



The Founding: From Colonies to the United States: SS.7.CG.1.7
Articles of Confederation
READING

Name: _____

Date: _____



SS.7.CG.1.7 Benchmark Clarification: Students will identify the weaknesses of the government under the Articles of Confederation (i.e., Congress had no power to tax, to regulate trade or to enforce its laws; the national government lacked a national court system [judicial branch] and central leadership [executive branch]; no national armed forces; and changes to the Articles required unanimous consent of the 13 states).

After declaring independence from Great Britain, the colonists needed to create a system of government for the new, independent nation. The first government of the United States was a **confederation** called the **Articles of Confederation**.

The Articles of Confederation was a direct response to the long list of grievances (complaints) against King George III, the king who had all the power over the colonies. While the colonists were under the rule of King George III a unitary system was in place. In a unitary system, one person controls the government.

The colonists created a confederal government to avoid a unitary system in the new nation. This confederation reflected the colonists' fear of a powerful national government. Under the confederal system, there were strict limits on the national government that were later viewed as weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation. Below is a list of these weaknesses:

Weakness of the National Government	What does this mean?
Congress had no power to tax	Congress could not collect money from the states to create and pay for an army and navy to defend the nation.
Congress had no power to regulate trade	Congress could not make laws about the types of goods entering the country. Also, the states had different trade policies.
Congress had no power to enforce its own laws	The laws that Congress passed had no real influence on the people because they were not being enforced. People and states could choose to ignore national laws.
The national government lacked a national court system	There was nothing set up in the national government to decide how the law would be interpreted. This means there was no real judicial branch.
The national government lacked strong leadership	There was no chief executive who could manage the national government. This means there was no real executive branch.

Amendments to the Articles of Confederation required unanimous consent of the 13 state legislatures	Changing the government was very difficult. If one state legislature did not like a proposed change, it could vote against the amendment and prevent it from being ratified.
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Because the Articles of Confederation created a decentralized (no central power) system of government, each state operated as an independent country in many ways. Each state was able to make trade agreements with other nations. Each state established its own military, and made laws that its residents were expected to follow. The states were not operating as one nation. It would have been easy for another country to attack the United States.

Adding to these concerns was **Shays's Rebellion** (1786-1787), an event in which 2000 Massachusetts farmers **revolted** in local courthouses to prevent the government from taking their farms. The government of Massachusetts was threatening to take the land from these farmers because they had not paid their **taxes** during the Revolutionary War, even though the government had previously told them they did not have to pay those taxes.

The national government took another look at the Articles of Confederation in response to Shays's Rebellion." In February 1787, five states sent representatives to meet in Maryland to discuss the crisis. They called for a meeting of representatives from all 13 states in Philadelphia to decide what to do about the Articles of Confederation. This meeting would later be known as the **Constitutional Convention**, where the U.S. Constitution was written to replace the Articles of Confederation.

At the Constitutional Convention, plans were introduced to determine how the national legislature would be structured under the new constitution. The **Virginia Plan** focused on giving legislative power to the large states while the **New Jersey Plan** focused on giving power to the small states.

The Virginia Plan would solve the large states' desire to elect more representatives to Congress than the small states. A **bicameral**, or two-house legislature based on population, was suggested. New Jersey disagreed and suggested a plan similar to the structure under the Articles of Confederation; a **unicameral**, or one-house Congress with equal representation for each state and one vote for each state. Edmund Randolph, Governor of Virginia, at the request of James Madison, presented the Connecticut Compromise. This plan suggested a bicameral legislature; one chamber based on **proportional representation**, the idea that the size of a state's population determines its representation in Congress, and one chamber based on **equal representation**, a single representative and a vote in Congress for each state despite the size of its population. Members of the convention agreed with this "**Great Compromise**" and adopted it as the structure of Congress under the U.S. Constitution.

amendment - a change to a constitution (e.g., Articles of Confederation, U.S. Constitution)

Articles of Confederation - the first constitution of the United States

confederation - a system of government where power is located with the independent states and there is little power in the central government; a confederation is also known as a confederal system

Constitutional Convention - a meeting in Philadelphia in 1787 where delegates decided to throw out the Articles of Confederation and draft the Constitution

enforce - to carry out effectively

regulate - to control, govern, or direct according to rule

revolt - to rise up against the authority of a ruler or government

Shays's Rebellion - an event when 2,000 Massachusetts farmers rebelled against land foreclosures and debt from the Revolutionary War

tax - money charged by a government for specific facilities or services