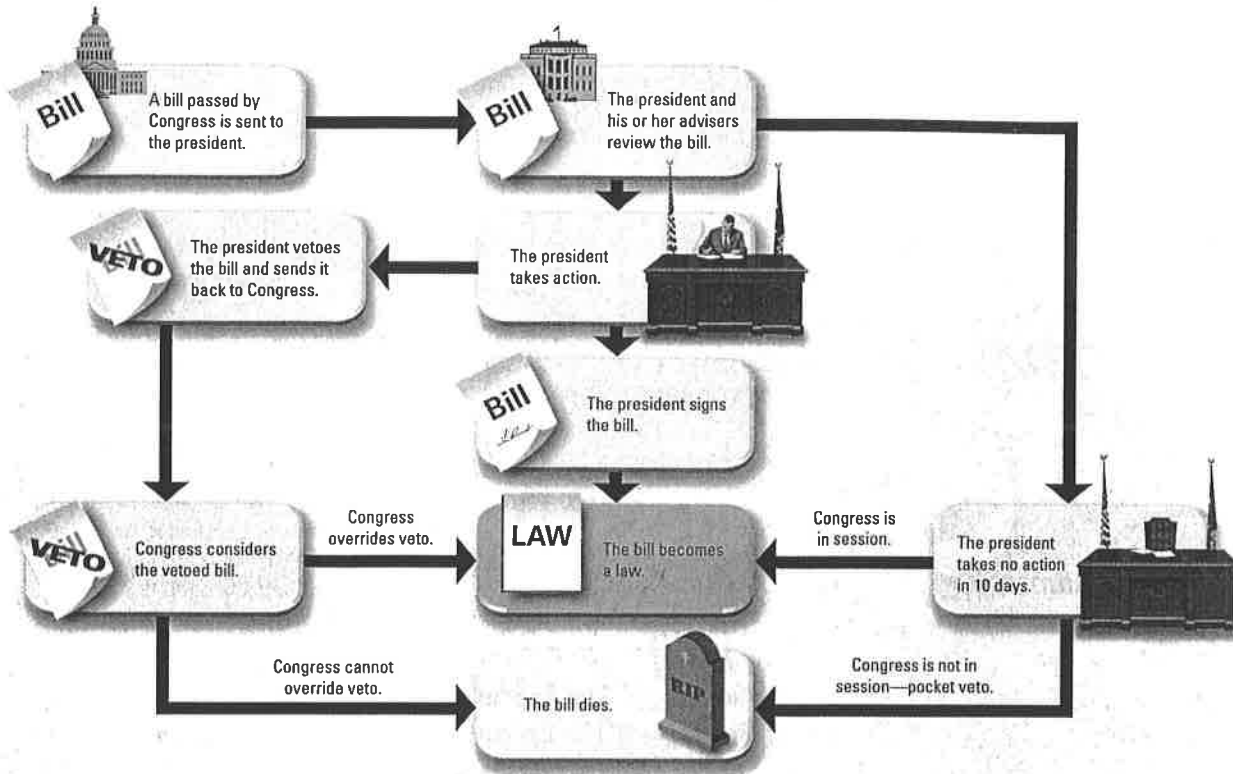
Chief citizen. The president is also the nation's chief citizen. In that role, the president strives to embody American ideals and to serve the nation by acting in its best interests. In times of crisis or tragedy, the president as chief citizen works to inform, inspire, and comfort the American people.



One of the president's roles is to reassure and comfort the nation at times of crisis. George W. Bush fulfilled this duty at Ground Zero in New York City, the site of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

How a Bill Lives or Dies at the Hands of the President

The president's power to approve or veto legislation gives the chief executive an important role in the legislative process. As this diagram shows, a bill may pass through various steps after it is sent to the White House.



Presidential Checks on the Other Branches

The president also plays an important role as head of the executive branch in the federal system of checks and balances. As chief executive, the president can check the power of the legislative branch by approving or vetoing legislation passed by Congress. Likewise, the president can influence the power of the judicial branch by nominating judges to the Supreme Court and other federal courts.

The presidential veto is a powerful tool for influencing policy. The diagram above shows how the veto works. The president is required to sign or veto a bill within 10 days of receiving it from Congress. If the president fails to act within that time, the bill automatically becomes law. However, if Congress adjourns during those 10 days, the president can do

nothing and will simply let the bill die. This is known as a **pocket veto**.

The president can also check the power of Congress by invoking executive privilege. Although this power is not formally granted in the Constitution, it has developed over time through custom and practice. Executive privilege allows the president to deny access to White House documents, even when Congress wants to see them, on the grounds that keeping such records confidential is vital to the operations of the executive branch. The Supreme Court has recognized the right of presidents to invoke executive privilege, though not in all cases. Chapter 4 describes the Court's refusal to back President Nixon's use of executive privilege during the Watergate scandal.