

The Articles of Confederation of 1781

During the American Revolution, many colonists felt that the Continental Congress needed authority if the colonies were to defeat the British. In November of 1777, delegates adopted a formal basis for a union. It was called the Articles of Confederation. This document was then sent to each of the states for adoption or approval. By March 1, 1781, all of the colonies had adopted the Articles of Confederation. It joined the states into a union and served as the new nation's first constitution.

The Articles of Confederation created a loose union of states. Even though they were at war, many Americans feared a strong central government. Also, a great many colonists felt a stronger sense of allegiance to their state than to a new national government.

The Articles created a national government with one branch, a unicameral legislature. There was no executive branch or President and no judicial branch either. The Confederation Congress was given few powers. For instance, the new government did not have the power to levy or impose taxes, or regulate trade between the states. Under the Articles of Confederation, each state had one vote. Most of the power was reserved for the states.

Powers Granted and Denied under the Articles of Confederation

Powers Granted Under the Articles of Confederation:

- Declare War
- Make Peace
- Maintain an Army and a Navy
- Make treaties with other countries
- Borrow money
- Establish a postal service

Powers Denied Under the Articles of Confederation:

- No executive branch
- No raising taxes
- Could not print money - the states could still print their own money
- Could not regulate trade with other countries or between states
- No court system

In Summary:

The weakness of the Articles was that it provided too little structure for the new nation. Because the new government could not regulate trade, business was almost at a standstill and many state economies suffered. State governments discouraged trade by taxing the products from other states. Some of them issued nearly worthless paper money which many merchants refused to take. After an armed rebellion, called Shay's Rebellion, stirred up by Massachusetts' attempt to tax their residents to pay for the war, many Americans realized a stronger, centralized government was needed. In May of 1787, every state, except Rhode Island, sent delegates to Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation.