

The Articles of Confederation: America's First National Government

When we think about the founding of the United States, most people immediately think of the Constitution. However, before the Constitution, America was governed by a much different document known as the **Articles of Confederation**.

Understanding the Articles helps us better appreciate the wisdom, courage, and faith of the generation that secured our independence and laid the foundation for the nation we enjoy today.

Why Were the Articles of Confederation Created?

In 1776, the thirteen colonies declared their independence from Great Britain. But declaring independence and governing a new nation were two different challenges.

The colonies had just fought against a powerful king and a distant government that they believed had violated their rights. As a result, they were very cautious about creating another strong central government.

Many Americans believed that political power should remain primarily with the individual states. They feared that a national government might eventually become as oppressive as the British Crown.

To unite the states during the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress drafted the Articles of Confederation in November of 1777. The states finally ratified them in 1781, making them America's first national constitution.

An interesting America250 connection is that **the Articles were adopted just two months after the Battle of Brandywine (September 11, 1777)**. Congress had been forced to leave Philadelphia and was meeting in York when it completed America's first constitution.

What Did the Articles Do?

The Articles created a "firm league of friendship" among the states.

Each state remained sovereign and independent while cooperating with the others for common purposes such as:

- Conducting the Revolutionary War
- Making treaties with foreign nations
- Managing western lands
- Coordinating national defense

The Articles allowed the states to work together while preserving their individual authority.

This arrangement reflected the strong desire for liberty that had inspired the Revolution.

Strengths of the Articles

Although often remembered for their weaknesses, the Articles accomplished several important things.

They Helped Win the Revolutionary War

The national government coordinated military efforts, obtained foreign assistance, and supported General George Washington and the Continental Army throughout the struggle for independence.

They Secured International Recognition

Under the Articles, American representatives negotiated the Treaty of Paris in 1783, which officially ended the Revolutionary War and recognized the United States as an independent nation.

They Opened the West

The Articles established procedures for governing western territories and eventually admitting new states into the Union.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 became one of the most important achievements of this period, providing an orderly path for expansion and statehood.

Weaknesses of the Articles

As the war ended, serious problems became apparent.

The national government could request money from the states, but it could not require them to pay.

Congress could not:

- Levy taxes
- Regulate interstate commerce
- Enforce many of its decisions
- Maintain a strong national military
- Easily amend the Articles

Each state had one vote regardless of population, and major decisions required approval from a large majority of states.

As a result, the government often lacked the authority needed to solve national problems.

From the Articles to the Constitution

In 1787, delegates gathered in Philadelphia intending to revise the Articles.

Instead, they produced an entirely new framework of government: **the United States Constitution.**

The Constitution sought to solve the weaknesses of the Articles while still protecting individual liberty.

The founders attempted to balance two important principles:

Freedom from tyranny and **effective self-government.**

Similarities Between the Articles and the Constitution

Although the Constitution replaced the Articles, the two documents share several important ideas.

Both:

- Recognized the United States as one nation.
- Established a republican form of government.
- Rejected monarchy and hereditary rule.
- Sought to protect liberty.
- Derived authority from the people.
- Emphasized cooperation among the states.

The Constitution did not reject everything in the Articles; it built upon the lessons learned under them.

Key Differences

Under the Articles:

- States held most power.
- Congress was the only national branch.
- No president existed.
- No national court system existed.
- Congress could not directly tax citizens.
- Congress could not regulate interstate commerce.

Under the Constitution:

- Power was shared between the national government and the states.
- Three branches were established:
 - Legislative

- Executive
- Judicial
- A president would enforce the laws.
- Federal courts would interpret the laws.
- Congress could levy taxes.
- Congress could regulate commerce between states.

The Constitution created a stronger national government while limiting its power through checks and balances.

A Biblical Reflection

For people of faith, the story of the Articles of Confederation illustrates an important biblical principle.

Scripture teaches that freedom is a blessing, but freedom must be accompanied by responsibility and order.

The founders had experienced the dangers of concentrated power under King George III. Their first instinct was to distribute authority widely among the states. Yet they soon discovered that unity was necessary if the nation was to survive.

Ecclesiastes 4:12 reminds us:

"And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

The thirteen states could preserve their independence only by working together.

Likewise, the Constitution reflects another biblical truth found in 1 Corinthians 12. Just as many members form one body, thirteen states became one nation while retaining their individual identities.

"For the body also is not one member, but many."

1 Corinthians 12:14

Why It Matters Today

The Articles of Confederation represent America's first attempt at self-government as an independent people.

They remind us that the United States was not created all at once. It was forged through prayer, sacrifice, debate, trial, and experience.

The Articles helped win the Revolution and preserve the fragile Union long enough for the Constitution to emerge.

In many ways, the Articles were America's first draft. The Constitution became the refined version.

Together, they tell the remarkable story of a people seeking to secure liberty under God while creating a government capable of preserving that liberty for future generations.

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“At the Constitutional Convention of 1787 it was broadly acknowledged that the Articles of Confederation were inadequate and that a new system of government was necessary. But the question of how that new government should be structured was contested and controversial. To somewhat oversimplify a complex set of issues, the question ultimately boiled down to two competing proposals—the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan.

Both plans called for a three-branch national government (executive, legislative, and judicial). But under the Virginia Plan, which was introduced by James Madison, there would be a bicameral (two house) legislature with the number of representatives in both houses to be determined based on a state’s population, while under the New Jersey Plan, written primarily by William Paterson and introduced on this day in 1787, Congress would be unicameral (one house only), with each state having an equal number of representatives. While there were numerous other disputes and debates, whose ramifications are still being felt today, it was the question of how representation in Congress was to be determined that most threatened to destroy the Union and cause the failure of the Convention.

Naturally the large states favored the Virginia Plan, arguing that fairness required that the number of legislators from each state should be based on the state’s population, while the smaller states favored the New Jersey Plan, arguing that unless each had an equal number of legislators the small states would be dominated and at the mercy of the more populous states.

After much contentious debate, Roger Sherman and Oliver Ellsworth of Connecticut proposed what came to be called the “Connecticut Compromise,” which called for a bicameral Congress, with the composition of the lower house to be based on population but with each state to have an equal number of senators. Although many delegates continued to be uneasy about it, the compromise sufficiently allayed the fears of the smaller states to prevent the Convention from

failing. The compromise is reflected in the Constitution as ultimately adopted and ratified, of course, which provides for proportional representation in the House and equal representation in the Senate.”