

Articles of Confederation

America's First Constitution

The first constitution in our nation's history was the Articles of Confederation. Under the Articles of Confederation we took "baby steps" as a nation. The government conducted the affairs of the country during the last two years of the Revolutionary War, helped to negotiate the Treaty of Paris in 1783, and produced two monumental pieces of legislation in the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

While the Articles of Confederation was a plan of government based upon the principles fought for in the American Revolutionary War, it contained crucial flaws. It had no power of national taxation, no power to control trade, and it provided for a comparatively weak executive. Therefore, it could not enforce legislation. It was a "league of friendship" which was opposed to any type of national authority. The Articles of Confederation's greatest weakness, however, was that it had no direct origin in the people themselves—it knew only state sovereignty. Each state, therefore, had the power to collect its own taxes, issue currency, and provide for its own militia. The government could not govern efficiently because of a general lack of power to compel states to honor national obligations. The government's main activity was to control foreign policy and conclude treaties. Economic credibility was a major problem because the government owed \$42 million (more than \$40 billion today) after the Revolutionary War, and the debt was mainly owed to American patriots. This financial obligation was not paid off until the early part of the 1800's.

It would have been very difficult for our country to have created a stronger second constitution without learning from the mistakes of the first. The Articles of Confederation served as a "transition" between the Revolutionary War and the Constitution.



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