132 **CHAPTER 5**

MAIN IDEA Terms & Names

One American's Story

# Experimenting with

# Confederation

•republic

•republicanism

•Articles of

Confederation

•confederation

•Land Ordinance

of 1785

•Northwest

Ordinance of

1787

Americans adopted the

Articles of Confederation but

found the new government

too weak to solve the

nation’s problems.

The reaction to the weak

Articles of Confederation led to

a stronger central government

that has continued to expand

its power.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Although John Dickinson had once opposed American

independence, he later worked hard to help create a

government for the new United States. In 1779 John

Dickinson returned to the Continental Congress as a

delegate from Delaware. At that time he explained the

principles that guided his political decisions.

**A PERSONAL VOICE** JOHN DICKINSON

***“*** Two rules I have laid down for myself throughout this

contest . . . first, on all occasions where I am called

upon, as a trustee for my countrymen, to deliberate on

questions important to their happiness, disdaining all

personal advantages to be derived from a suppression

of my real sentiments . . . openly to avow [declare]

them; and, secondly, . . . whenever the public resolutions

are taken, to regard them though opposite to my

opinion, as sacred . . . and to join in supporting them

as earnestly as if my voice had been given for them. ***”***

*—*quoted in *The Life and Times of John Dickinson, 1732–1808*

Dickinson’s two rules became guiding principles for

the leaders who faced the formidable task of starting a

new nation.

Americans Debate Republicanism

The task of creating a new government posed a great challenge. Among many

other issues, the relationship between the new states and the national government

was difficult to define. The debate over the nature of the new government

of the United States would consume the political energies of the new nation.

John Dickinson

p0132-137aspe-0205s1 10/16/02 3:54 PM Page 132

A

COLONIES BECOME STATES British settlers in North

America had founded not one colony but many, each with

its own governor, council, and colonial assembly. This system

of distinct, self-governing colonies encouraged people

to think of the colony as the primary political unit. Because

of this, most people’s allegiance was to the colony in which

they lived. The Revolutionary War gave the colonies a common

goal, but as these colonies became states, they

remained reluctant to unite under a strong central government.

The challenge was to develop a system of government

that balanced the interests of the several states

with those of the nation.

UNITY THROUGH A REPUBLIC Eighteenth-century

Americans believed that a democracy, or government

directly by the people, placed too much power in the hands

of the uneducated masses. Therefore, they favored a

**republic**—a government in which citizens rule through

their elected representatives. However, **republicanism,**

the idea that governments should be based on the consent

of the people (which should not be confused with the

Republicanism of the modern-day political party), meant

different things to different Americans.

Some, like John Dickinson, believed that a republic

required a virtuous people. The new government could

only succeed, they argued, if people placed the good of the

nation above their personal interests.

Other Americans, influenced by the writings of the

philosopher and economist Adam Smith, believed that a

republic would benefit from self-interest. They asserted that

if a government allowed independent citizens to pursue

their own economic and political interests, the whole nation

would benefit.

STATE CONSTITUTIONS As the states created their own

constitutions, they wrestled with how to put republican

ideals into practice. Many state constitutions shared certain

similarities. They limited the powers of government leaders.

They guaranteed specific rights for citizens, including

freedom of speech, religion, and the press. In general, state

constitutions emphasized liberty rather than equality and

reflected a fear of centralized authority.

At the same time, state constitutions differed widely in

granting the right to vote. Although the new states were

more democratic than any western nation at this time, it was still only a very limited

democracy by modern standards. African Americans were generally not

allowed to vote. Some states granted voting rights to all white males. Other states,

like Maryland, continued to make property ownership a requirement for voting.

Despite the more active political role that women had played during the

Revolution, they were still denied the right to vote in most states. However, New

Jersey gave voting rights to all free property owners but neglected to specify

males. Consequently, some New Jersey women gained the right to vote—at least

until 1807, when this right was revoked.

POLITICAL PRECEDENTS In a world where most nations were still governed

by kings, there were few political systems that could serve as models for the new

republic. The nation’s founders searched history for political precedents for the

***Shaping a New Nation*** 133

REPUBLICAN MOTHERHOOD

An important issue in the early

years of the nation was the role

that women should play in the

republic. In the years before and

during the Revolutionary War,

many women became politically

active, organizing boycotts of

British goods and helping raise

money for the army. This involvement

in public affairs was an

important departure for women,

who had traditionally been confined

to the private sphere of

family life.

After the Revolution, as the

nation readjusted to peace, the

new ideal of republican motherhood

helped channel women’s

newfound political awareness and

activism back into the home.

Women were expected to raise

the next generation of patriots by

instilling democratic values in

their children.

**SPOTLIGHT**

HIISTTORIICALL

MAIN IDEA

A

**Developing**

**Historical**

**Perspective**

What relics of

the colonial period

survived in the

new system of

government?

**Background**

In *An Inquiry into*

*the Nature and*

*Causes of the*

*Wealth of Nations*,

Adam Smith

(1723–1790)

argued that

social order and

progress were

the natural result

of individualism

and self-interest.

***A. Answer*** The

system of distinct

self-governing

colonies

survived in the

form of distinct,

self-governing

states.

p0132-137aspe-0205s1 10/16/02 3:54 PM Page 133

B

134 **CHAPTER 5**

new government. In the previous century, the English had established a shortlived

republic after the execution of King Charles I. During the Middle Ages,

Italian cities such as Florence, Pisa, Genoa, and Venice had become self-governing

city-states. Swiss communities also had resisted royal control, forming alliances

that developed into the Swiss Confederation. In ancient times, republics and various

democratic systems had existed in Greece and in Rome. However, none of these

models could be adapted easily to the political situation of the new United States,

with its need to balance the concerns of state and national governments.

The Continental Congress Debates

While the states developed their individual constitutions, the Continental Congress

tried to draft one for the states as a whole. However, there was much disagreement over

the role of the national government. The delegates had to answer three basic questions.

REPRESENTATION BY POPULATION OR BY STATE? Although the states were

equal as political entities, they were unequal in size, wealth, and population.

These differences posed a serious dilemma. Should delegates to a new government

represent people or states? Should each state elect the same number of

representatives regardless of its population? Or should states with large populations

have more representatives than states with small populations?

For the time being, the members of the Continental Congress saw themselves

as representing independent states. As a result, they made the decision that each

state would have one vote regardless of population.

SUPREME POWER: CAN IT BE DIVIDED? Until this time most people

assumed that a government could not share supreme power with smaller administrative

units, such as provinces or states.

MAIN IDEA

B

**Analyzing**

**Issues**

Why did

differences

between the

states cause

problems of

representation

in the new

government?

***B. Answer***

People couldn’t

decide whether

delegates to a

new government

should

represent a

state’s population

or each

state should

send the same

number of representatives.

THE ENGLISH COMMONWEALTH

In the mid-17th century the English parliament executed

the king and established a republic, which lasted from

1649 to 1660. This republic, called the Commonwealth

and Protectorate, was controlled first by Oliver Cromwell

and later by his son Richard. The Commonwealth was

continually threatened by anarchy and bad leadership

and did not long survive Cromwell’s death. The failure

of the English Commonwealth must have haunted

American political leaders as they planned the government

of their republic.

Engraving of the ancient Roman Senate ▼

The execution of King Charles I

▼

ATHENS AND ROME

In the 18th century, American leaders revered the political

achievements of ancient Athens and Rome. The Greek city

of Athens was acknowledged as the birthplace of democracy,

while the early Romans were admired for overthrowing

monarchy and establishing a republic. However, Greek

democracy, like the democracy of the New England town

meeting, was workable only at a local level. It was the

democracy of a city, not of a huge nation. Neither Greek

democracy nor the Roman republic had endured.

Political Precedents

p0132-137aspe-0205s1 10/16/02 3:54 PM Page 134

D

C

However, the Congress proposed a new type of government in a set of laws

called the **Articles of Confederation**—one in which two levels of government

shared fundamental powers. State governments were supreme in some matters,

while the national government was supreme in other matters. The delegates

called this new form of government a **confederation,** or alliance.

In true Enlightenment fashion, John Dickinson hoped that the new system

of government would reflect the order and harmony found in nature.

**A PERSONAL VOICE** JOHN DICKINSON

***“*** Let our government be like that of the solar system. Let the general government

be like the sun and the states the planets, repelled yet attracted, and the whole

moving regularly and harmoniously in their several orbits.***”***

*—*from *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*

The Articles of Confederation gave the new national government power to

declare war, make peace, and sign treaties. It could borrow money, set standards

for coins and for weights and measures, establish a postal service, and deal with

Native American peoples. The Articles, however, created no separate executive

department to carry out and enforce the acts of Congress and no national court

system to interpret the meaning of laws.

WESTERN LANDS: WHO GETS THEM? By 1779, 12 states had agreed to accept

the new government, but conflict over western lands delayed final approval for

two more years. Some states had claims to lands west of the Appalachian

Mountains. Maryland, which had no such claims, feared that states with land

claims would expand and overpower smaller states. It refused to approve the

Articles until all states turned over their western lands to the United States.

Consequently, the landed states gave up their western claims, and with Maryland’s

approval, the Articles of Confederation went into effect in March 1781.

GOVERNING THE WESTERN LANDS The Confederation Congress then faced

the question of how to govern the public lands west of the

Appalachians and north of the Ohio River that offered rich

land for settlers. Congress passed the **Land Ordinance of**

**1785,** which established a plan for surveying the land. (See

the Geography Spotlight on page 138.) In the **Northwest**

**Ordinance of 1787,** Congress provided a procedure for

dividing the land into territories. The Northwest Ordinance

also set requirements for the admission of new states, which,

however, seemed to overlook Native American land claims.

There were three basic stages for becoming a state:

**1.** Congress would appoint a territorial governor and

judges.

**2.** When a territory had 5,000 voting residents, the settlers

could write a temporary constitution and elect their

own government.

**3.** When the total population of a territory reached 60,000

free inhabitants, the settlers could write a state constitution,

which had to be approved by Congress before it

granted statehood.

The Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest

Ordinance of 1787 became the Confederation’s greatest

achievements. These laws established a blueprint for future

growth of the nation.

***Shaping a New Nation*** 135

ANOTHER

**PERSPECTIVE**

JOHN BAPTIST DE COIGNE

John Baptist de Coigne, a

Kaskaskia chief, was among a

group of Indians from the

Northwest Territory who met with

leaders of the U.S. government in

1793. He expressed the Native

American view of the westward

expansion of white settlers during

the previous ten years:

“Order your people to be just.

They are always trying to get

our lands. They come on our

lands, they hunt on them; kill

our game and kill us. Keep

them on one side of the line,

and us on the other. Listen,

my father, to what we say,

and protect the nations of the

Wabash and the Mississippi

in their lands.”

MAIN IDEA

C

**Summarizing**

What is a

confederation?

MAIN IDEA

D

**Contrasting**

What was the

basic difference

between the Land

Ordinance of

1785 and the

Northwest

Ordinance of

1787?

***C. Answer***

A confederation

is a system of

government in

which two levels

of government

share fundamental

powers.

***D. Answer*** The

Land Ordinance

of 1785 established

a plan for

surveying the

land, whereas

the Northwest

Ordinance of

1787 provided for

dividing the land

into three to five

territories and

established the

requirements for

the admission of

new states.

p0132-137aspe-0205s1 10/16/02 3:54 PM Page 135

The Confederation Encounters Problems

After its success in dealing with the Northwest Territory, the Confederation

encountered overwhelming problems in dealing with more immediate issues.

These problems ranged from economic issues, such as taxation and the national

debt, to political issues, such as the nature of Congressional representation. In

addition to these domestic issues, there were also many foreign-relations problems

that the Confederation was powerless to solve.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS The most serious problem was that

the country under the Confederation lacked national unity. Each state functioned

independently by pursuing its own interests rather than those of the nation as a

whole. In addition, the Confederation didn’t recognize the differences in population

among the states. Each state, regardless of its population, had only one vote

in Congress. Thus, the political power of Georgia, with a population of 23,375

in 1770, was equal to that of Massachusetts, with a population of 235,308.

Furthermore, the Articles could not be amended without the consent of every

state; a single state could stall the amendment process. Therefore, changes in government

were difficult to achieve.

The most serious economic problem was the huge debt that the Congress had

amassed during the Revolutionary War. The war had cost the nation $190 million—

a huge amount of money in those days. The Continental Congress had borrowed

from foreign countries and had printed its own paper money. After the war,

Continental currency became worthless.

Lacking the power to tax, the Congress requested the states’ approval to

impose a tariff, or tax on imported goods. It planned to use the revenue to repay

foreign loans. However, one state, Rhode Island, rejected the proposed tax, so it

was not adopted. Unable to impose taxes, the Confederation Congress also had

no control over interstate or foreign trade.

BORROWERS VERSUS LENDERS Another problem caused by the debt from

the Revolution was the struggle between creditors (lenders of money) and debtors

(borrowers of money). After the war, wealthy people who had lent money to the

states favored high taxes so that the states would be able to pay them back.

However, high taxes sent many farmers into debt. When a creditor sued a farmer

in court for repayment and won the case, the government seized the farmer’s land

and animals and sold them at auction.

Debtors and creditors also disagreed over the usefulness of paper money.

Debtors wanted to increase the supply of money to lessen its value and enable

them to pay off their debts with cheap currency. Creditors, in contrast, wanted to

keep the supply of money low so that it would keep its full value. Both groups

had much to lose.

FOREIGN-RELATIONS PROBLEMS The lack of support from states for national

concerns led to foreign-relations problems for the Congress. First, since the

United States could not repay its debts to British merchants and would not compensate

Loyalists for property losses suffered during the Revolutionary War,

Britain refused to evacuate its military forts on the Great Lakes. Furthermore,

Spain’s presence on the borders of the United States posed another threat to

westward expansion. In 1784, Spain closed the Mississippi River to American navigation.

This action deprived Western farmers of a means of shipping their crops

to Eastern markets through New Orleans. Though Northerners were willing to

give up navigation rights on the Mississippi in exchange for more profitable trade

concessions, Westerners and Southerners insisted on access to the Mississippi.

However, Congress was too weak to resolve either of these challenges by Spain

and Britain.

136 **CHAPTER 5**

E

MAIN IDEA

E

**Identifying**

**Problems**

What weakness

in the

Confederation was

highlighted by the

actions of Rhode

Island?

**Background**

See *inflation* on

page R42 in the

Economics

Handbook.

***E. Answer*** The

government’s

power to tax

could be vetoed

by a single

state.

p0132-137aspe-0205s1 10/16/02 3:54 PM Page 136

The problems the Congress encountered in dealing with foreign nations

revealed the basic weaknesses of the Confederation government. Americans’ fear

of giving the national government too much power had resulted in a government

that lacked sufficient power to deal with the nation’s problems. The forthcoming

Constitutional Convention would change all of this.

***Shaping a New Nation*** 137

•republic

•republicanism

•Articles of Confederation

•confederation

•Land Ordinance of 1785 •Northwest Ordinance of

1787

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

In a diagram like the one below,

describe the powers given to the

national government by the Articles

of Confederation

What were the weaknesses of the

Articles of Confederation?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. ANALYZING ISSUES

Why were the states afraid of

centralized authority and a strong

national government?

4. IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS

What was the main problem with the

system of representation by state

(rather than by population) that was

adopted by the Confederation?

5. HYPOTHESIZING

Do you think that the United States

would have become a world power if

the Articles of Confederation had

remained the basis of government?

Explain the reasons for your opinion.

Think About:

• the power that the Articles gave

the states

• foreign affairs and the

Confederation Congress

• the Confederation Congress’s

taxation powers

National Government

financial

matters

war and

defense

Native

Americans

• Congress could not enact and collect

taxes.

• Congress could not regulate interstate

or foreign trade.

• Regardless of population, each state

had only one vote in Congress.

• Two-thirds majority—9 out of 13 states

needed to agree to pass any law.

• Articles could be amended only if all

states approved.

• There was no executive branch to

enforce the laws of Congress.

• There was no national court system to

settle legal disputes.

• There were 13 separate states that

lacked national unity.

Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation

***Skillbuilder***

**1.** All states

**2.** Without the

ability to collect

taxes or to regulate

interstate or

foreign trade

and with no

executive

branch or

national court

system, the government

was

weak. It was

also weak

because each

state had only

one vote, it took

nine of the 13

states to pass

any law, and it

took all 13 states

to amend the

Articles of

Confederation.

SKILLBUILDER **Interpreting Charts**

1. How many states’ votes were needed to approve changes in the Articles of

Confederation?

2. Why did the listed weaknesses lead to an ineffective government?

Articles of Confederation

p0132-137aspe-0205s1 10/16/02 3:54 PM Page 137