

# American Failure: The Articles of Confederation

BY JIMMY SENGENBERGER

On Sept. 17, 1787, 40 American men convened to sign a treasonous document. Among these traitors were George Washington, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton. They signed what is now known as the United States Constitution.

Hard as it may be to believe, our Constitution was once a betrayal of America herself. They were committing an act of treason against the Articles of Confederation, America's first attempt at a united government.

The Articles of Confederation was a logical result of the Revolutionary War, for the leaders of the fledgling nation feared that a strong central government might lead to another tyrannical regime like that which they fought against in the rebellion. A loose confederacy, they determined, was the right way to go. Yet in their aspirations for a weak central government and strong state governments came a document that was both ineffective and doomed to failure.

The document was plagued with problems, and so the Philadelphia Convention was convened on May 25, 1787, to revise the Articles. The delegates to this convention did not, however, revise the Articles. Instead they met in secret, making every effort to maintain that secrecy, and rewrote a brand new system of government, excluding all outside influence. Furthermore, the Constitution specified that only nine out of the 13 original states needed to



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ratify the Constitution for it to go into effect, which was a remarkable difference from the required unanimous consent to amend the Articles. In truth, those states which first ratified the Constitution seceded from the Articles.

In retrospect, though we do not tend to see this as an act of treason, we view the Philadelphia Convention as inherently good, just as we view the Declaration of Independence, and rightfully so. The Articles of Confederation was a system of government under which the national government was too weak to function in any serious capacity. Under the Articles the government could not levy taxes and therefore raise revenues unless the states, adverse to national taxation, were willing to provide such funds, which they typically were not. Congress could raise an army and a navy, but only with the support of the states; it was in essence only able to call upon the states to send their militias. The states were not required to comply with Congress' requests

for military forces and revenue, and they were reluctant to do so much at all, causing Congress to seek other routes, such as the Northwest Ordinance, to raise funds.

These flaws within the Articles of Confederation led directly to a number of incidents in which the national government was impotent. Perhaps the most spectacular event showcasing the failures of the Articles was Shays' Rebellion. In the year 1786, Massachusetts farmers rebelled against land foreclosures carried out by the courts on behalf of creditors. Daniel Shays, a Yankee captain of the Revolutionary War, led the uprising, staging a number of armed attacks on courthouses to prevent the foreclosures from continuing. The Massachusetts governor called upon Congress to send military aid to the state, but they were unsuccessful in their attempts to raise a militia that could halt the advance of Shays and his followers. The lack of national aid in this crisis increased the dissatisfaction with the Articles, for it had become apparent that Congress was powerless when it came to lending a much-needed helping hand.

Congress' inability to regulate commerce created a number of problems regarding the ability to form a coherent national economy and produce foreign trade agreements at a national level. The fact that it couldn't raise revenue from the states caused it to revert to disbanding the army and printing worthless money, among other

risky measures to fund its most basic functions. Furthermore, the Articles could only be amended given unanimous consent of all 13 states, which was virtually impossible. The Annapolis Convention was held in September 1786 to revise the Articles, yet only 12 delegates from five states attended, preventing any changes from taking place.

That is until the Philadelphia Convention, the meeting suggested by the Annapolis delegates to modify the Articles. Yet it was impossible to repair, so it had to be scrapped entirely and replaced with a new, fresh document.

Thus, in the failure of the Articles of Confederation came perhaps the most important document in American history: the Constitution. This charter, while keeping the revolutionary principles of smaller national government alive, increased federal power in a way that would greatly improve upon the failings of the Articles and lay the foundation for the best system of government in existence.

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