

Understanding the Articles of Confederation

What were the Articles of Confederation?

Remember when the American colonies became the United States of America? That was on July 4, 1776. Since they no longer were under the control of the British government, the Americans needed to organize their own government. There were many different ways this could have been done. They could have chosen someone to be the King, or someone could have possibly tried to become the dictator. But that isn't what the American people wanted. They wanted the kind of government that they could have a voice in.

They wanted to create a democracy! But the rules for how the democracy would work had to be written down. The rules they came up with were written on a document called The Articles of Confederation.

The United States of America was governed under the Articles of Confederation for over 10 years. After the Revolutionary War, it became obvious that the rules they had written in the Articles were not working. Under the Articles each state was almost like its own country. The Articles didn't provide for a strong central government...and remember that the states were jealous of each other and found it hard to cooperate with one another. They only looked out for their own state's best interest.

What were the rules of government under the Articles of Confederation?

1. There is to be only one branch of central government - Congress is that branch.
2. Congress will be made of representatives from each of the 13 states.
3. In law-making, each state gets one vote.
4. For a law to be made, 9 states must vote "yes".
5. In order to change (amend) these rules, all 13 states must agree.

A Situation faced by Congress:

During the Revolutionary War, the Americans were fighting for their survival! If they didn't defeat the British, they would never be free.

Now the Congress must make a major decision in helping the war cause. It seems that the continental Army is losing a lot of battles because the transportation system is so poor. There are no roads that connect the New England, Middle and Southern states. One must quickly be built to help transport soldiers and supplies.

The Congressman from Virginia proposes that a road be built to connect the states. The proposed road is drawn in on your map (pg. 1). The Congressman proposes that each state should pay equally in the building of the road, that is, each state pays 1/13th of the cost.

Answer the following questions on another sheet of paper.

1. How do you think the delegates from Maryland and New Hampshire would vote? Why?
2. How do you think the delegates from Massachusetts, Connecticut, Delaware, Rhode Island and New Jersey would vote? Why?
3. Why might the delegates from Virginia, New York and Pennsylvania vote yes?
4. Under the Articles of Confederation, how many states must vote yes for this proposal to become a law?
5. Do you think this bill* will become a law?
6. Why didn't the government succeed under the Articles of Confederation?

* A bill is a proposed law.

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