



UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE
Joel W. Solomon United States Courthouse
900 Georgia Avenue
Chattanooga, Tennessee 37402

THE FEDERAL COURTS REMAIN STEADFAST IN THE MIDST OF SOCIETAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

January 2024

The Federal Courts Maintain their Role and Function Through Technological Changes

Chief Justice John Roberts recently issued his 2023 Year-End Report on the Federal Judiciary. In his report he discussed ways the federal judiciary has adapted to ever changing technology and is using modern technology. Chief Justice Roberts began his report by stating “the arrival of new technology can dramatically change work and life for the better.” He then discussed how the rural electrification program dramatically improved lives. He goes on to discuss how the legal profession and the judiciary moved from the quill pen to typewriters and then to personal computers.

The Chief’s remarks served to bring home the remarkable steadfastness of the federal courts in the face of societal and technological change. Although the courts have shown great adaptability, they have not strayed from the rule set out in the Constitution. The framers, in creating the judicial branch, envisioned a branch that would be a stable and impartial arbiter of the law, above all beholden to the Constitution and the laws of the nation. And in large measure, the federal judiciary has proven true to its original role and function in our form of democracy.

Societal and Technological Changes Affects How Government Functions

In looking at the other two branches of government, we easily see how societal change and technological advancements have caused tremendous change to their role and function. Technology has allowed the president to command and control vast numbers of subordinates through modern communications. By telephone, the president can communicate with foreign heads of state instantaneously as opposed to sending diplomatic letters by ship that would take weeks or months to arrive. Instead of having to travel across the country by horse drawn wagon and steamboat, modern presidents can be in any part of the country in a matter of hours by high-speed jet aircraft. Societal changes have caused the president to function in ways that the earlier presidents could never have envisioned. The change in the role and function of the congress has not been as dramatic but it obviously operates much differently than the first congresses. This is

also because societal demands are much different, and technology allows it to meet these challenges differently.

The Federal Courts Role and Function Remains Unchanged

While the federal courts no longer use quill pens to scratch opinions onto parchment, and orders are not delivered by messengers riding horses or horse drawn carriages, the courts still issue orders containing their opinions. These orders and opinions are now produced by computer technology and distributed through high-speed internet. Instead of having to look in physical reporters, citizens, whether formally trained in the law or not, are able to access court opinions with the click of a button. The method of producing the orders and distributing them has changed, but the fundamental nature of the orders and rulings have remained constant.

Additionally, citizens are able to follow court proceedings in a way once unimaginable. For the Supreme Court, and many Circuit Courts of Appeals, citizens are able to “stream” oral arguments as they happen in real time. And if one is not able to listen in real time, these oral arguments are also available for playback later. This increased access to hearings has also helped modernize the courts while keeping them true to their core role and function.

Throughout our history, the courts faced challenges through the several wars the country experienced, economic depressions and recessions, labor strikes and disputes, and enormous internal civil and social turmoil. The courts have remained true to their essential role and function which helps ensure the stability of our nation.

The Courts Will Remain True to Fundamental Principles of Justice, Fairness, and the Rule of Law

In facing these and other challenges, the federal courts are ensuring that the institution established by the framers remains a steadfast guardian of the rule of law. Yet, the fundamental principles that guide the federal judiciary remain unchanged. From the very beginning, the role of the federal judiciary was to interpret the Constitution, settle disputes, and ensure that justice prevailed. Going forward, the federal judiciary will face challenges inconceivable to the framers and unimaginable to us today. Armed conflicts in distant lands, globalization, the digital age, artificial intelligence, climate change, and complex geopolitical issues will test the judiciary’s adaptability. Yet the need to ensure the fundamental principles of justice, fairness, and the rule of law will ensure the courts remain an integral part of our federal government.

Curtis L. Collier
United States District Judge
Chair, Eastern District of Tennessee Civics and Outreach Committee

Carrie Brown Stefaniak
Law Clerk to the Honorable Curtis L. Collier
Past President, Chattanooga Chapter of the Federal Bar Association

Erienne Reniajal Lewis
Law Clerk to the Honorable Curtis L. Collier