

Articles of Confederation Activity

With your group, prepare a short skit that illustrates your assigned issue relating to the Articles of Confederation. You may be assigned a failure or a success of the articles. After your skit, be prepared to take questions about your topic. You may use any books in the classroom to do further research on your topic. You will have approximately 20 minutes to prepare your presentation and 10 minutes to present and take questions from the group.

Federal Debt, Taxation, and Commerce

The United States had a large debt at the end of the Revolutionary War. The Confederation Congress tried to raise revenue, but states did not want to raise taxes and the Congress did not have the power to force revenue measures on the states.

The Confederation Congress did not have the power to regulate commerce. It could not regulate trade between the US and foreign nations OR between the various states. States competed with one another to get the best trading deals with foreign nations and they charged tariffs on goods entering from other states. The British prevented American ships from landing in the British West Indies and thereby cut off trade between the US and the British West Indies. The federal government also could not stop British goods from flooding American markets and hurting American manufacturing because they could not raise tariffs. Tariffs would also have been a source of revenue.

Western Land / Northwest Ordinance

During the Confederation period many states claimed land west of the 13 original states. There were competing claims for much of this land. One success of the Articles of Confederation Congress was getting the states to hand this land over to the Federal government. The Confederation Congress wrote the Northwest Ordinance which divided the land into territories, set up a governing structure and developed the method for turning these territories into states. These states were admitted on equal terms with the rest of the US and the inhabitants were guaranteed civil and religious liberty. Slavery was also prohibited in the Northwest Territory.

British Forts, Indian Conflict, and the Spanish

During the Confederation period, the British refused to evacuate the western forts ceded to the US in the Treaty of Paris ending the Revolution. British fur traders, based in these forts, encouraged tribal resistance to the US government. Indians sometimes raided American settlers who were moving into the trans-Appalachian west. As a result of this, individual states began to plan military action against the Indians.

Spain closed the Mississippi River to American traffic in 1784 including barring Americans from using the port of New Orleans. Without the tax dollars to support a strong army and navy, there was little the US government could do about it. Spain also still disputed the border of the US with Spanish Florida and claimed parts of present-day Mississippi and Alabama.

Debtors and Shays' Rebellion

A severe postwar depression had a dramatic negative impact on small farmers and merchants. The US Congress under the Articles did could not create a standardized currency nor could they regulate the money supply. There was a shortage of hard cash and debtors faced business failure and farm foreclosures. Western counties were particularly hard hit and many western farmers, underrepresented in many state legislatures, lost their farms and had their goods sold at auction. Such problems in Massachusetts led to Shays' Rebellion where farmers including many Revolutionary War veterans marched on Springfield, MA burning the courthouse and trying to seize an armory.

Some states responded to the demands of debtors and issued more paper money and/or annulled some debts. These policies upset creditors some of whom were in debt themselves to English merchants.

Shayne E. Klein, Academic Dean and History Teacher, Raleigh Charter High School