

A failed experiment: the articles of confederation essay sample



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War-torn and economically weak, the United States in the late 1700s, was in desperate need of government and law. The solution drawn up by Congress was the Articles of Confederation. This document acted as the law of the land until it was superseded by the Constitution in 1789. In fear of tyranny, the Articles created a very weak central government, with federal power consolidated in a unicameral legislature. There was no executive or judicial branch, and the vast majority of power was left to the states. The states were essentially assembled into a loose confederation under Congress. This confederation, as others before and after it, had strengths and weaknesses. While achieving the original goals of limiting federal power and safely navigating international relations, the federal government created by the Articles was too weak to sustain a growing nation. In foreign and domestic policy-making immediately after the war, the Articles of Confederation succeeded. The government set up by the Articles successfully negotiated the Treaty of Paris, Signed in 1783, the Treaty of Paris recognized America as an independent nation and called for the British to vacate America.

Congress was able to end the war this way because of their right to make treaties. The Northwest Ordinance was another policy-making success, which allowed for America to slowly grow in land and population for the future. Using its exclusive right to organize and sell the unsettled territory located West of the Appalachians, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, which gave Congress authority over the region, and set parameters as to when and how inhabitants of the region could apply for statehood. By 1792, New York and Virginia had ceded Western land to the federal government to become part of new states. (Document E). The ordinance created an orderly way to

expand the confederation while minimizing tensions between the northern and southern colonies. The initial policy making by the Articles of Confederation government was beneficial to the United States. The political successes of the Articles were largely nullified by the failure to enforce treaties and pass laws due to the lack of an executive branch and a high required threshold of states to pass a law. Without the executive branch, Congress did not have power to enforce treaties or laws.

Moreover, Congress could not draft men into the Armed Services. To raise an army, it had to ask the states for troops. The high state threshold caused problems with the ratification of the Jay-Gardoqui treaty. In negotiations, John Jay concluded that it would be best to “ Agree that the treaty should be limited to twenty-five or thirty years, and that one of the articles should stipulate that the United States forbear to use the navigation of that river below their [the Spanish] territories to the ocean” (Document F). This infuriated the southeastern states such as Georgia, who had wanted the Mississippi for fishing and trade. As a result, the treaty was ignored because the states had a choice whether to abide by it or not. Because of the need for a $\frac{2}{3}$ majority in ratifying a treaty, the treaty ended up being rejected. In John Jay’s 1785 instructions to the United States Minister to Great Britain, Jay instructed the minister to “ Insist...that the United States be put...into possession of all the posts and territories within their limits which are now held by British garrisons “ (Document D).

Unfortunately, the largely disbanded national army could not enforce such a treaty, and without an executive force to enforce the treaty, America’s request for complete British withdrawal went largely ignored. Without any <https://assignbuster.com/a-failed-experiment-the-articles-of-confederation-essay-sample/>

way to enforce treaties and laws, the Articles of Confederation mitigated the effects of the earlier political successes. The Articles of Confederation made it impossible for the federal government to function, by giving far too much economic freedom to the individual states. In all systems of government, it is imperative that a strong central government controls the economy. In fear of another arbitrary government, the drafters of the Articles of Confederation outlined many powers that would be exclusively left to the states. These included regulating trade, regulation of wages and prices, and paying taxes to federal government. States were also allowed to print paper money without federal regulation. After the war, a combination of devalued paper money and a wartime shortage of goods resulted in inflation and an economic downturn. By 1784, the estimated market value of United States exports to Great Britain were only 66% of what they had been before the war (Document B).

Unfortunately, the federal government could not stop the economic collapse. Without power to regulate trade, there was no way to control the continuous flow of imported goods from Britain and gold and silver back to Britain. Without the ability to regulate wages and prices or to prevent states from printing money, the federal government could not halt inflation and the ensuing depreciation. Finally, without the ability to tax, Congress could not reduce the public debt. Federal attempts to take economic power were rejected by the states. The Rhode Island Assembly, in rejecting a proposal for federal control over imports, summarized the sentiment of the state governments. “ By granting Congress a power to collect moneys from the commerce of these states, indefinitely as to time and quantity...they would

become independent of their constituents; and so the proposed impost is repugnant to the liberty of the United States” (Document A). The lack of economic power in the federal government made the Articles of Confederation ineffective.

The inability of the government to raise revenue through taxation led to many domestic issues. After the war, Congress did not have the money to pay troops, nor the means of acquiring any money. This led to discontent in the armed forces. Delegate Joseph Jones of Virginia, in a letter to George Washington explains, “ One ground of discontent in the army...is the delay in complying with their requests [for bonus and back pay]...Every class of public creditors must know the inability of Congress to pay their demands, unless furnished with the means by the several States...” (Document C).

Without pay and without a need to exist after the war, the Continental Army was largely broken up. The dismal economic situation also harmed farmers who were selling less produce but still having to pay off mortgages on farms and other debts. John Jay expressed his fears of the impending situation, in a weak economy with little to no faith in their federal government. “ Our affairs seem to lead to some crisis, some revolution...I am uneasy more so than during the war” (Document G). In the summer of 1786, Jay’s fears became reality, when 2000 Western Massachusetts farmers led by Revolutionary War veteran Daniel Shays, rose in rebellion, closing county courts and seizing the federal arsenal in Springfield in an attempt to stop creditors from foreclosing on their farms. The Articles of Confederation allowed for a weak economy, which resulted in domestic issues, specifically in the army and with local farmers.

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The Articles of Confederation were a political success and a structural and economical failure. The states had left absolute power in England, and were constantly in fear of power. This resulted in the Articles' government having little to no power over the states. For a growing nation in a weak economy trying to enforce new laws and treaties, a strong central government is essential. The initial government under the Articles succeeded in initial foreign policy. The Treaty of Paris recognized America as an independent nation, and the Northwest ordinance allowed for American expansion without increasing tensions between the states. Unfortunately, these initial successes were largely overshadowed due to the lack of enforcement. This was a result of both not having an executive branch and concentrating far too much power to the states.

The states were given the ability to choose which treaties to abide by, and southeastern states chose to completely ignore the Jay-Gardoqui treaty. Moreover, the high threshold required for states to ratify a treaty or law resulted in the treaty not being ratified. The lack of an executive branch made it impossible to enforce another treaty in which Britain promised to leave the continent; a promise they were never forced to follow through on. Finally, the economic difficulties after the war were impossible to control or contain since almost all economic influence and power was concentrated in the states. As a result, the federal government was helpless against economic collapse. This economic collapse resulted in domestic issues such as the dissolution of the Army and Shays Rebellion. In conclusion, the Articles of Confederation failed due to their structural and economic flaws, which overshadowed its initial political success.