**The Articles of Confederation**

The Articles of Confederation was written in 1776 and finally ratified, or approved, by the original thirteen states in 1781. Maryland was the last state to ratify the document in 1781. The confederation was the first government of the newly formed United States. A confederation is a government system where power is located with the independent states and there is little power in the central government. The desire for a confederation came from the colonists’ experience under King George III from England. They wanted to create a system that wouldn’t allow for unfair taxing or limiting individual rights.

Under the Articles of Confederation, most power was with the states. The articles stated that each colony was to act as an independent state, and that each state had the right to pass laws within their borders. The articles also established a weak national legislature to oversee interactions between the states.

Under the Articles of Confederation, states maintained their freedom and independence. As a result, states functioned in many ways as independent countries. For example, several states negotiated their own trade agreements with other countries, while other states established their own militaries.

With the states having the majority of government power, the central government had no control over the states’ actions and people began to fear that this system of government was not working because the national government was too weak. The Congress did not have the power to tax, so it could not pay for the army and navy needed to defend the nation. It also couldn’t regulate the trade agreements states were making with other countries. The Congress could also not enforce any laws they passed because there was no central leadership to make sure that laws were being enforced in each state or a central judicial system to interpret laws or settle disputes between states. Finally, if any changes were to be made to the Articles of Confederation, unanimous approval from all 13 states was required. This made it difficult to make any changes to the articles. As a result, the lack of powers held by the weak national Congress combined with each state’s independent actions, raised concerns that the Articles of Confederation were not designed in a way to protect the new nation.

By 1786 the economy of the United States was struggling due to debt, or money owed, from the Revolutionary War and because states were arguing over boundary lines and taxes. This economic situation impacted individual states and also individual citizens, especially farmers and merchants. These circumstances led to Shays’s Rebellion, a revolt by 2,000 western Massachusetts farmers who marched on county courthouses to prevent land foreclosures. A foreclosure is when a bank or other entity takes back property when taxes or debts are not paid. The farmers’ land was threatened with foreclosure because they were promised that they did not have to pay taxes and other debts on their land during the Revolutionary War. These promises were not kept and this led the farmers to revolt. Congress did not respond because it was too weak and did not have its own army. The Massachusetts militia finally ended the rebellion, but the situation made it clear that the national government did not have the ability to maintain order in this new nation. After Shays’s Rebellion, Alexander Hamilton of New York organized a meeting in Philadelphia in 1787. This meeting, called the Constitutional Convention, would eventually throw out the Articles of Confederation and draft the Constitution.

The freedom that the American Revolution sought to preserve proved to create a government under the Articles of Confederation that could not keep law and order. However, the experience with the Articles of Confederation led to the writing of the Constitution in 1787.

Adapted from: Florida Joint Center for Citizenship, Elementary Civics Module for SS.5.C.1.4, #2, <http://www.ushistory.org/gov/2b.asp> and <http://www.kidspast.com/world-history/0368-articles-of-confederation.php>.

**Understanding the Articles of Confederation**

Directions: While you read, mark text that helps you answer the following guiding questions. After reading, cite the specific text-based evidence that helps you answer each question. Then, write you answers in complete sentences and in your own words.

**What is the Articles of Confederation?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Evidence from Text |  |
| Answer in complete sentences |  |

**What is a confederation?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Evidence from Text |  |
| Answer in complete sentences |  |

**What were the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Evidence from Text |  |
| Answer in complete sentences |  |

**What does the term debt mean? What does debt have to do with Shays’s Rebellion?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Evidence from Text |  |
| Answer in complete sentences |  |

**How did Shays’s Rebellion lead to the Constitutional Convention?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Evidence from Text |  |
| Answer in complete sentences |  |

**What happened at the Constitutional Convention?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Evidence from Text |  |
| Answer in complete sentences |  |

**Excerpts of the U.S. Constitution**

Directions: Below are six excerpts from the U.S. Constitution. In your small groups, summarize the excerpts in your own words. Then, compare the excerpt to the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation and determine which weakness is related to the excerpt.

|  |
| --- |
| Article 1, Section 8: The Congress shall have Power To lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts, and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defense and general Welfare of the Unites States; but all Duties, Imposts and Excises shall be uniform throughout the United States. |
|  |

|  |
| --- |
| Article 1, Section 8: The Congress shall have Power… To regulate Commerce among foreign Nations, and among the several States  |
|  |

|  |
| --- |
| Article II, Section 3:…he shall take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed… |
|  |

|  |
| --- |
| Article III, Section 1: The judicial Power of the United States, shall be vested in one supreme Court, and in such inferior Courts as the Congress may from time to time ordain and establish.  |
|  |

|  |
| --- |
| Article II, Section 1: The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America.  |
|  |

|  |
| --- |
| Article V: The Congress, whenever two thirds of both Houses shall deem it necessary, shall propose Amendments to this Constitution**…** |
|  |