

The Organization of the New Governments and the Articles of Confederation

the Organization of the New Governments and The Articles of Confederation represent the initial steps taken by the United States to establish a framework for self-governance following independence, laying the foundation for the eventual creation of the more robust federal system outlined in the U.S. Constitution.

1. Organization of New Governments

While the Revolutionary War was being fought, leaders of the 13 colonies worked to change them into independently governed states, each with its own constitution (written plan of government). At the same time, the revolutionary Congress that originally met in Philadelphia tried to define the powers of a new central government for the nation that was coming into being.

1.1. State Governments

By 1777, ten of the former colonies had written new constitutions. Most of these documents were both written and adopted by the states' legislatures. In a few of the states (Maryland, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina), a proposed constitution was submitted to a vote of the people for ratification (approval). Each state constitution was the subject of heated debate between conservatives, who stressed the need for law and order, and liberals, who were most concerned about protecting individual rights and preventing future tyrannies. Although the various constitutions differed on specific points, they had the following features in common.

List of rights: Each state constitution began with a —bill or —declaration listing the basic rights and freedoms, such as a jury trial and freedom of religion, that belonged to all citizens by right and that state officials could not infringe (encroach on).

Separation of powers: With a few exceptions, the powers of state government were given to three separate branches: (1) legislative powers to an elected two-house legislature, (2) executive powers to an elected governor, and (3) judicial powers to a system of courts. The principle of separation of powers was intended to be a safeguard against tyranny—especially against the tyranny of an over powerful executive.

Voting: The right to vote was extended to all white males who owned some property. The property requirement, usually for a minimal amount of land or money, was based on the assumption that property-owners had a larger stake in government than did the poor and property less.

Office-holding: Those seeking elected office were usually held to a higher property qualification than the voters.

2. The Articles of Confederation

The American Revolutionary War and the Articles of Confederation are interconnected in the history of the United States. During the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), the American colonies fought for independence from Great Britain. After achieving independence, the former colonies needed to establish a new system of government. This need for unity among the newly created states led to the drafting of the Articles of Confederation, which represented the first constitutional agreement among the 13 former colonies that were now free American states.

The Articles of Confederation served as the written document that outlined the functions of the national government of the United States after independence. It established a weak central government, aiming to preserve the independence and sovereignty of the states. However, the limitations of this government, such as the inability to raise funds, regulate commerce effectively, and assemble delegates, became apparent over time. These weaknesses, coupled with events like Shays' Rebellion, highlighted the necessity for a stronger central government, leading to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 to address the deficiencies of the Articles of Confederation.

2.1. Drafting the Articles of Confederation

At Philadelphia in 1776, at the same time that Jefferson was writing the Declaration of Independence, John Dickinson drafted the first constitution for the United States as a nation. Congress modified Dickinson's plan to protect the powers of the individual states. The Articles of Confederation, as the document was called, was adopted by Congress in 1777 and Submitted to the states for ratification.

❖ Ratification

Ratification of the Articles was delayed by a dispute over the vast stretches of wilderness extending westward beyond the Alleghenies. Seaboard states like Rhode Island and Maryland insisted that such lands be placed under the jurisdiction of the new central government. When Virginia and New York finally agreed to give up their claims to western lands, the Articles were at last ratified in March 1781.

❖ Structure of government

The Articles established a central government that consisted of just one body, a congress. In this unicameral (one-house) legislature, each state was given one vote, with at least nine votes out of 13 required to pass important laws. To amend the Articles, a unanimous vote was required. A Committee of States, with one representative from each state, could make minor decisions when the full congress was not in session.

➤ Powers

The Articles gave the congress the power to wage war, make treaties, send diplomatic representatives, and borrow money. Certain important powers not given to the Congress were the power to regulate commerce or to collect taxes. (To finance any of its decisions, the congress had to rely upon taxes voted by each state.) Neither did the congress have any executive power to enforce its own laws.

➤ Accomplishments

Despite its weaknesses, the congress under the Articles did succeed in accomplishing the following:

- **Winning the war:** The U.S. government could claim some credit for the ultimate victory of Washington's army and for negotiating favorable terms in the treaty of peace with Britain.
- **Land Ordinance of 1785:** Congress established a policy for surveying and selling the western lands. The policy provided for setting aside one section of land in each township for public education.
- **Northwest Ordinance of 1787:** For the large territory lying between the Great Lakes and the Ohio River, the congress passed an ordinance (law) that set the rules for creating new states. The Northwest Ordinance: granted limited self-government to the developing territory and prohibited slavery in the region.

2.2. Problems with the Articles

The 13 states intended the central government to be weak—and it was. Making such a government work presented three kinds of problems:

2.1. Financial: Most war debts were unpaid. Individual states as well as the congress issued worthless paper money. The underlying problem was that the congress had no taxing power and could only request that the states donate money for national needs.

2.2. Foreign: European nations had little respect for a new nation that could neither pay its debts nor take effective and united action in a crisis. Britain and Spain threatened to take advantage of U.S. weakness by expanding their interests in the western lands soon after the war ended.

2.3. Domestic: In the summer of 1786, Captain Daniel Shays, a Massachusetts farmer and Revolutionary War veteran, led other farmers in an uprising against high state taxes, imprisonment for debt, and lack of paper money. The rebel farmers stopped the collection of taxes and forced the closing of debtors' courts. In January 1787, when Shays and his followers attempted to seize weapons from the Springfield armory, the state militia of

Massachusetts broke Shays' Rebellion.