

Not Worth a Continental

The Articles of Confederation, 1776–1787

Unit 3 3.7 The Articles of Confederation

“Thirteen Sovereignities pulling against each other, and all tugging at the foederal head, will soon bring ruin on the whole...”

George Washington

Letter to James Madison, November 5, 1786

Original spelling.

What the exam expects

Why did the Articles of Confederation give the national government such limited powers?

Americans had rebelled against a king in the name of consent and liberty, so they feared any distant, powerful government. The **Articles of Confederation** left most power with the states and gave the nation only a **unicameral legislature**, with no executive or national court system. The same fear led most **state constitutions** to keep governors weak and legislatures strong.

What tensions did Shays's Rebellion reflect, and why was it significant?

Western Massachusetts farmers who owed debts and taxes in scarce **specie** closed the courts in 1786 to stop the seizure of their farms. **Shays's Rebellion** convinced many Americans that the Articles could not keep order and strengthened the movement for a new constitution. The **Whiskey Rebellion** of 1794 grew from the same frontier anger at eastern power.

Explain one accomplishment of the national government under the Articles of Confederation.

Congress saw the war through and made peace, but its best-known success was a plan for the West. The **Land Ordinance of 1785** laid out the land north of the Ohio in townships, with a lot in each for schools. The **Northwest Ordinance** set a path for territories to become equal states and banned slavery there.

Explain one argument critics used in the 1780s to support revising the Articles of Confederation.

Critics said a Congress that could not tax had to live on **requisitions**, which the states often ignored. It also had no power over **interstate commerce**, so states taxed one another's goods. The Constitution answered both complaints by giving Congress power to lay taxes and regulate trade among the states.

Don't mix these up

- ✗ "The Articles set up a two-house Congress and a weak president." The Articles created only a one-house Congress, with one vote per state, no executive, and no national court system.
- ✗ "The Confederation Congress won Americans the right to ship goods through New Orleans." Spain closed the lower Mississippi to Americans in 1784, and only Pinckney's Treaty reopened it, in 1795.
- ✗ "The Northwest Ordinance closed western land to settlers, like the Proclamation of 1763." Britain's 1763 Proclamation tried to stop western settlement, while the 1787 Northwest Ordinance organized it and set a path to statehood.

Study list

	What it was	Why it matters
Continental currency 1775–1780	Paper money the Continental Congress printed to pay for the war, more than \$200 million in all. By March 1780 Congress itself valued 40 paper dollars at one silver dollar.	Its collapse proved that a Congress unable to tax could not back its money, and the Articles never gave Congress that power.
State constitutions 1776–1780	Written plans of government that most former colonies adopted as they became states, many opening with a bill of rights. They usually put power in elected legislatures and kept governors weak.	Americans had learned to fear royal governors, so Virginia let its legislature choose the governor each year and gave him no veto.
Property qualifications 1776–1780	Rules in most state constitutions that let a man vote only if he owned property or paid taxes, and set a higher bar to hold office.	Voting stayed tied to property after the Revolution, and most states did not drop the test for white men until the 1830s.
Articles of Confederation 1777–1789	The first national constitution, which joined the states in a “firm league of friendship” under a weak Congress. John Dickinson wrote its first draft, and the Articles took effect in 1781.	Because each state kept every power it did not expressly delegate, Congress could not tax, regulate trade, or enforce its laws.
Unicameral legislature 1781–1789	The one-house Congress that made up the whole national government under the Articles, with no executive branch and no national court system. Each state cast one vote, whatever its size.	War, treaties, and spending needed nine states, and amendments needed all 13, so a few states could block Congress’s biggest decisions.
Requisitions 1781–1789	Bills that Congress sent each state for its share of national costs, because the Articles gave Congress no power to tax. State legislatures decided whether to pay.	States often paid little or nothing, so Congress could not pay its soldiers or creditors until the Constitution let it tax.
British frontier posts 1783–1796	Forts on U.S. soil around the Great Lakes, including Detroit and Niagara, that Britain kept after the Treaty of Paris (1783) and used to supply its Native allies.	Britain blamed unpaid prewar debts and state seizures of Loyalist property, and Congress could neither enforce the treaty nor drive Britain out.
Spanish closure of the Mississippi 1784	Spain’s ban on American ships using the lower Mississippi, which Spain controlled from New Orleans. It cut western farmers off from their route to market.	Westerners blamed a Congress too weak to force the river open, and many doubted that the Union could protect their trade.

	What it was	Why it matters
Interstate commerce 1781–1789	Trade among the states, which the Articles left outside Congress's power. States taxed one another's goods, and New York's import duties fell on New Jersey and Connecticut buyers.	Neighboring states became trade rivals, and their quarrels led to the Annapolis Convention of 1786.
Land Ordinance of 1785 1785	Congress's plan to survey land north of the Ohio into townships six miles square, each with 36 one-square-mile lots, before selling it at \$1 an acre or more.	The grid made western settlement orderly and lot 16 supported schools, though the 640-acre minimum favored speculators over farmers.
Specie hard currency 1780s	Gold and silver coin, which was scarce after the war, especially in farm towns. Private creditors still demanded it, and Massachusetts required it for part of its heavy 1786 tax.	Farmers who owned land and crops but little coin faced lawsuits that could cost them their farms.
Shays's Rebellion Shays' Rebellion 1786–1787	An armed uprising of western Massachusetts farmers, many of them veterans, who closed courts to stop seizures for debts and taxes. Militia cannon killed four at Springfield in January 1787.	Congress could not send help, so Massachusetts raised an army with private loans, and many Americans decided the Articles had failed.
Annapolis Convention 1786	A meeting of 12 delegates from five states at Annapolis, Maryland, to discuss interstate trade. Too few came to act, so Alexander Hamilton drafted a call for a broader convention.	The call for a stronger union began over trade, months before Shays's men marched on the Springfield arsenal.
Northwest Ordinance 1787	The law that set up the Northwest Territory, with an elected assembly at 5,000 free adult men and statehood on equal terms at 60,000 free inhabitants. It banned slavery and encouraged schools.	Its slavery ban made the Ohio River a line between free and slave soil, though enslavers could reclaim people who fled north.
Whiskey Rebellion 1794	An uprising of western Pennsylvania farmers against Hamilton's 1791 whiskey tax, which they had to pay in scarce cash. Rebels burned the house of the federal tax inspector, John Neville.	Unlike the Confederation in 1786, the new federal government raised an army and enforced its own tax.

Also in the film

Western land cessions 1780–1802	Maryland refused to ratify the Articles until Virginia and New York agreed to give Congress their western land claims.
Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 1780	John Adams drafted most of it, and its tax-weighted senate drew protests from western towns before Shays's Rebellion.
Impost of 1781 1781–1782	Congress's plan for a five percent import duty died when Rhode Island refused, since any amendment needed every state.
Robert Morris 1781–1784	The Philadelphia merchant who, as Superintendent of Finance, pressed the states for money they rarely sent.
Newburgh Conspiracy 1783	Anonymous letters urged unpaid officers at Newburgh, New York, to defy Congress, and Washington talked them out of it.
War debt certificates 1780s	Instead of coin, Congress and the states paid soldiers in IOUs, which many veterans sold cheaply to speculators.
Ordinance of 1784 1784	Jefferson's plan for the whole West would have banned slavery after 1800, but that clause lost by one state.
Treaty of Fort Finney 1786	American commissioners claimed Shawnee land by conquest, and Kekewepellethe answered, "God gave us this country."

Short-answer practice

“The taxes for paying that proportion shall be laid and levied by the authority and direction of the legislatures of the several States within the time agreed upon by the United States in Congress assembled.”

Continental Congress, Articles of Confederation, Article VIII, 1777 (in force 1781)

(a) Briefly describe ONE limit that the system in the excerpt placed on the national government under the Articles of Confederation.

(b) Briefly explain ONE effect of that limit on the United States in the 1780s.

(c) Briefly explain how ONE provision of the United States Constitution addressed the limit described in the excerpt.

Continental currency

1775–1780

Not Worth a Continental

State constitutions

1776–1780

Not Worth a Continental

Property qualifications

1776–1780

Not Worth a Continental

Articles of Confederation

1777–1789

Not Worth a Continental

Unicameral legislature

1781–1789

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Requisitions

1781–1789

Not Worth a Continental

British frontier posts

1783–1796

Not Worth a Continental

Spanish closure of the Mississippi

1784

Not Worth a Continental

Interstate commerce

1781–1789

Not Worth a Continental

Land Ordinance of 1785

1785

Not Worth a Continental

The new states' written plans of government, which mostly made legislatures strong and governors weak.

Fear of kings and royal governors also left the Articles with no executive.

The first U.S. constitution, which created a weak Congress and left most power with the states.

Congress made peace and organized the West but could never tax.

Congress's requests to the states for money, which the states could ignore.

By July 1782 the states had paid under one percent of what was due.

Spain's 1784 order shutting the lower Mississippi and New Orleans to American trade.

Pinckney's Treaty reopened the river in 1795.

Congress's 1785 plan to survey western land into square townships, with one lot for schools.

Its grid still marks the map of the Midwest.

Congress's wartime paper money, which became nearly worthless because no taxes backed it.

It gave Americans the phrase "not worth a Continental."

State rules that let a man vote only if he owned property or paid taxes.

The poorest men, and nearly all women, still could not vote.

Under the Articles, a one-house Congress with one vote per state was the whole national government.

Large states' anger at equal votes fed the 1787 fight over representation.

Great Lakes forts such as Detroit that Britain refused to leave after the 1783 peace.

Britain gave them up only in 1796, under Jay's Treaty.

Trade among the states, which Congress could not regulate under the Articles.

The Constitution's commerce clause gave Congress power over it.

Specie

hard currency

1780s

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Shays's Rebellion

Shays' Rebellion

1786–1787

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Annapolis Convention

1786

Not Worth a Continental

Northwest Ordinance

1787

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Whiskey Rebellion

1794

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Shays's Rebellion 1786–1787

A 1786 revolt of indebted Massachusetts farmers who shut the courts to save their farms.

It strengthened the movement for a new constitution.

Northwest Ordinance 1787

The 1787 law that set a path to statehood and banned slavery north of the Ohio.

Most later territories followed its path to statehood.

Specie 1780s

Gold and silver coin, scarce in the 1780s, which creditors and Massachusetts tax collectors demanded.

Debts owed in hard currency sparked Shays's Rebellion.

Annapolis Convention 1786

The 1786 meeting on interstate trade that called for a convention in Philadelphia.

Congress endorsed the call, and the Constitutional Convention met in May 1787.

Whiskey Rebellion 1794

A 1794 revolt by western Pennsylvania farmers against the federal whiskey tax.

Like Shays's Rebellion, it pitted frontier farmers against eastern power.

Model answers

- (a) Briefly describe ONE limit that the system in the excerpt placed on the national government under the Articles of Confederation.

Congress set each state's share of national costs, but only the state legislatures could lay and collect the taxes to pay it. Congress could not tax the people directly, so it depended on the states choosing to pay.

- (b) Briefly explain ONE effect of that limit on the United States in the 1780s.

Without its own taxes, Congress could not pay its debts or its soldiers. Of the \$4 million due from the states by July 1, 1782, Robert Morris received less than \$40,000, and unpaid officers at Newburgh threatened to defy Congress in 1783.

- (c) Briefly explain how ONE provision of the United States Constitution addressed the limit described in the excerpt.

Article I, Section 8 gave Congress its own power to lay and collect taxes, duties, imposts, and excises, so it no longer had to wait on state legislatures. Congress used that power for the 1791 federal excise on whiskey.