APUSH—Significant U.S. Supreme Court Cases

Marbury v. Madison (1803)
Facts of the Case: Marbury appointed as justice in last minutes of Adams's presidency. Madison refused to complete appointment.

Question Presented: Is Marbury entitled to his appointment? And, is the Supreme Court the place for Marbury to get the relief he requests?

Conclusion: When the Constitution--the nation’s highest law--conflicts with an act of the legislature or executive, that act is invalid. This case establishes the Supreme Court's power of judicial review.

McCulloch v. Maryland (1819)
Facts of the Case: In 1816, Congress chartered The Second Bank of the United States. In 1818, the state of Maryland passed legislation to impose taxes on the bank. James W. McCulloch, the cashier of the Baltimore branch of the bank, refused to pay the tax.

Question Presented: The case presented two questions: Did Congress have the authority to establish the bank? Did the Maryland law unconstitutionally interfere with congressional powers?

Conclusion: The Court held that Congress had the power to incorporate the bank and that Maryland could not tax instruments of the national government employed in the execution of constitutional powers. Established supremacy of federal government over states.

Gibbons v. Ogden (1824)
Facts of the Case: A New York state law gave two individuals the exclusive right to operate steamboats on waters within state jurisdiction. In this case a steamboat owner who did business between New York and New Jersey challenged a law which forced him to obtain an operating permit from the State of New York to navigate on that state's waters.

Question Presented: Did the State of New York exercise authority in a realm reserved exclusively to Congress, namely, the regulation of interstate commerce?

Conclusion: The Court concluded that regulation of navigation by steamboat operators and others for purposes of conducting interstate commerce was a power reserved to and exercised by the Congress.

Worcester v. Georgia (1832)
Facts of the Case: Worcester and other non-Native Americans, were indicted in the Supreme Court in the state of Georgia for "residing within the limits of the Cherokee nation without a license" and "without having taken the oath to support and defend the constitution and laws of the state of Georgia."
Question Presented: Does the state of Georgia have the authority to regulate the intercourse between citizens of its state and members of the Cherokee Nation?

Conclusion: In an opinion delivered by Chief Justice John Marshall, the Court held that the Georgia act, under which Worcester was prosecuted, violated the Constitution, treaties, and laws of the United States. Chief Justice Marshall argued, "The Cherokee nation, then, is a distinct community occupying its own territory in which the laws of Georgia can have no force." (Note: Andrew Jackson refused to enforce the decision)

Scott v. Sanford (1857)
Facts of the Case: Dred Scott was a slave in Missouri. From 1833 to 1843, he resided in Illinois (a free state) and in an area of the Louisiana Territory, where slavery was forbidden by the Missouri Compromise of 1820. After returning to Missouri, Scott sued unsuccessfully in the Missouri courts for his freedom, claiming that his residence in free territory made him a free man.

Question Presented: Was Dred Scott free or slave?

Conclusion: Dred Scott was a slave. The Court held that no person descended from an American slave had ever been a citizen. The Court then held the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional, hoping to end the slavery question once and for all. The ruling effectively extended slavery to all states.

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)
Facts of the Case: The state of Louisiana enacted a law that required separate railway cars for blacks and whites. In 1892, Homer Adolph Plessy--who was seven-eighths Caucasian--took a seat in a "whites only" car of a Louisiana train. He refused to move to the car reserved for blacks and was arrested.

Question Presented: Is Louisiana's law mandating racial segregation an unconstitutional infringement on the equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment?

Conclusion: No, the state law is within constitutional boundaries. The majority upheld state-imposed racial segregation. The justices based their decision on the separate-but-equal doctrine, that separate facilities for blacks and whites satisfied the Fourteenth Amendment so long as they were equal.

Muller v. Oregon (1908)
Facts of the Case: Oregon enacted a law that limited women to ten hours of work in factories and laundries.

Question Presented: Does the Oregon law violate a woman's freedom of contract implicit in the liberty protected by due process of the Fourteenth Amendment?

Conclusion: There was no constitutional violation. In a famous brief in defense of the Oregon law, attorney Louis Brandeis elaborately detailed expert reports on
the harmful physical, economic and social effects of long working hours on women. The Court held that physical and social differences between the sexes warranted a different rule respecting labor contracts. The opinion conveyed the accepted wisdom of the day: that women were unequal and inferior to men.

**Schenck v. U.S.** (1919)

*Facts of the Case:* During World War I, Schenck mailed circulars to draftees. The circulars urged "Do not submit to intimidation" but advised only peaceful action such as petitioning to repeal the Conscription Act. Schenck was charged with conspiracy to violate the Espionage Act by attempting to cause insubordination in the military and to obstruct recruitment.

*Question Presented:* Are Schenck's actions (words, expression) protected by the free speech clause of the First Amendment?

*Conclusion:* Holmes, speaking for a unanimous Court, concluded that Schenck is not protected in this situation. The right to free speech is not unlimited. During wartime, utterances tolerable in peacetime can be punished.

**Korematsu v. U.S.** (1944)

*Facts of the Case:* During World War II, Presidential Executive Order 9066 and congressional statutes gave the military authority to exclude citizens of Japanese ancestry from areas deemed critical to national defense and potentially vulnerable to espionage. Korematsu remained in San Leandro, California and violated Civilian Exclusion Order No. 34 of the U.S. Army.

*Question Presented:* Did the President and Congress go beyond their war powers by implementing exclusion and restricting the rights of Americans of Japanese descent?

*Conclusion:* The Court sided with the government and held that the need to protect against espionage outweighed Korematsu's rights.

**Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka** (1954)

*Facts of the Case:* Black children were denied admission to public schools attended by white children under laws requiring or permitting segregation according to the races.

*Question Presented:* Does the segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race deprive the minority children of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the 14th Amendment?

*Conclusion:* Yes. Despite the equalization of "objective" factors, intangible issues foster and maintain inequality. Racial segregation in public education has a detrimental effect on minority children because it is interpreted as a sign of inferiority. The long-held doctrine that separate facilities were permissible provided they were equal was rejected.
Miranda v. Arizona (1966)
*Facts of the Case:* The Court considered the constitutionality of defendants being questioned "while in custody or otherwise deprived of [their] freedom in any significant way," without being notified of right to counsel.

*Question Presented:* Does the police practice of interrogating individuals without notifying them of their right to counsel and their protection against self-incrimination violate the Fifth Amendment?

*Conclusion:* The Court noted that "the modern practice of in-custody interrogation is psychologically rather than physically oriented." The Court specifically outlined the necessary aspects of **police warnings to suspects**, including **warnings of the right to remain silent and the right to have counsel present during interrogations.**

Roe v. Wade (1971)
*Facts of the Case:* Roe, a Texas resident, sought to terminate her pregnancy by abortion. Texas law prohibited abortions except to save the pregnant woman's life.

*Question Presented:* Does the Constitution embrace a woman's right to terminate her pregnancy by abortion?

*Conclusion:* The Court held that a woman's right to an abortion fell within the **right to privacy** (recognized in Griswold v. Connecticut) protected by the **Fourteenth Amendment.** The decision gave a woman total autonomy over the pregnancy during the first trimester and defined different levels of state interest for the second and third trimesters.

*Facts of the Case:* A grand jury returned indictments against seven of President Richard Nixon's closest aides in the Watergate affair. The special prosecutor sought audio tapes of conversations recorded by Nixon in the Oval Office. Nixon asserted that he was immune from the subpoena claiming "executive privilege," which is the right to withhold information from other government branches to preserve confidential communications within the executive branch or to secure the national interest.

*Question Presented:* Is the President's right to safeguard certain information, using his "executive privilege" confidentiality power, entirely immune from judicial review?

*Conclusion:* No. The Court held that neither the doctrine of separation of powers, nor the generalized need for confidentiality of high-level communications, can sustain an absolute, unqualified, presidential privilege. Therefore, the president must obey the subpoena and produce the tapes and documents. Nixon resigned shortly after the release of the tapes.
University of California v. Bakke (1978)

Facts of the Case: Allan Bakke, a thirty-five-year-old white man, had twice applied for admission to the University of California Medical School at Davis. He was rejected both times. The school reserved sixteen places in each entering class of one hundred for "qualified" minorities, as part of the university’s affirmative action program, in an effort to redress longstanding, unfair minority exclusions from the medical profession. Bakke’s qualifications (college GPA and test scores) exceeded those of any of the minority students admitted in the two years Bakke’s applications were rejected. Bakke contended, that he was excluded from admission solely on the basis of race.

Question Presented: Did the University of California violate the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, by practicing an affirmative action policy that resulted in the repeated rejection of Bakke’s application for admission to its medical school?

Conclusion: No and yes. There was no single majority opinion. Four of the justices contended that any racial quota system supported by government violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr., agreed, casting the deciding vote ordering the medical school to admit Bakke. However, in his opinion, Powell argued that the rigid use of racial quotas as employed at the school violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The remaining four justices held that the use of race as a criterion in admissions decisions in higher education was constitutionally permissible. Powell joined that opinion as well, contending that the use of race was permissible as one of several admission criteria. So, the Court managed to minimize white opposition to the goal of equality (by finding for Bakke) while extending gains for racial minorities through affirmative action.

Source: Jerry Goldman and Northwestern University (http://www.oyez.org)