

The Articles of Confederation

After writing the Declaration of Independence, the Second Continental Congress set out to write a new plan of government. They called this plan the Articles of Confederation and hoped that it would bring unity and stability to the newly formed nation. Unfortunately, the Articles of Confederation had some basic weaknesses. Let's investigate!!

The Articles of Confederation was the first constitutional agreement made between the original 13 states. A constitution is a plan of government or the rules of a country. It was written to establish the powers of the new national government. Because of their past problems with the British king and his Parliament, the members of the Second Continental Congress were not in favor of setting up another strong central government that might ignore the needs of the people. Instead, the Articles established a weak national government and a "firm league of friendship" between 13 sovereign states.

Although the new central government was given some powers, the weaknesses of the Articles soon became obvious. Under the Articles the national government had a legislative, or lawmaking branch, consisting of a Congress. No executive or judicial branches were established. However, the states elected representatives to serve in the Congress, and each state, regardless of its size, had one vote. The Congress could conduct foreign affairs, declare war and peace, and maintain an army and navy to defend the nation, but that is where its authority ended.

The new national government had no power to tax and so depended on the charity of the states to run the government and repay \$50 million dollars in war debts. As a result, little money was collected, and soldiers and suppliers who had supported the colonial war effort were not paid. In addition, the central government was not given the power to regulate commerce, or business, between the states. States began to compete and charge each other tariffs on goods that crossed state lines. A tariff is a type of tax that makes goods more expensive to buy. Hey, didn't the colonists just complain about that kind of thing?

Another weakness in the Articles was in the area of currency. Although the central government was given the power to coin money, it could not prevent the states from coining their own money. This resulted in each state printing its own paper bills. Before long a confusing variety of paper bills of different values began to circulate throughout the new nation. As more and more paper money was made, it began to lose its value and in many cases became worthless.