A More Perfect Union

Lesson 1 The Articles of Confederation

ESSENTIAL QUESTION
Why do people form governments?

Terms to Know
bicameral having two separate lawmaking chambers
constitutional republic a government in which citizens rule through elected representatives, according to a plan of government
ordinance a law
depreciate to fall in value

Where in the world?

When did it happen?

1780

1781 Maryland ratifies the Articles of Confederation, and it becomes "governing document"

1785

1785 Congress passes Land Ordinance of 1785

1786 A rebellion begins in Massachusetts led by Daniel Shays

1787 Shays's Rebellion is suppressed

1788 The U.S. Constitution is ratified

1787 Congress approves meeting in Philadelphia on May 14, 1787, to revise the Articles of Confederation

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The Making of a Republic

Guiding Question What kind of government was created by the Articles of Confederation?

In May 1776, the Continental Congress asked each state to set up a government. Each state adopted a constitution. A constitution is a plan of government.

Americans did not want to give too much power to one ruler or one branch of government. State constitutions solved that problem. They split the power between the governor and legislature. The governor had less power than the legislature. Most states set up two-house, or bicameral, legislatures. This divided the power even more.

Americans had to set up a national government, too. They wanted a constitutional republic. In a constitutional republic, citizens elect people to represent them and make decisions based on what they want. Representatives govern according to a written constitution.

Most Americans felt the central government should have only the power to fight wars and to deal with other countries. In 1776 the Second Continental Congress had a group of people make a plan for a central government. This group created the Articles of Confederation. The Articles called for a weak central government. They also let states keep most of their powers. Congress accepted the Articles of Confederation in November, 1777.

The Articles of Confederation gave Congress certain powers, but there were important powers that Congress did not have. For example, if Congress needed to raise money or an army, it had to ask the states. The states did not have to say yes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Powers of Congress Under The Articles of Confederation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Congress had these powers:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manage foreign affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>keep up armed forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>borrow money</td>
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<tr>
<td>issue money</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Congress did NOT have these powers:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>control trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>force citizens to join army</td>
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<tr>
<td>impose taxes</td>
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The central government did not have a chief executive such as a president or a governor. A chief executive leads the government and carries out the laws.
All states had to approve the Articles of Confederation. Each state had one vote. But disputes about control of land west of the Appalachian Mountains delayed approval. Seven states claimed western lands. Maryland would not approve the Articles until other states gave up claims to this land. The states finally agreed and approved the Articles. On March 1, 1781, the Articles of Confederation became the government of the United States of America.

The new national government was weak. Congress could not pass a law unless 9 states voted for it. Congress also did not have the power to change the Articles of Confederation. Any plan to change the Articles needed to be approved by all 13 states. This weakness made it difficult for the government to handle the nation’s problems.

Even so, America's government did some important things. America made a peace treaty with Britain. It expanded foreign trade. It set up plans for people to settle lands to the west.

Policies for Western Lands

Guiding Question What process allowed new states to join the union?

The Articles of Confederation did not tell how to add new states. Settlers were already living west of the Appalachian Mountains. This was outside the United States. Western settlers wanted to form new states and join the Union. Congress needed to give people a way to settle the Western lands and form new states.

In 1785, the Confederation Congress passed an ordinance, or law, about western lands. This law set up a way to divide and then sell the western lands. Land was divided into townships. Land in the township was divided into smaller sections. These sections were sold to settlers.

In 1787, the Northwest Ordinance created the Northwest Territory. This territory included lands north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River. The lands were divided into three to five smaller territories. A territory could apply to become a state when 60,000 people lived there. New states would have the same rights as the original 13 states. Settlers had a bill of rights. They had freedom of religion and trial by jury. The bill of rights said there could be no slavery in the Northwest Territory.

The Land Act of 1800 was passed to make it easier for people to buy land in the Northwest Territory. It allowed people to pay for the land over a period of four years.
Problems at Home and Abroad

Guiding Question *In what ways was the Confederation government weak?*

The national government had problems paying its bills. By 1781, American dollars, called Continentals, had **depreciated**, or lost value. They were worth almost nothing. The War for Independence left the Continental Congress with a large debt. Congress did not have the power to raise taxes to pay these debts.

In 1781, Congress created a department of finance, led by Robert Morris. Morris made a plan to charge a 5 percent tax on goods brought in from other countries to help pay the debts. All 13 states had to approve Morris' plan for it to pass, but Rhode Island voted no. The plan did not pass.

The new government faced other problems. The British did not let Americans trade in the West Indies and other British areas. British soldiers were still in several important forts in the Great Lakes region.

The American government had problems with Spain, too. Spain controlled Florida and lands west of the Mississippi River. Spain wanted to stop America's growth in Spanish territory. In 1784, Spain closed the lower Mississippi River to American shipping. Western settlers could no longer use the river for trade.

It became clear that the Confederation was not able to deal with major problems. Americans came to agree that their new country needed a stronger government.

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Writing

Check for Understanding

1. **Expository** What kind of government was created by the Articles of Confederation?

2. **Descriptive** Describe three problems the Confederation government faced in its relations with other countries.

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Analyzing

8. Why did Robert Morris's plan to pay the country's war debts fail?

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Reading Progress Check

9. Why did the national government under the Articles of Confederation have difficulty raising money?