

LANDMARK SUPREME COURT CASES

1803

Marbury v. Madison was the first instance in which a law passed by Congress was declared unconstitutional. The decision greatly expanded the power of the Court by establishing its right to overturn acts of Congress, a power not explicitly granted by the Constitution. Initially the case involved Secretary of State **James Madison**, who refused to seat four judicial appointees although they had been confirmed by the Senate.

1819

McCulloch v. Maryland upheld the right of Congress to create a Bank of the United States, ruling that it was a power implied but not enumerated by the Constitution. The case is significant because it advanced the doctrine of implied powers, or a loose construction of the Constitution. The Court, Chief Justice **John Marshall** wrote, would sanction laws reflecting “the letter and spirit” of the Constitution.

1824

Gibbons v. Ogden defined broadly Congress's right to regulate commerce. Aaron Ogden had filed suit in New York against Thomas Gibbons for operating a rival steamboat service between New York and New Jersey ports. Ogden had exclusive rights to operate steamboats in New York under a state law, while Gibbons held a federal license. Gibbons lost the case and appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which reversed the decision. The Court held that the New York law was unconstitutional, since the power to regulate interstate commerce, which extended to the regulation of navigation, belonged exclusively to Congress. In the 20th century, Chief Justice John Marshall's broad definition of commerce was used to uphold civil rights.

1857

Dred Scott v. Sandford was a highly controversial case that intensified the national debate over slavery. The case involved Dred Scott, a slave, who was taken from a slave state to a free territory. Scott filed a lawsuit claiming that because he had lived on free soil he was entitled to his freedom. Chief Justice **Roger B. Taney** disagreed, ruling that blacks were not citizens and therefore could not sue in federal court. Taney further inflamed antislavery forces by declaring that Congress had no right to ban slavery from U.S. territories.

1896

Plessy v. Ferguson was the infamous case that asserted that “equal but separate accommodations” for blacks on railroad cars did not violate the “equal protection under the laws” clause of the 14th Amendment. By defending the constitutionality of racial segregation, the Court paved the way for the repressive **Jim Crow laws** of the South. The lone dissenter on the Court, Justice **John Marshall Harlan**, protested, “The thin disguise of ‘equal’ accommodations...will not mislead anyone.”

1954

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka invalidated racial segregation in schools and led to the unraveling of **de jure** segregation in all areas of public life. In the unanimous decision spearheaded by Chief Justice **Earl Warren**, the Court invalidated the Plessy ruling, declaring “in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has

no place” and contending that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” Future Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall was one of the NAACP lawyers who successfully argued the case.

1963

Gideon v. Wainwright guaranteed a defendant's right to legal counsel. The Supreme Court overturned the Florida felony conviction of Clarence Earl Gideon, who had defended himself after having been denied a request for free counsel. The Court held that the state's failure to provide counsel for a defendant charged with a felony violated the Fourteenth Amendment's due process clause. Gideon was given another trial, and with a court-appointed lawyer defending him, he was acquitted.

1964

New York Times v. Sullivan extended the protection offered the press by the First Amendment. L.B. Sullivan, a police commissioner in Montgomery, Ala., had filed a libel suit against the *New York Times* for publishing inaccurate information about certain actions taken by the Montgomery police department. In overturning a lower court's decision, the Supreme Court held that debate on public issues would be inhibited if public officials could sue for inaccuracies that were made by mistake. The ruling made it more difficult for public officials to bring libel charges against the press, since the official had to prove that a harmful untruth was told maliciously and with reckless disregard for truth.

1966

Miranda v. Arizona was another case that helped define the due process clause of the (4th) Amendment. At the center of the case was Ernesto Miranda, who had confessed to a crime during police questioning without knowing he had a right to have an attorney present. Based on his confession, Miranda was convicted. The Supreme Court overturned the conviction, ruling that criminal suspects must be warned of their rights before they are questioned by police. These rights are: the right to remain silent, to have an attorney present, and, if the suspect cannot afford an attorney, to have one appointed by the state. The police must also warn suspects that any statements they make can be used against them in court. Miranda was retried without the confession and convicted.

1973

Roe v. Wade legalized abortion and is at the center of the current controversy between “pro-life” and “pro-choice” advocates. The Court ruled that a woman has the right to an abortion without interference from the government in the first trimester of pregnancy, contending that it is part of her “right to privacy.” The Court maintained that right to privacy is not absolute, however, and granted states the right to intervene in the second and third trimesters of pregnancy.

1978

Regents of the University of California v. Bakke imposed limitations on affirmative action to ensure that providing greater opportunities for minorities did not come at the expense of the rights of the majority. In other words, affirmative action was unfair if it lead to reverse discrimination. The case involved the University of Calif., Davis, Medical School and Allan Bakke, a white applicant who was rejected twice even though there were minority applicants admitted with significantly lower scores than his. A closely divided Court ruled that while race was a legitimate factor in school admissions, the use of rigid quotas was not permissible.

2000

Bush v. Gore the Court reversed the Florida Supreme Court decision ordering manual recount of presidential election ballots. A majority of justices (7-2) agreed that the recount violated the Constitution's equal protection and due process guarantees, since counting standards varied among counties. The Court remanded the case to the Florida Supreme Court for remedy but, in 5-4 split, maintained that deadline for recount ended at midnight. The decision effectively ended the presidential election, handing a victory to George W. Bush.

2010

In ***Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission***, the Supreme Court ruled, 5-4, that the government cannot restrict the spending of corporations for political campaigns, maintaining that it's their First Amendment right to support candidates as they choose. This decision upsets two previous precedents on the free-speech rights of corporations. President Obama expressed disapproval of the decision, calling it a "victory" for Wall Street and Big Business.