**1. The core components of the Articles of Confederation**

The first government of the United States following the Declaration of Independence was the Articles of Confederation (1781-1789). A confederation is a state-centered, decentralized government where the primary powers of government are held at the state level. The Declaration of Independence spoke of the many abuses of King George III, who, as a monarch, ruled over the executive, legislative and judiciary powers of the government. In the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson stated that both King George III and the form of government in place at the time both failed to protect the colonists’ “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.” The unitary government, one that centralized the legislative, executive and judicial powers, was unacceptable to the colonists when they sought to create a government after declaring their independence from the British crown.

The colonists decided to create a government that was quite different from a unitary system where the powers of government were concentrated in a single person. This decentralized system reflected the colonists’ fear of a powerful central government. Under the Articles of Confederation, states retained their freedom and independence. Each of the 13 states had a vote in the weak national Congress (appointed by the state governments), while a vote of all 9 states was required in order to pass any laws and a unanimous vote of all 13 states was required for the Articles to be amended. The national Congress was also denied the power to tax, so it could not pay for the army and navy needed to defend the nation. The national Congress also lacked the power to regulate trade. As for the other powers of government, there was no national court system nor was there a national executive.

The result of this decentralized approach was that each state functioned in many ways as an independent country. Several states negotiated their own trade agreements with those countries that the king had previously convinced not to have a relationship with the colonies, while other states established their own militaries. The lack of a national court system meant that criminals committing crimes in one state would often seek refuge in other states where they would not be prosecuted. Without a national military, states that were attacked or suffered internal rebellion could not turn to the national government for support or resources for their defense. The result of these state actions was that the states, despite being part of the same country, did not function as a nation. For instance, fears emerged that the 13 states functioning as independent countries would make the nation vulnerable to attack by Spain, France, by Native Americans.

Together the lack of powers held by the weak national Congress coupled with each state’s independent and often conflicting actions, raised concerns that the Articles of Confederation were not designed in a way to protect the new nation. In February 1787, Alexander Hamilton called for a constitutional convention, a “Meeting of Commissioners to Remedy Defects of the Federal Government” to take place the following May. In May 1787, 12 of the 13 states met in Philadelphia, PA for this purpose. The outcome of that meeting was the U.S. Constitution which was completed on September 17, 1787 and sent to the states for their review and ratification.

**2. Responding to Shays’s Rebellion**

Shays’s Rebellion was a citizen rebellion that began in 1786. Two thousand western Massachusetts farmers marched on county courthouses to prevent land foreclosures. The farmers’ land was threatened with foreclosure because they were assured that they did not have to pay taxes and other debts on their land during the Revolutionary War. These promises were not kept, which prompted the farmers to revolt. Congress would not respond because it was too weak and did not have its own army.

Shays’s Rebellion prompted representatives from five states to meet in Annapolis, Maryland in February 1787 to call for a constitutional convention of all 13 states the following May in Philadelphia. Congress stated that the purpose of this May convention was “the sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation.”

**3. Definitions and Key Points**

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| **Word/Term** | **Part of Speech** | **Definition** |
| **Articles of Confederation** | proper noun | the first constitution of the United States, adopted in 1781 and replaced in 1789 |
| **confederation** | noun | a system of government where power is located with the independent states and there is little power in the central government |
| **Constitutional Convention** | proper noun | a meeting in Philadelphia in 1787 where delegates decided to throw out the Articles of Confederation and draft the Constitution |
| **debt** | noun | something owed; such as money |
| **Shays’s Rebellion** | proper noun | an event when 2000 Massachusetts farmers rebelled against land foreclosures and debt from the Revolutionary War |

**Key Points:**

* In 1775, the Revolutionary War begins between the colonists and the British.
* In 1776, the Declaration of Independence is signed.
* The Revolutionary War continued until 1783.
* After the Revolutionary War, the newly formed United States created the Articles of Confederation to give the new country a sense of unity.

**4. The Articles of Confederation - Purpose of Reading:** *What are the Articles of Confederation & how did it’s’ weaknesses lead to the writing of the U.S. Constitution?*

The Articles of Confederation was written in 1776 and finally ratified, or approved, by the original thirteen states in 1781. Maryland was the last state to ratify the document in 1781. The confederation was the first government of the newly formed United States. A confederation is a government system where power is located with the independent states and there is little power in the central government. The desire for a confederation came from the colonists’ experience under King George III from England. They wanted to create a system that wouldn’t allow for unfair taxing or limiting individual rights.

Under the Articles of Confederation, most power was with the states. The articles stated that each colony was to act as an independent state, and that each state had the right to pass laws within their borders. The articles also established a weak national legislature to oversee interactions between the states.

Under the Articles of Confederation, states maintained their freedom and independence. As a result, states functioned in many ways as independent countries. For example, several states negotiated their own trade agreements with other countries, while other states established their own militaries.

With the states having the majority of government power, the central government had no control over the states’ actions and people began to fear that this system of government was not working because the national government was too weak. The Congress did not have the power to tax, so it could not pay for the army and navy needed to defend the nation. It also couldn’t regulate the trade agreements states were making with other countries. The Congress could also not enforce any laws they passed because there was no central leadership to make sure that laws were being enforced in each state or a central judicial system to interpret laws or settle disputes between states. Finally, if any changes were to be made to the Articles of Confederation, unanimous approval from all 13 states was required. This made it difficult to make any changes to the articles. As a result, the lack of powers held by the weak national Congress combined with each state’s independent actions, raised concerns that the Articles of Confederation were not designed in a way to protect the new nation.

By 1786 the economy of the United States was struggling due to debt, or money owed, from the Revolutionary War and because states were arguing over boundary lines and taxes. This economic situation impacted individual states and also individual citizens, especially farmers and merchants. These circumstances led to Shays’s Rebellion, a revolt by 2,000 western Massachusetts farmers who marched on county courthouses to prevent land foreclosures. A foreclosure is when a bank or other entity takes back property when taxes or debts are not paid. The farmers’ land was threatened with foreclosure because they were promised that they did not have to pay taxes and other debts on their land during the Revolutionary War. These promises were not kept and this led the farmers to revolt. Congress did not respond because it was too weak and did not have its own army. The Massachusetts militia finally ended the rebellion, but the situation made it clear that the national government did not have the ability to maintain order in this new nation. After Shays’s Rebellion, Alexander Hamilton of New York organized a meeting in Philadelphia in 1787. This meeting, called the Constitutional Convention, would eventually throw out the Articles of Confederation and draft the Constitution.

The freedom that the American Revolution sought to preserve proved to create a government under the Articles of Confederation that could not keep law and order. However, the experience with the Articles of Confederation led to the writing of the Constitution in 1787.

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| **Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation** |
| LACK OF POWER AND MONEY |
| Congress had no power to collect taxes |
| Congress had no power to regulate trade |
| Congress had no power to enforce its laws |
| LACK OF CENTRAL POWER |
| No single leader or group directed government policy |
| No national court system existed |
| RULES TOO RIGID |
| Congress could not pass laws without the approval of 9 states |
| The Articles could not be changed without the agreement of all 13 states |