**The First Attempt at Government: The Articles of Confederation**

Britain did not (and does not) have a written constitution. The colonists wanted a constitution—a written document that defines rights and obligations for citizens and puts limits on government. This had never been done before and was accomplished during a war against the largest military power in the world.

The colonists created a loose league of friendship under "The Articles of Confederation." The only way the colonists could have devised a system less like the British unitary system would be if they had chosen anarchy (the lack of any government at all). In a confederacy, the central government is very weak and the component parts—states—have the majority of the power and the sovereignty. This is almost the opposite of the unitary system used in Britain in which all of the power and sovereignty is vested in the central government. The Articles of Confederation was predominantly a reaction to British rule in many other ways as well.

**Key provisions under the Articles included:**

* A national government and national legislature (Congress)
* Congress would have the power to coin money, make peace, appoint officers to the military, run the post office, and negotiate with Indian nations
* Each state in the Congress had equal representation, one vote
* A super-majority was required for the passage of any legislation (9/13) and amendments must be unanimous
* Members of Congress would be chosen and paid for by the state legislatures

The Articles were ratified in 1781 and had been operational throughout the

Revolutionary War. However, after the British surrendered and the people were no

longer united in war, problems began to manifest.

**Problems Under the Articles of Confederation**

The central government under the Articles was to be weak. The national Congress was empowered to make peace, coin money, appoint officers for an army, control the post office, and negotiate with Indians. That's it. The states retained independence and sovereignty. Therefore, each state, regardless of size, had one vote in the Congress. To further limit central government powers, nine of 13 states were necessary to pass any measure and unanimity was required to amend the Articles. The requirement for 'super-majorities' for even simple legislation, guaranteed the continuing preeminence of the states over the center. Delegates to the Congress were to be appointed by state legislatures, further ensuring states' rights. Fearful of a new king, the Articles made no provision for an executive branch and assumed that a federal judiciary was unnecessary. States could handle all judicial functions. By 1784, Congress had trouble getting a quorum of nine states to conduct business. Even when quorum was made, the states did nothing but bicker. The Congress faced a very serious problem—how to raise money to pay the Revolutionary War debt? They had no power to tax. States coined their own money and trade wars erupted. Congress had no power to regulate commerce among the states or ensure a unified monetary system. Although Congress could coin money, Continental Dollars were worth little because the government had nothing to back the currency. States conducted foreign relations without regard to neighboring states' needs or wants. Duties, tariffs, and taxes on trade proliferated differently in each state. Vermont threatened to annex itself to Canada and border wars between states began.

**So in summary, the greatest weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation were:**

* a weak central government
* Congress had
  + no power to tax
  + no power to regulate commerce among the states or with foreign countries
  + no ability to ensure the value or unity of money
  + no power to post or regulate duties and tariffs
  + no executive to implement and enforce laws
  + no one to coordinate foreign policy
  + no one to ensure compliance with the Treaty of Paris (1783) that ended the Revolutionary War
  + no judiciary
  + disputes among states about borders could not be addressed adequately in state courts; neither could trade disputes or disputes about the frontier and lands to the west
  + an extremely limited ability to amend or change the Articles, thus addressing weaknesses without abandoning the document

**Shays’ Rebellion**

The economy began to deteriorate. Several years of bad harvests ensued.

Farmers went into ever-deeper debt (remember most Americans were farmers at this

time). George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, among others, worried about

questions of defense, trade, and frontier expansion. Under the Articles, the central

government was not strong enough to cope with these problems. By 1786, several states

had called for a convention to discuss ways of strengthening the national government.

Before that convention could meet, unrest broke out in America. In

Massachusetts, banks were foreclosing on farms and the Massachusetts legislature

enacted a new law requiring all debts be paid in cash. Daniel Shays, a Revolutionary

War veteran who had not been paid for his military service, was outraged and frustrated with the new

law and the huge debt burden of farmers. He led a group of 1,500 armed and disgruntled farmers to the

capital. They forcibly prevented the state court from foreclosing on their farms.

Congress authorized the Secretary of War to call up a national militia to respond

and appropriated $530,000 for the purpose. Every state except Virginia refused. Finally,

a private army put down Shays' Rebellion. This failure of Congress to protect the

citizens and property of Americans was yet another example of the weakness of the

Articles.

**Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation**

Directions: For each weakness listed, write an explanation for why the weakness potentially hurts the American political process AND possible solutions to the weakness. You may work in groups to complete this worksheet.

1. One vote for each state, regardless of size:

2. Congress is powerless to collect taxes and duties:

3. Congress is powerless to regulate foreign and interstate commerce:

4. No executive branch exists to enforce the acts of Congress:

5. No national court system exists:

6. An amendment to the Articles can only occur with consent of all the states:

7. A 9/13 majority is needed to pass laws:

8. Articles are only considered to the states as a “firm league of friendship:”