

WHAT DID THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE PROCLAIM?

The Declaration of Independence argued for many of the natural rights of man. Most well known of these are the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The bell that hung from the tower of the state house rang loudly as this Declaration was read; today it has become known as the "Liberty Bell."

AN ATTEMPT AT A NATIONAL GOVERNMENT: THE ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION

2.2 Identify the components of the Articles of Confederation and the reasons for their failure.

In late 1777, the Second Continental Congress adopted the **Articles of Confederation**, creating a loose "league of friendship" between the thirteen sovereign, or independent, colonies (some that even called themselves separate countries), and presented the Articles to the colonies for ratification. The Articles created a type of government called a confederation or confederacy, one quite common among the Indian tribes. The national government in a confederacy is weaker than the sum of its parts, and the states often consider themselves independent nation-states linked together only for limited purposes, such as national defense. The Articles of Confederation included the following:

- A national government with a Congress empowered to make peace, coin money, appoint officers for an army, control the post office, and negotiate with Indian tribes.
- Each state's retention of its independence and sovereignty, or ultimate authority, to govern within its territories.
- One vote in the legislature, the Congress of the Confederation, for each state regardless of size.
- The vote of nine states to pass any measure (a unanimous vote for any amendment).
- The selection and payment of delegates to the Congress by the states.

The Articles, finally ratified by all thirteen states in March 1781, fashioned a government that reflected the political culture and philosophy of the times.⁷ Although it had its flaws, the government under the Articles of Confederation saw the nation through the Revolutionary War. However, once the British surrendered in 1781, and the new nation found itself no longer united by the war effort, the national government quickly fell into chaos.

Problems Under the Articles of Confederation

Historians refer to the chaotic period from 1781 to 1789, when the former colonies were governed under the Articles, as the **Critical Period**.⁸ The Congress of the Confederation rarely could assemble the required quorum of nine states to conduct

Articles of Confederation

The compact between the thirteen original colonies that created a loose league of friendship, with the national government drawing its powers from the states.

Critical Period

The chaotic period from 1781 to 1789 after the American Revolution during which the former colonies were governed under the Articles of Confederation.

business. Even when it did meet, states found it difficult to agree on any policies. To raise revenue to pay off war debts and run the government, Congress proposed various land, poll, and liquor taxes. But, since it had no specific power to tax, all these proposals were rejected. At one point, Congress was even driven out of Philadelphia (then the capital of the new national government) by its own unpaid army.

Although the national government could coin money, it had no resources to back up the value of its currency. Continental dollars were worth little, and trade between states grew chaotic as some of them began to coin their own money. Another weakness was that the Articles of Confederation did not allow Congress to regulate commerce among the states or with foreign nations. As a result, individual states attempted to enter into agreements with other countries, and foreign nations were suspicious of trade agreements made with the Congress of the Confederation.

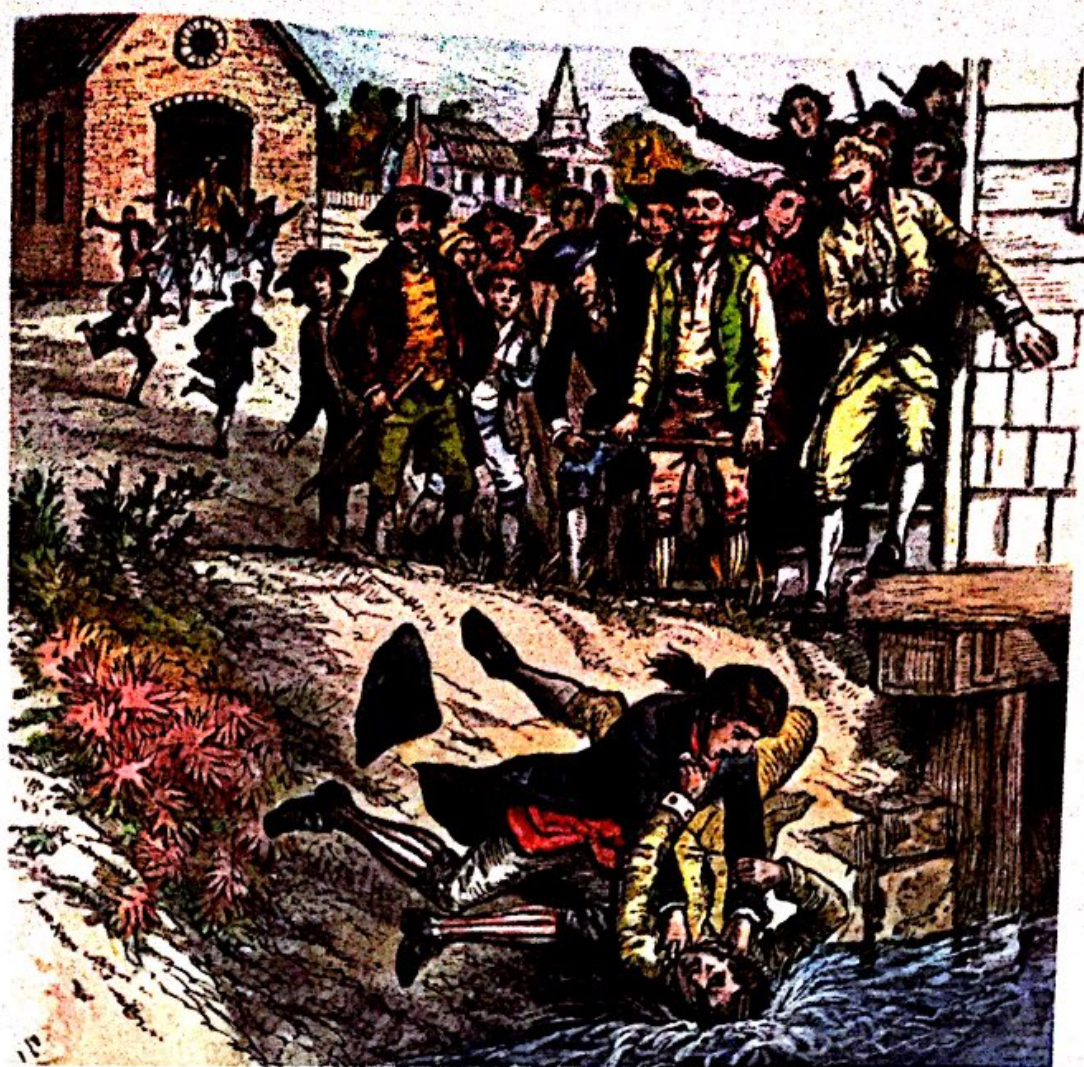
Fearful of a chief executive who would rule tyrannically, the drafters of the Articles made no provision for an executive branch of government that would be responsible for executing, or implementing, laws passed by the legislative branch. Instead, the president was merely the presiding officer at meetings. The Articles of Confederation, moreover, had no provision for a judicial system to handle the growing number of economic conflicts and boundary disputes among the individual states. Several states claimed the same lands to the west, and Pennsylvania and Virginia went to war with each other.

The Articles' greatest weakness, however, was its failure to provide for a strong central government. Although states had operated independently before the war, during the war they acceded to the national government's authority to wage armed conflict. Once the war was over, however, each state resumed its sovereign status and was unwilling to give up rights, such as the power to tax, to an untested national government. Consequently, the government could not force states to abide by the provisions of the second Treaty of Paris, signed in 1783, which officially ended the Revolutionary War. For example, states passed laws to allow debtors who owed money to Great Britain to postpone payment. These actions violated the treaty. Still, the Articles did foster some successes. Improvements were made in transportation and communication. The establishment of a national postal service also helped foster a sense of some nationality that went beyond state borders.

Rebellion in the States

Before concerned states and individuals could take action to strengthen the government, new unrest broke out in America. In 1780, Massachusetts adopted a constitution that appeared to favor the interests of the wealthy. Property-owning requirements barred the lower and middle classes from voting and office holding. And, as the economy of Massachusetts declined, banks foreclosed on the farms of many Massachusetts Continental Army veterans who were still waiting for promised bonuses that the national government had no funds to pay. The last straw came in 1786, when the Massachusetts legislature enacted a new law requiring the payment of all debts in cash. Frustration and outrage at the new law incited Daniel Shays, a former Continental Army captain, and 1,500 armed, disgruntled farmers to march to the government arsenal in Springfield, Massachusetts. This group obstructed the entrance to the state court located there, thus preventing the court from foreclosing on the mortgages on their farms.

The Congress of the Confederation immediately authorized the secretary of war to call for a new national militia. Congress made a \$530,000 appropriation for this purpose, but every state except Virginia refused to pay. The governor of Massachusetts then tried to raise a state militia, but because of the poor economy, the commonwealth's treasury lacked the necessary funds to support his action. A militia finally was assembled after frantic attempts to collect private financial support. By February 4, 1787, this privately



WHAT WAS THE RESULT OF SHAYS'S REBELLION?

With Daniel Shays in the lead, a group of farmers who had served in the Continental Army marched to Springfield, Massachusetts, to stop the state court from foreclosing on the farms. The rebellion illustrated the problems of the national government under the Articles of Confederation and is widely thought to have influenced the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention.

paid force ended what was called **Shays's Rebellion**. The failure of the Congress to muster an army and quell the rebellion provided a dramatic example of the weaknesses inherent in the Articles of Confederation and shocked the nation's leaders into recognizing the new national government's inadequacies. It finally prompted several states to join together and call for a convention in Philadelphia in 1787.

Shays's Rebellion

A rebellion in which an army of 1,500 disgruntled and angry farmers led by Daniel Shays marched to Springfield, Massachusetts, and forcibly restrained the state court from foreclosing mortgages on their farms.

WRITING THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

2.3 Outline the issues resolved by compromise during the writing of the Constitution.

On February 21, 1787, in the throes of economic turmoil and with domestic tranquility gone haywire, the Congress called for a **Constitutional Convention** in Philadelphia for "the sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation." However, many delegates who gathered in sweltering Philadelphia on May 25, 1787, were prepared to take potentially treasonous steps to preserve the union. On the first day of the convention, delegates from Virginia proposed fifteen resolutions creating an entirely new government (later known as the Virginia Plan). Their enthusiasm, however, was not universal. Many delegates considered these resolutions to be in violation of the convention's charter. They proposed the New Jersey Plan, which took greater steps to preserve the Articles.

These proposals met heated debate on the convention's floor. Eventually, the Virginia Plan triumphed. Although the delegates had established the basic structure of the new government, the work of the Constitutional Convention was not complete. Remaining differences were resolved through a series of compromises, and less than one hundred days after the meeting convened, the Framers had created a new constitution to submit to the electorate for its approval.

Constitutional Convention

The meeting in Philadelphia in 1787 that was first intended to revise the Articles of Confederation but produced an entirely new document, the U.S. Constitution.