

The Articles of Confederation

1781-1789

The United States was the first nation in modern times to have a government designed and run according to democratic principles. During the Revolutionary War the rebelling colonists knew they needed a new government responsive to the people.

Starting in 1776, colonial assemblies converted themselves into state governments and replaced colonial charters with written constitutions

The idea of habitual (frequent and regular elections) came from *John Locke's* idea of “*right of revolution.*” People were regularly allowed to cast ballots proving satisfaction or dissatisfaction with governmental performance. Most states changed their property requirements for voting.

Every state except Pennsylvania kept their bicameral legislatures. They made the legislators responsible to the electorate (voters) instead of the King or Parliament.

Legislatures had short terms making them more responsible to the voters. To prevent tyranny very limited executive authority was given to governors,. They had to stand for popular election every two years. Most states made their legislative branch supreme by giving overwhelming power to their elected representatives.

The new state governments also protected individual rights. Each state added a bill of rights to its constitution. These documents guaranteed:

- Freedom of speech
- Freedom of worship
- Safeguards for property ownership
- Granted bail and trial rights for accused persons

It was no easy task to preserve the new power and authority of the states while establishing a central government to administer national affairs (such as a revolutionary war). Pennsylvania delegate **John Dickinson** drew up the first system of national government for the Continental Congress. In 1777, Dickinson submitted the *Articles of Confederation*.

The new states were so protective of their authority and land claims that they took almost four years just to ratify the *Articles*.

The *Articles* created a **confederation - a loose union with power shared between states and the national (central) government**

The few powers allowed to the national government were difficult to exercise

- Simple legislature required a two-thirds majority
- Amendments to the Articles had to be approved unanimously

The government had some essential powers

- It could make war and negotiate treaties
- It could borrow money
- It could resolve disputes between states.

Under the *Articles* the central government faced many major problems:

- It could not levy taxes – “the power of the purse”
- Its sovereignty (independent power) was limited
- The central government did not regulate commerce
- The central government could not raise troops
- It had no enforcement power – “the power of the sword”
- There were no executive officers, only secretaries appointed by and responsible to Congress to manage financial and foreign affairs.
- There were no national courts in which to prosecute offenses or settle disputes.
- The national government had to rely upon the good will of the states to contribute funds and to make its laws work.

The *Articles of Confederation* were in effect from 1781 to 1789, a time modern historians call the “**Critical Period.**”

- It negotiated a favorable end to the war with the Treaty of Paris in 1783
- It created a model for the admission of new territories and the orderly admission of states to the Union – the Northwest Ordinance in 1785

Weaknesses of the Articles

- Unicameral legislature; each state had an equal vote no matter the size of population
- Two-thirds majority needed to pass laws
- No control of interstate or foreign trade
- Congress could levy but not collect taxes
- No executive department to enforce laws
- No national judicial branch, only individual state courts
- Unanimous vote of states needed to amend the constitutional structure

Post-War Problems

- The economy was in disarray
- States issued their own paper money but the people lacked confidence in it; more value was given to British, French and Dutch coins; Spanish gold was the most valued money (and the rarest)
- The new, freer trade allowed with China, France, the French West Indies and other European powers did not equal the amount of pre-Revolutionary trade with Britain.
- Poorly equipped army units could not protect the surge of new settlers into the Ohio Valley who were subject to violence by British soldiers still lingering in the area.

Shays' Rebellion

Debtors, mostly farmers, were pressured to pay their debts in hard currency (coin). The crisis came to a head in 1785, when New England Merchant lenders pressured overtaxed farmers towards bankruptcy. The poor farmers rallied around Captain Daniel Shays, a war veteran who was threatened with prison if he did not pay his debt. Their petitions for tax relief and for printing more paper money were turned down by the General Court. In Boston mobs began to threaten tax collectors and court officials. Shays' Rebellion spread; there were a few skirmishes and some of the rebels were captured and subsequently released. Shay and some of his followers fled to Vermont but were never prosecuted. At the same time Virginia and Maryland held a meeting to discuss border disputes. It soon broadened to general national problems. In fear of a full scale national crisis George Washington offered up his home, the first step towards the Constitutional Convention.