



American Government
FOUNDATIONS

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Chapter 1

A NATION IN TROUBLE

It was 1783. George Washington wanted to rest. He helped win the Revolutionary War. Washington helped create the United States. Now it was time to return home to Mount Vernon, Virginia.

America was in trouble in early 1787. Each state acted like its own country. There was no president. The judicial branch didn't exist. No one made sure laws were fair. The government was broke. States could collect taxes. The federal government could not. Congress had to ask states for money. They often refused to pay.





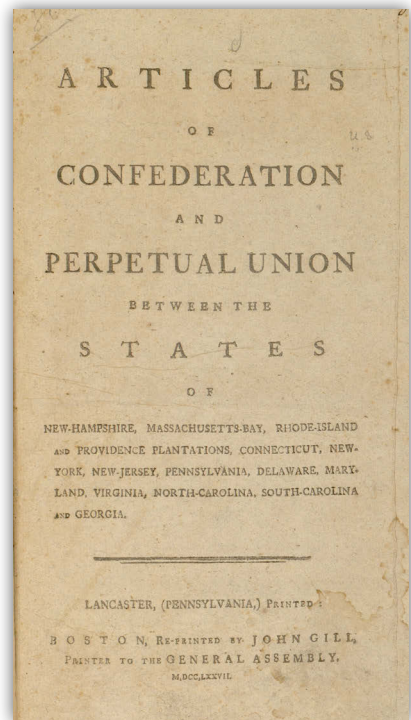
Washington's rest was short. The new nation needed him. The great general came to Philadelphia. Others also made the trip. They came to rewrite the Articles of Confederation. They were a set of laws that formed the U.S. government. By 1781, all 13 states had approved the Articles. They were the first American constitution.

Think About It: *Were the Articles of Confederation America's first fail?*

[WHAT IS A CONSTITUTION?]

A constitution is a document. It is a set of rules. Words are written down. They say how the government will work. A constitution is the starting point. It says what the government can do. And what it cannot do. It also says how much power the government will have. A constitution explains how the government is organized. Good constitutions can be changed. Why? Because people's beliefs change over time.

The first U.S. constitution was called the Articles of Confederation. States stayed independent. The central government had limited power. American leaders didn't want to create a strong central government. They had seen what too much power could do. The cruelty of British rule was fresh in their minds. Plus, Americans were more loyal to their state than their country.




The Articles kept the states united. It was during the Revolutionary War. After the war the nation grew. Some people moved west. More came to the 13 states. Problems were harder to solve. The nation was too big. Our first constitution was too simple.



[MANY PROBLEMS]

The Articles were weak. States had power. But the federal government did not. Citizens were okay with that. Americans did not trust government. They had spent years under British control. King George III had taken away their freedoms. America was now its own country. The people ruled, not kings.

The Articles made problems. The government could not collect taxes. It could not set up courts.



Laws were not enforced. And the government did not have the power to control trade. There was no national army to protect the new nation.

The states were not united. Each had its own money. States collected their own taxes. Each had its own trade rules. States fought. No one had power to settle the fights.

There was no shared currency. Each state had its own. States did not look out for the good of all people. Some people went broke. The states had to come together. Or the U.S. would fail as a new nation.

[NEW RULES]

The men met at the Pennsylvania State House. Now called Independence Hall. Washington and the other men closed the doors. They shut the windows. Whatever they talked about would be a secret. The men made a decision. The Articles would not be

fixed. They would be thrown away. New laws would be written. There would be a new government. This one would have greater power over the states.

➔ HISTORY HAPPENED HERE

Event: Shays's Rebellion

Where: Massachusetts

When: Winter of 1786–1787




Farmers were broke. They couldn't pay their taxes. Many lost their land. They didn't trust state leaders. Daniel Shays wanted to help. He led protests against the courts. The farmers shut them down. Then they headed to Springfield. The government had guns there. The rebels wanted them.

State soldiers stopped them. Shays fled. The rebellion worried many. It showed the federal government's weakness. The event made leaders rethink the Articles of Confederation.

[MISTRUST]

Fixing the country was not going to be easy.

Everyone had an idea. Like James Madison. He lived in Virginia. Madison wanted a strong central government. He proposed three branches of government. Legislative. Executive. And judicial.



Their powers would be separate. This was to stop abuse. Each branch would have its own job. They could not do the jobs of another branch.

Madison wanted a **bicameral** Congress. It would have two groups of lawmakers. A lower house and an upper house. The people would choose the lower house. And the lower house would choose the upper house. States with a larger population would have more power. This was because they would have more lawmakers.

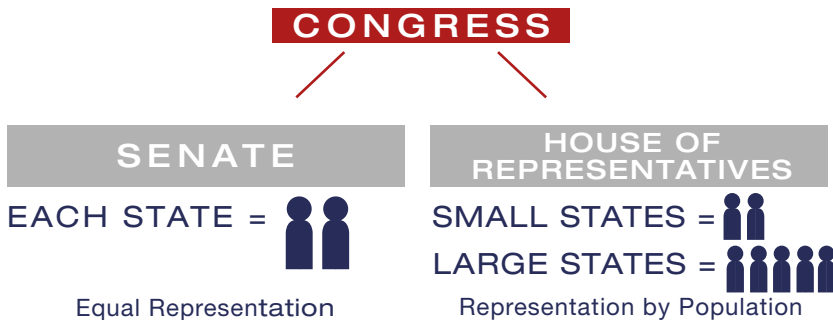
The plan caused arguments. Small states did not trust big states. They wanted an equal say in government. The small states did not want to be bullied. Virginia had the largest population. Delaware, the smallest.

The men talked about other plans. Nothing worked. Things got heated. Fights broke out. Outside, people waited for news.

[SHERMAN TO THE RESCUE]

The 55 men kept at it. They were called **delegates**. Their states selected them. The men were educated. And patriotic. Twelve of the 13 states were represented. Rhode Island skipped the meeting. The work was hard. It took many hours. Everyone believed a government's power came from the people. People also had certain rights. Rights no one could take away.

Roger Sherman saved the day. He lived in Connecticut. Sherman agreed Congress should have two houses. But they would have equal power. One was the Senate. The other was the House of Representatives. Each state would have the same number of members in the Senate. But their population would decide their numbers in the House.



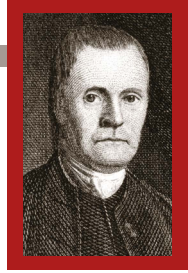
Sherman needed support. He wanted states where enslavement was legal to agree. Sherman and another delegate had a plan. Enslaved people should count as three-fifths of a person. At that time, they were “property,” not people.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Roger Sherman

Born: April 19, 1721

Died: July 23, 1793



Roger Sherman was not famous. Not like George Washington. Not like Benjamin Franklin. Yet he was a leader. He was a member of the Continental Congress. It made the important decisions during the Revolution. Sherman signed the Declaration of Independence. He signed the Articles of Confederation. And he helped write the U.S. Constitution.

Tempers rose. Emotions were high. Washington listened. He kept the peace. Sherman’s plan passed. The makeup of Congress was settled. Figuring out the rest of the document was easy.

The sale of enslaved people from Africa went on until 1808. It continued in the U.S. It separated families. Millions of Black people suffered. Their lives were hard. It would be nearly 100 years before they were free. The Civil War saw to that. The Union won. The 13th Amendment was passed. Enslavement was over.

[“A REPUBLIC, MADAM”]

The delegates worked hard. They wrote a new set of rules. A constitution. This was the plan on how the nation would work. It had seven parts. Articles. The delegates set up three branches of government. Each had a specific job. Congress would make laws. The executive would carry them out. The judiciary would **interpret** them.



LEGISLATIVE

Makes Laws



EXECUTIVE

Carries Out Laws



JUDICIAL

Interprets Laws

Delegates knew about the dangers of cruel leaders. Too much power was bad. So they set up checks and balances. Each branch would keep an eye on the other.

These were crazy ideas. No nation had ever done these things before. America was now a democratic

society. But it wasn't a **direct democracy**. Not everyone voted on all laws. It was a **constitutional representative democracy**. Ruled by laws. With elected officials who made the decisions.

The delegates finished. They walked outside. "What have you given us?" a woman yelled. "A republic, Madam," Benjamin Franklin said, "if you can keep it."



American Government FOUNDATIONS

Being an informed citizen is not a choice. It is a responsibility.

Foundations explains the beginnings of the American political system. Chapters introduce the concepts of a federal republic, with relevant facts and interesting sidebars. Open-ended “Think About It” questions frame each topic.

- Were the Articles of Confederation America’s first fail?
- Is direct democracy a good idea?
- Did the civil rights movement bring about racial equality?
- Is big government a good thing or a bad thing?
- Is voting your civic duty? Are you a bad citizen if you don’t vote?
- What does it mean to be a good citizen? Was Edward Snowden a good citizen? What about Daniel Ellsberg?



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