



ROAD TO THE CONVENTION



Vocabulary

Concept Words – These words can help you understand the big ideas.

- **confederation:** a group of people or countries that join together for a common reason
- **executive branch:** the branch of government that is responsible for enforcing the laws passed by the legislature
- **judicial branch:** the branch of government that interprets laws
- **legislative branch:** the branch of government that includes the Senate and House of Representatives and is responsible for making laws

Speed Bump Words – These words can help you better comprehend the text.

- **faction:** a group of people who are acting on their own self interests
- **mob:** a large group of people engaging in disorderly, illegal conduct
- **rebellion:** refusing to follow the rules or laws set by those in power

Topic 1: The Articles of Confederation and Mob Violence

Now that this new country had declared independence from Britain, the founders still needed to design a new government that would provide for the public good. After the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation created a relatively weak national government. At the same time, individual state constitutions governed their own territories.

Many colonists at the time wanted a weak national government with most power held by the states. They believed that their state governments were closest to the people and liked the idea of having local leaders managing local concerns. But over time, the problems with this arrangement became too obvious to ignore.

Mob Violence and a Rebellion in Massachusetts

By 1783, the Revolutionary War was over and Great Britain had officially recognized the United States as an independent country. But this did not mean the problems were over. There was a lot of war debt to pay. States put up trade barriers between one another. And there were disagreements about the way the state leaders were using taxes to pay that debt. This was an explosive situation for the new country.

In mid-1786, farmers in western Massachusetts took matters into their own hands. They were tired of high land taxes (and growing debt) and feeling as if the ruling class in Boston didn't represent them. Under the leadership of 39-year-old former Revolutionary War soldier Daniel Shays, farmers armed themselves and prepared to march to Boston and confront members of the Massachusetts government. The national government could do little in this time of crisis. It didn't have the power to solve the debt problem or to raise an army to put down the rebellion. For some, the uprising in Massachusetts was convincing proof that the Articles of Confederation were simply too weak to solve the nation's many problems.

The Articles of Confederation

Shays' Rebellion was just one example of trouble brewing in the states. There was competition between the states, too. Some states taxed goods from other states, or began printing their own currency, which led to arguments over trade. Many of the founders believed that the national government established by the Articles of Confederation was not strong enough to meet the promises of this new nation. The government formed by the Articles, a league of friendship, mostly preserved state power (and independence).

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Notes and Questions:

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Topic 2: The “Critical Period”

By the end of 1786, it was becoming increasingly clear to the founders that the Articles of Confederation were too weak to establish the type of government they envisioned for the new country. How did this understanding help the country move toward a new plan for national government, the U.S. Constitution?

State Constitutions

When the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in 1787, the nation already had a framework of government—the Articles of Confederation. And the Constitutional Convention itself was, in many ways, a response to the weaknesses of this form of government. As you’ve uncovered, this national government was too weak to provide for its citizens or prevent unhealthy competition between the states.

In May of 1776, before the Articles were drafted, the Second Continental Congress invited the states to write their own state constitutions. In writing these constitutions, the states engaged in an inspiring experiment in creating self-government. This experience helped inform those who eventually wrote the U.S. Constitution in 1788.

State Governments and Disorder

The creation of new state constitutions was an important experiment in self-rule. But without a strong national government, problems emerged from competition between the states and state governments that granted most power to the lower houses of their legislatures. For example, after the state constitutions were written, many states started making claims on the vast lands to the west. This caused concern and competition. One of the reasons the states agreed to ratify the Articles was to resolve this competition.

Even with the question of western territory partly resolved, the problems in the states continued. The different states had both the responsibility to pay their own war debts and the power to print their own money. This was a dangerous combination. Many states tried to print their way out of debt. This caused inflation, which meant that the money being printed had less value. When people saw that their money was worth less, they got angry. This anger led to mob violence.

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Mobs and factions were major concerns of the founders. They believed that one role of a constitution is to set up the government to slow down the political process, cool emotions and calm passions, and promote thoughtful discussion and compromise. The founding generation wanted to create a government that delivered results driven by reason and by a desire to serve the common good, not private self-interest.

In *Federalist* No. 10, James Madison explains how a good national government will counteract the dangers of faction. He argued that while state constitutions improved on those that came before them, they still have problems; they are unstable; and they often value the interests of factions over the common good.

Are these concerns the same today?

Notes and Questions: