

The States Form a Confederation



The Declaration of Independence was the beginning of a new era in America. The states were quick to throw off their status as colonies and began writing their constitutions. Remembering royal controls and appointed governors, they relied now on their legislatures to rule. However, there was also a war to fight, so the role of the Second Continental Congress was continued. The states made it very clear that they were in charge and had no intention of giving up any more power than necessary.

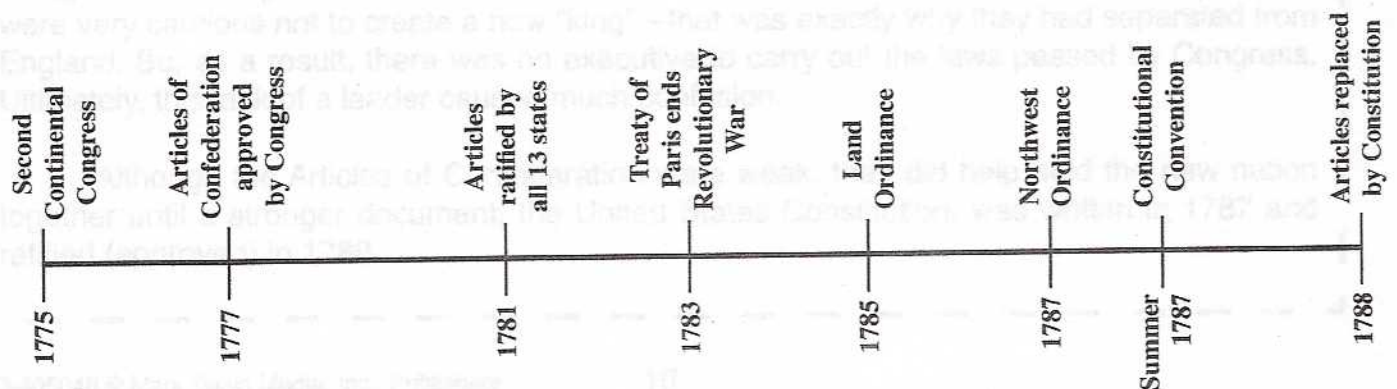
Congress had been like a committee called to meet one problem, but it continued to meet because new problems kept coming. If they were to be permanent, however, their purpose needed to be better defined. John Dickinson of Delaware chaired the committee that drafted the Articles of Confederation, which were approved by Congress in November 1777. Careful to avoid any hint they were going to take power from the states, the new union was called a “league of friendship.” Before the Articles could go into effect, all thirteen new states had to approve, and that was not easily done.

Small coastal states like Maryland fretted because other states had large land claims west of the mountains. Only if these states gave up their claims to western lands to Congress would they approve the Articles. In 1781, after western lands were turned over to Congress, Maryland gave approval.

The Articles gave Congress the power to declare war and peace, manage foreign affairs, maintain an army and navy, issue and borrow money, and control the Native Americans. Each state, no matter how large or small, got one vote. Members of Congress were chosen by the state legislature for one-year terms. Nine votes were required before any policy could be adopted, and thirteen votes were required before the Articles could be amended.

Many qualities necessary for a strong government were missing: (1) There was no president or executive at the head. (2) It had no power to tax; money was raised by begging it from the states and by borrowing. (3) State support was needed but not received. States, when asked for money, often declined. Sometimes states failed to appoint delegates, and many times, there was no quorum in Congress. (4) Members of Congress often did not take their responsibility seriously, and the public ignored them. (5) Congress had no power to enforce the peace treaty after it was signed. States did not return Loyalist property, and when English merchants tried to collect from American debtors, state judges found many reasons to rule in the debtors’ favor. (6) The lack of unified control in America made the threat of foreign involvement more likely. (7) Congress’s inability to pay the army’s back wages made the threat of a military takeover a possibility.

RESULTS: The Articles provided a temporary means for the states to work together through the Revolution, but a better approach was needed for the nation to survive. Two major pieces of legislation came out of the Confederation period. The Land Ordinance of 1785 provided a means for surveying western lands and dividing them into townships. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 provided a system for governing the Old Northwest and creating new states.



Key Details

The Articles of Confederation

In April 1775, the Revolutionary War began with the battles at Lexington and Concord between British troops and the local militia. In May 1775, delegates from the 13 colonies met in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for the **First Continental Congress**. Eight days later, the delegates approved the **Declaration of Independence**, announcing independence from Great Britain and the King. The declaration did not declare the 13 colonies were a country. Instead, colonies became separate countries called states with their own governments, courts, and laws.

First National Constitution

Dickinson

In 1777, the **Articles of Confederation** were written by John Dickerson. It became the first national constitution of the United States in March of 1781. This document created a "league of friendship" between the states. This loose friendship was enough to win the War of Independence and keep the states together as one country.

Powers of the National Government

The Articles of Confederation united the states, but without any threat to their power. The document gave each state as much independence as possible and limited the powers of the federal government. The federal government was a Congress made up of representatives from each state. Congress had the power to declare war, make peace, and make treaties.

Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation

Congress had no power to tax or enforce laws. There was no one person who was in charge of this new government. Because they feared the return of tyranny, the founding fathers were very cautious not to create a new "king"—that was exactly why they had separated from England. So, as a result, there was no executive to carry out the laws passed by Congress. Ultimately, this lack of a leader caused much confusion.

Although the Articles of Confederation were weak, they did help hold the new nation together until a stronger document, the United States Constitution, was written in 1787 and ratified (approved) in 1789.

