

Articles of Confederation

DIRECTIONS: Read the questions on each page. As you read the paragraph underline the sentence(s) that answers each question. One line for question 1, two lines for question 2 , 3 lines for question 3. Start the number of lines over on each page (one line for question 5, etc.). Answer each question in a complete sentence.

On July 4, 1776 the Declaration of Independence officially declared the British colonies free and independent of British rule. However, the newly formed United State of America was still fighting an intense war against the British, and needed to establish a government that would guide the states to stability and success.

The Continental Congress began to draft a constitution, which is a document that sets out laws, principles, organization, and processes of a government. Drafting the constitution was a challenge for the Continental Congress. Many states were apprehensive to give too much power to a national government. They feared that by creating a strong national government, they would be simply replacing the former tyranny of British rule with a new oppressive government. In addition, many states remained loyal to their states, and not the nation. States did not want to give up their individual power to a national government. This notion was previously illustrated with the rejection of Benjamin Franklin's Albany Plan of Union. Therefore, because all thirteen states needed to approve the constitution for ratification (approval), the Continental Congress created the Articles of Confederation, which established a loose alliance between the thirteen states. It was officially ratified in 1781.

1. What is a constitution?
2. Identify two reasons why creating a national government was difficult for the Continental Congress.
3. What was the name of the first national government that established a loose alliance between the thirteen states?

Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress was given the power to declare war, make peace, and make treaties. This was very important considering the United States was still fighting the American Revolution against Great Britain for the first few years under the new government. With this power, the Congress was able to negotiate and finalize the Treaty of Paris in 1783, which officially ended the American Revolution. In addition, Congress was also able to coin and borrow money, create post offices, and create an army and navy.

4. Name three powers granted to Congress under the Articles of Confederation?

Among the accomplishments under the Articles of Confederation was creating a process for admitting new states. After the American Revolution, the territory of the United States expanded west. Therefore, Congress passed the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance in 1787, which set up a system for settling in the newly acquired Northwest Territory. This allowed Americans to move into the new territory, but maintain rights and protection from the government. Also, it provided guidelines for establishing new states. Once a territory had a population of 60,000 free settlers, it could ask Congress to be admitted as a new state. States such as Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin were created from the Northwest Territory.



5. Describe an accomplishment under the Articles of Confederation.

Because of the states' unwillingness to create a strong national government, the Articles of Confederation were made very weak. The national government had very limited powers. Under the Articles of Confederation Congress could not tax. Without the ability to collect taxes, Congress was unable to pay debts from the American Revolution. In order to solve the problem, Congress utilized their power of printing paper currency, or money. However, the Continental dollar had little value and the states continued to print their own, individual state currency instead of using the national currency. In addition, because they could not tax, Congress was unable to pay the salaries of soldiers of the Continental Army who fought in the American Revolution. In 1783, Congress was actually chased out of Philadelphia by the Continental Army.

Congress also did not have control of trade, both domestic and international. Many states refused to accept the money of other states, because they disagreed on the value of state money. Some states felt as if their money was more valuable than other states. This created confusion and tension between the states, and hurt trade and businesses.

6. Name two powers denied to Congress under the Articles of Confederation.

7. What problems occurred because Congress could not collect taxes under the Articles of Confederation?

Moreover, because Americans feared the return of tyrant ruler, they did not create an executive, or one person who was in charge of the government, to carry out any laws passed by Congress. Passing laws by Congress was a difficult task as it was. They needed nine out of thirteen states to agree, each state having only one vote. Many states viewed the voting as unfair. Nevertheless, laws that were passed were not carried out. Because there was no executive under the Articles of Confederation, there was no one to enforce states to follow the laws. Most states ignored laws passed by the national government, and followed laws that were passed by their state governments. This created conflict between states and with foreign countries. Some countries began to take advantage of the weaknesses of the United States and lack of enforcement, including Great Britain. Ignoring the Treaty of Paris, Great Britain refused to withdraw troops stationed in the Ohio River Valley.

8. Why didn't Americans create an executive branch in the Articles of Confederation?

9. Why was it difficult for laws to be passed by Congress?

10. Why were states able to ignore laws passed by Congress?

The weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation were ultimately exposed in 1786 during Shays' Rebellion. As a result of the American Revolution, the United States was in an economic depression. Businesses were failing, unemployment rates were high, and people had less money. Among the people most hurt by the depression were farmers. During the war, there was a high demand for farm products, but after the war, the demand plummeted. Many farmers could not pay off loans they had taken when their businesses were doing well, and courts began to seize farms. In some cases, farmers were jailed until they could pay back the money. This created a lot of anger and resentment among farmers. Among those angered was Daniel Shays, a Massachusetts farmer and former member of the Continental Army. He organized an uprising of farmers in Massachusetts that attacked courthouses and prevented states from seizing farms. Eventually, Massachusetts sent out their militia to suppress the uprising.

Nevertheless, Shays' Rebellion proved that the Articles of Confederation were not effective. In anticipation of another crisis, leaders from several states called a meeting to revise and strengthen the Articles of Confederation. They met in Philadelphia in May of 1787 at the Constitutional Convention. Although their initial intentions were to revise the Articles of Confederation, they ultimately created a new and stronger national government: the United States Constitution.

11. What event led state leaders to believe the Articles of Confederation were too weak?

12. As a result of Shays' Rebellion, what did state leaders do?