



SECTION  
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Congress of the United States.  
began and held at the City of New York.  
on Wednesday the fourth of March one thousand seven hundred and eighty

# Experimenting with Confederation

## MAIN IDEA

Americans adopted the Articles of Confederation but found the new government too weak to solve the nation's problems.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The reaction to the weak Articles of Confederation led to a stronger central government that has continued to expand its power.

## Terms & Names

- republic
- republicanism
- Articles of Confederation
- confederation
- Land Ordinance of 1785
- Northwest Ordinance of 1787

## One American's Story

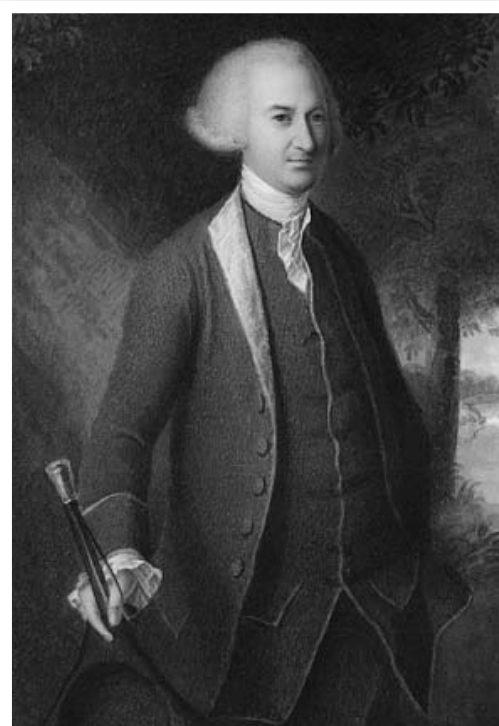
Although John Dickinson had once opposed American independence, he later worked hard to help create a government for the new United States. In 1779 John Dickinson returned to the Continental Congress as a delegate from Delaware. At that time he explained the principles that guided his political decisions.

### A PERSONAL VOICE JOHN DICKINSON

“Two rules I have laid down for myself throughout this contest . . . first, on all occasions where I am called upon, as a trustee for my countrymen, to deliberate on questions important to their happiness, disdaining all personal advantages to be derived from a suppression of my real sentiments . . . openly to avow [declare] them; and, secondly, . . . whenever the public resolutions are taken, to regard them though opposite to my opinion, as sacred . . . and to join in supporting them as earnestly as if my voice had been given for them.”

—quoted in *The Life and Times of John Dickinson, 1732–1808*

Dickinson's two rules became guiding principles for the leaders who faced the formidable task of starting a new nation.



John Dickinson

## Americans Debate Republicanism

The task of creating a new government posed a great challenge. Among many other issues, the relationship between the new states and the national government was difficult to define. The debate over the nature of the new government of the United States would consume the political energies of the new nation.



### MAIN IDEA

#### Developing Historical Perspective

**A** What relics of the colonial period survived in the new system of government?

#### Background

In *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith (1723–1790) argued that social order and progress were the natural result of individualism and self-interest.

**COLONIES BECOME STATES** British settlers in North America had founded not one colony but many, each with its own governor, council, and colonial assembly. This system of distinct, self-governing colonies encouraged people to think of the colony as the primary political unit. Because of this, most people's allegiance was to the colony in which they lived. The Revolutionary War gave the colonies a common goal, but as these colonies became states, they remained reluctant to unite under a strong central government. The challenge was to develop a system of government that balanced the interests of the several states with those of the nation. **A**

**UNITY THROUGH A REPUBLIC** Eighteenth-century Americans believed that a democracy, or government directly by the people, placed too much power in the hands of the uneducated masses. Therefore, they favored a **republic**—a government in which citizens rule through their elected representatives. However, **republicanism**, the idea that governments should be based on the consent of the people (which should not be confused with the Republicanism of the modern-day political party), meant different things to different Americans.

Some, like John Dickinson, believed that a republic required a virtuous people. The new government could only succeed, they argued, if people placed the good of the nation above their personal interests.

Other Americans, influenced by the writings of the philosopher and economist Adam Smith, believed that a republic would benefit from self-interest. They asserted that if a government allowed independent citizens to pursue their own economic and political interests, the whole nation would benefit.

**STATE CONSTITUTIONS** As the states created their own constitutions, they wrestled with how to put republican ideals into practice. Many state constitutions shared certain similarities. They limited the powers of government leaders. They guaranteed specific rights for citizens, including freedom of speech, religion, and the press. In general, state constitutions emphasized liberty rather than equality and reflected a fear of centralized authority.

At the same time, state constitutions differed widely in granting the right to vote. Although the new states were more democratic than any western nation at this time, it was still only a very limited democracy by modern standards. African Americans were generally not allowed to vote. Some states granted voting rights to all white males. Other states, like Maryland, continued to make property ownership a requirement for voting.

Despite the more active political role that women had played during the Revolution, they were still denied the right to vote in most states. However, New Jersey gave voting rights to all free property owners but neglected to specify males. Consequently, some New Jersey women gained the right to vote—at least until 1807, when this right was revoked.

**POLITICAL PRECEDENTS** In a world where most nations were still governed by kings, there were few political systems that could serve as models for the new republic. The nation's founders searched history for political precedents for the

### HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT



#### REPUBLICAN MOTHERHOOD

An important issue in the early years of the nation was the role that women should play in the republic. In the years before and during the Revolutionary War, many women became politically active, organizing boycotts of British goods and helping raise money for the army. This involvement in public affairs was an important departure for women, who had traditionally been confined to the private sphere of family life.

After the Revolution, as the nation readjusted to peace, the new ideal of republican motherhood helped channel women's newfound political awareness and activism back into the home. Women were expected to raise the next generation of patriots by instilling democratic values in their children.



## Political Precedents

### ATHENS AND ROME

In the 18th century, American leaders revered the political achievements of ancient Athens and Rome. The Greek city of Athens was acknowledged as the birthplace of democracy, while the early Romans were admired for overthrowing monarchy and establishing a republic. However, Greek democracy, like the democracy of the New England town meeting, was workable only at a local level. It was the democracy of a city, not of a huge nation. Neither Greek democracy nor the Roman republic had endured.



▲ Engraving of the ancient Roman Senate

### THE ENGLISH COMMONWEALTH

In the mid-17th century the English parliament executed the king and established a republic, which lasted from 1649 to 1660. This republic, called the Commonwealth and Protectorate, was controlled first by Oliver Cromwell and later by his son Richard. The Commonwealth was continually threatened by anarchy and bad leadership and did not long survive Cromwell's death. The failure of the English Commonwealth must have haunted American political leaders as they planned the government of their republic.

◀ The execution of King Charles I



new government. In the previous century, the English had established a short-lived republic after the execution of King Charles I. During the Middle Ages, Italian cities such as Florence, Pisa, Genoa, and Venice had become self-governing city-states. Swiss communities also had resisted royal control, forming alliances that developed into the Swiss Confederation. In ancient times, republics and various democratic systems had existed in Greece and in Rome. However, none of these models could be adapted easily to the political situation of the new United States, with its need to balance the concerns of state and national governments.

## The Continental Congress Debates

While the states developed their individual constitutions, the Continental Congress tried to draft one for the states as a whole. However, there was much disagreement over the role of the national government. The delegates had to answer three basic questions.

**REPRESENTATION BY POPULATION OR BY STATE?** Although the states were equal as political entities, they were unequal in size, wealth, and population. These differences posed a serious dilemma. Should delegates to a new government represent people or states? Should each state elect the same number of representatives regardless of its population? Or should states with large populations have more representatives than states with small populations?

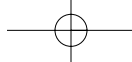
For the time being, the members of the Continental Congress saw themselves as representing independent states. As a result, they made the decision that each state would have one vote regardless of population. **B**

**SUPREME POWER: CAN IT BE DIVIDED?** Until this time most people assumed that a government could not share supreme power with smaller administrative units, such as provinces or states.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Issues

**B** Why did differences between the states cause problems of representation in the new government?



However, the Congress proposed a new type of government in a set of laws called the **Articles of Confederation**—one in which two levels of government shared fundamental powers. State governments were supreme in some matters, while the national government was supreme in other matters. The delegates called this new form of government a **confederation**, or alliance.

In true Enlightenment fashion, John Dickinson hoped that the new system of government would reflect the order and harmony found in nature.

### **A PERSONAL VOICE** JOHN DICKINSON

**“Let our government be like that of the solar system. Let the general government be like the sun and the states the planets, repelled yet attracted, and the whole moving regularly and harmoniously in their several orbits.”**

—from *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*

The Articles of Confederation gave the new national government power to declare war, make peace, and sign treaties. It could borrow money, set standards for coins and for weights and measures, establish a postal service, and deal with Native American peoples. The Articles, however, created no separate executive department to carry out and enforce the acts of Congress and no national court system to interpret the meaning of laws. **C**

#### **MAIN IDEA**

#### **Summarizing**

**C** What is a confederation?

**WESTERN LANDS: WHO GETS THEM?** By 1779, 12 states had agreed to accept the new government, but conflict over western lands delayed final approval for two more years. Some states had claims to lands west of the Appalachian Mountains. Maryland, which had no such claims, feared that states with land claims would expand and overpower smaller states. It refused to approve the Articles until all states turned over their western lands to the United States. Consequently, the landed states gave up their western claims, and with Maryland’s approval, the Articles of Confederation went into effect in March 1781.

**GOVERNING THE WESTERN LANDS** The Confederation Congress then faced the question of how to govern the public lands west of the Appalachians and north of the Ohio River that offered rich land for settlers. Congress passed the **Land Ordinance of 1785**, which established a plan for surveying the land. (See the Geography Spotlight on page 138.) In the **Northwest Ordinance of 1787**, Congress provided a procedure for dividing the land into territories. The Northwest Ordinance also set requirements for the admission of new states, which, however, seemed to overlook Native American land claims. There were three basic stages for becoming a state:

1. Congress would appoint a territorial governor and judges.
2. When a territory had 5,000 voting residents, the settlers could write a temporary constitution and elect their own government.
3. When the total population of a territory reached 60,000 free inhabitants, the settlers could write a state constitution, which had to be approved by Congress before it granted statehood.

The Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 became the Confederation’s greatest achievements. These laws established a blueprint for future growth of the nation. **D**

#### **MAIN IDEA**

#### **Contrasting**

**D** What was the basic difference between the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787?

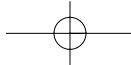
#### **ANOTHER**

### **PERSPECTIVE**

#### **JOHN BAPTIST DE COIGNE**

John Baptist de Coigne, a Kaskaskia chief, was among a group of Indians from the Northwest Territory who met with leaders of the U.S. government in 1793. He expressed the Native American view of the westward expansion of white settlers during the previous ten years:

“Order your people to be just. They are always trying to get our lands. They come on our lands, they hunt on them; kill our game and kill us. Keep them on one side of the line, and us on the other. Listen, my father, to what we say, and protect the nations of the Wabash and the Mississippi in their lands.”



## The Confederation Encounters Problems

After its success in dealing with the Northwest Territory, the Confederation encountered overwhelming problems in dealing with more immediate issues. These problems ranged from economic issues, such as taxation and the national debt, to political issues, such as the nature of Congressional representation. In addition to these domestic issues, there were also many foreign-relations problems that the Confederation was powerless to solve.

**POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS** The most serious problem was that the country under the Confederation lacked national unity. Each state functioned independently by pursuing its own interests rather than those of the nation as a whole. In addition, the Confederation didn't recognize the differences in population among the states. Each state, regardless of its population, had only one vote in Congress. Thus, the political power of Georgia, with a population of 23,375 in 1770, was equal to that of Massachusetts, with a population of 235,308. Furthermore, the Articles could not be amended without the consent of every state; a single state could stall the amendment process. Therefore, changes in government were difficult to achieve.

The most serious economic problem was the huge debt that the Congress had amassed during the Revolutionary War. The war had cost the nation \$190 million—a huge amount of money in those days. The Continental Congress had borrowed from foreign countries and had printed its own paper money. After the war, Continental currency became worthless.

Lacking the power to tax, the Congress requested the states' approval to impose a tariff, or tax on imported goods. It planned to use the revenue to repay foreign loans. However, one state, Rhode Island, rejected the proposed tax, so it was not adopted. Unable to impose taxes, the Confederation Congress also had no control over interstate or foreign trade. **E**

**BORROWERS VERSUS LENDERS** Another problem caused by the debt from the Revolution was the struggle between creditors (lenders of money) and debtors (borrowers of money). After the war, wealthy people who had lent money to the states favored high taxes so that the states would be able to pay them back. However, high taxes sent many farmers into debt. When a creditor sued a farmer in court for repayment and won the case, the government seized the farmer's land and animals and sold them at auction.

Debtors and creditors also disagreed over the usefulness of paper money. Debtors wanted to increase the supply of money to lessen its value and enable them to pay off their debts with cheap currency. Creditors, in contrast, wanted to keep the supply of money low so that it would keep its full value. Both groups had much to lose.

**FOREIGN-RELATIONS PROBLEMS** The lack of support from states for national concerns led to foreign-relations problems for the Congress. First, since the United States could not repay its debts to British merchants and would not compensate Loyalists for property losses suffered during the Revolutionary War, Britain refused to evacuate its military forts on the Great Lakes. Furthermore, Spain's presence on the borders of the United States posed another threat to westward expansion. In 1784, Spain closed the Mississippi River to American navigation. This action deprived Western farmers of a means of shipping their crops to Eastern markets through New Orleans. Though Northerners were willing to give up navigation rights on the Mississippi in exchange for more profitable trade concessions, Westerners and Southerners insisted on access to the Mississippi. However, Congress was too weak to resolve either of these challenges by Spain and Britain.

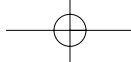
### MAIN IDEA

#### Identifying Problems

**E** What weakness in the Confederation was highlighted by the actions of Rhode Island?

#### Background

See *inflation* on page R42 in the Economics Handbook.



### Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation

- Congress could not enact and collect taxes.
- Congress could not regulate interstate or foreign trade.
- Regardless of population, each state had only one vote in Congress.
- Two-thirds majority—9 out of 13 states needed to agree to pass any law.
- Articles could be amended only if all states approved.
- There was no executive branch to enforce the laws of Congress.
- There was no national court system to settle legal disputes.
- There were 13 separate states that lacked national unity.

**SKILLBUILDER** *Interpreting Charts*

1. How many states' votes were needed to approve changes in the Articles of Confederation?
2. Why did the listed weaknesses lead to an ineffective government?

The problems the Congress encountered in dealing with foreign nations revealed the basic weaknesses of the Confederation government. Americans' fear of giving the national government too much power had resulted in a government that lacked sufficient power to deal with the nation's problems. The forthcoming Constitutional Convention would change all of this.

1

ASSESSMENT

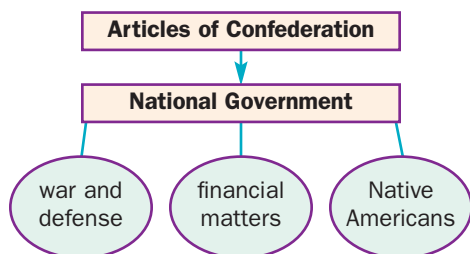
**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

|   |  |  |   |
|---|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>republic</li> <li>republicanism</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Articles of Confederation</li> <li>confederation</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Land Ordinance of 1785</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Northwest Ordinance of 1787</li> </ul> |
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**MAIN IDEA**

**2. TAKING NOTES**

In a diagram like the one below, describe the powers given to the national government by the Articles of Confederation



What were the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation?

**CRITICAL THINKING**

**3. ANALYZING ISSUES**

Why were the states afraid of centralized authority and a strong national government?

**4. IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS**

What was the main problem with the system of representation by state (rather than by population) that was adopted by the Confederation?

**5. HYPOTHESIZING**

Do you think that the United States would have become a world power if the Articles of Confederation had remained the basis of government? Explain the reasons for your opinion.

**Think About:**

- the power that the Articles gave the states
- foreign affairs and the Confederation Congress
- the Confederation Congress's taxation powers