



### Our Weak Federal Government

“The weakness of our federal government . . . prevents the adoption of any measures that are requisite for us as a nation; it keeps us from paying our honest debts; it also throws out of our power all the profits of commerce, and this drains us of cash.”

—Noah Webster, complaining about national government, 1786

◀ A variety of state currencies weakened the nation’s economy.

## Governing a New Nation

### Objectives

- Discuss the ideas that guided the new state governments.
- Describe the government under the Articles of Confederation.
- Explain the Ordinances of 1785 and 1787 and their importance to westward expansion.
- Identify the problems created by a weak central government.

### 🔍 Reading Skill

**Identify Propositions** The study of history often takes you inside important debates over ideas and actions. People propose their ideas and then give reasons to support those ideas. Identifying those propositions will help you to understand the beliefs and experiences of people in an earlier time. One way to identify propositions is to ask yourself what problems people had and how they proposed solving those problems.

### Key Terms and People

constitution  
executive

economic  
depression  
Daniel Shays

**Why It Matters** Leaders of the new American nation recalled how the king and Parliament in faraway England had exerted excessive power over colonial legislatures. Many Americans favored a republic in which the states had more power than the central government.

🎯 **Section Focus Question:** What were the major successes and failures of the government under the Articles of Confederation?

### Government by the States

As the Continental Congress began moving toward independence in 1776, leaders in the individual states began creating governments. Eleven of the 13 states wrote new constitutions to support their governments. A **constitution** is a document stating the rules under which a government will operate. The other two states—Rhode Island and Connecticut—kept using their colonial charters. However, they removed all references to the British king.

**Writing State Constitutions** In writing state constitutions, Americans were well aware of the problems that had led to the Revolution. Colonists had been unhappy with governors appointed by the British Crown. Thus, the new constitutions minimized the powers of state governors. Instead, they gave most of the power to state legislatures elected by the people.



The governor served as the state's executive. In a government, the **executive is the person who runs the government and sees that the laws are carried out.** Governors appointed key state officials, but usually the legislature had to approve the appointments.

The new constitutions allowed more people to vote than in colonial times. Nonetheless, all but a few states barred African Americans (including those who were free) from voting. New Jersey allowed some women to vote until 1807, but women could not vote in any other state. In order to vote, white males had to be 21 or older. In most states, they also had to own a certain amount of property.

**Protecting Rights** The Declaration of Independence listed ways that Britain had violated the rights of colonists. To prevent such abuses, states sought to protect individual rights. Virginia was the first state to include a bill of rights in its constitution. Virginia's list included freedom of the press and the right to trial by jury, and it also barred "cruel and unusual punishments." The final clause guaranteed freedom of religion:

**“That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience.”**

—Virginia Bill of Rights, 1776

Many other states followed Virginia's lead. For example, the New York state constitution also included a bill of rights that guaranteed freedom of religion:

**“This convention doth further, in the name and by the authority of the good people of this State, ordain, determine, and declare, that the free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, shall forever hereafter be allowed, within this State, to all mankind.”**

—New York Constitution of 1777

Massachusetts also included freedom of religion in its bill of rights. However, Massachusetts did retain its official church. Massachusetts's bill of rights declared that people have the freedom to worship as they please, so long as they did not disturb the public peace or interfere with other people's freedom of worship.

**Checkpoint** Why did many state constitutions limit the power of state governors?

### Vocabulary Builder

**individual** (in duh vü oo uhl)

**adj.** of, for, or by a single person or thing

### Protecting Rights

Virginia included a bill of rights in its constitution. The Virginia bill of rights became a model for other states and, later, for the national Constitution. **Critical Thinking:**

**Link Past and Present** Which protections in the Virginia bill of rights are enjoyed by all Americans today?

Do This



### Virginia Bill of Rights

- Freedom of Religion
- Freedom of the Press
- Trial by Jury
- Limits on Searches
- Limits on Arrests
- No Cruel and Unusual Punishment

Do This

## The Articles of Confederation

While the states were writing their constitutions, the Continental Congress created a plan for the nation as a whole. It was called the Articles of Confederation. Congress adopted the Articles in 1777.

**Form of Government** Instead of having three branches of government like those of most states, the government under the Articles had just one branch—a one-house legislature, called Congress. There was no executive and no system of national courts.

Within Congress, all states would be equal and each had a single vote. Moreover, for the most important matters, nine states had to agree before a law could go into effect.

**Limited Government** The framers of the Articles of Confederation kept in mind their complaints against Britain. Parliament had passed laws the colonists considered unfair. The new states did not want to risk giving too much power to a central government far from the people. Thus, the Articles provided for a limited central government.

Under the Articles, most power remained in the hands of the states. Congress could not regulate trade or collect taxes. Instead, it had to ask the states for the money it needed.

Congress did have some powers under the Articles. It could deal with foreign nations and with Native Americans outside the 13 states. It could make laws, declare war, coin or borrow money, and run a postal service. However, the national government had no power to enforce the laws that it made. For that, it depended on the states.



### Identify Propositions

What issues concerned the framers when they were drafting the Articles of Confederation? What did they propose in response?

Do This

 **Checkpoint** How did the Articles of Confederation ensure the power of the states?

Do This

## Settling the Western Lands

The Articles had to be approved by all 13 states. But some states would not give their approval until other states dropped their claims to vast areas of land west of the Appalachian Mountains. It took years to get all the states to give up their claims to western lands. In 1781, Virginia was the final state to agree. Only then did Maryland approve the Articles of Confederation, the final state to do so.

The western lands that the states had given up were turned over to the national government. They proved to be very valuable. Land was in great demand. It could be sold off, piece by piece, to private companies seeking to develop western settlements.

**Land Ordinance of 1785** Congress had to devise a system for land sales and settlement. Under the Land Ordinance of 1785, surveyors were to divide public lands into townships, 6 miles on each side. This would result in a grid of squares. Within each township there would also be a grid, 1 mile on each side. These 36 sections would be sold for no less than \$1 an acre.

### Vocabulary Builder

**devise** (dee vīz) *v.* to think up an idea for something and figure out how it will work



Within each township, one section was set aside to support schools. This reflected the belief of the nation's leaders that democracy depended on education. Thomas Jefferson later wrote:

“If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

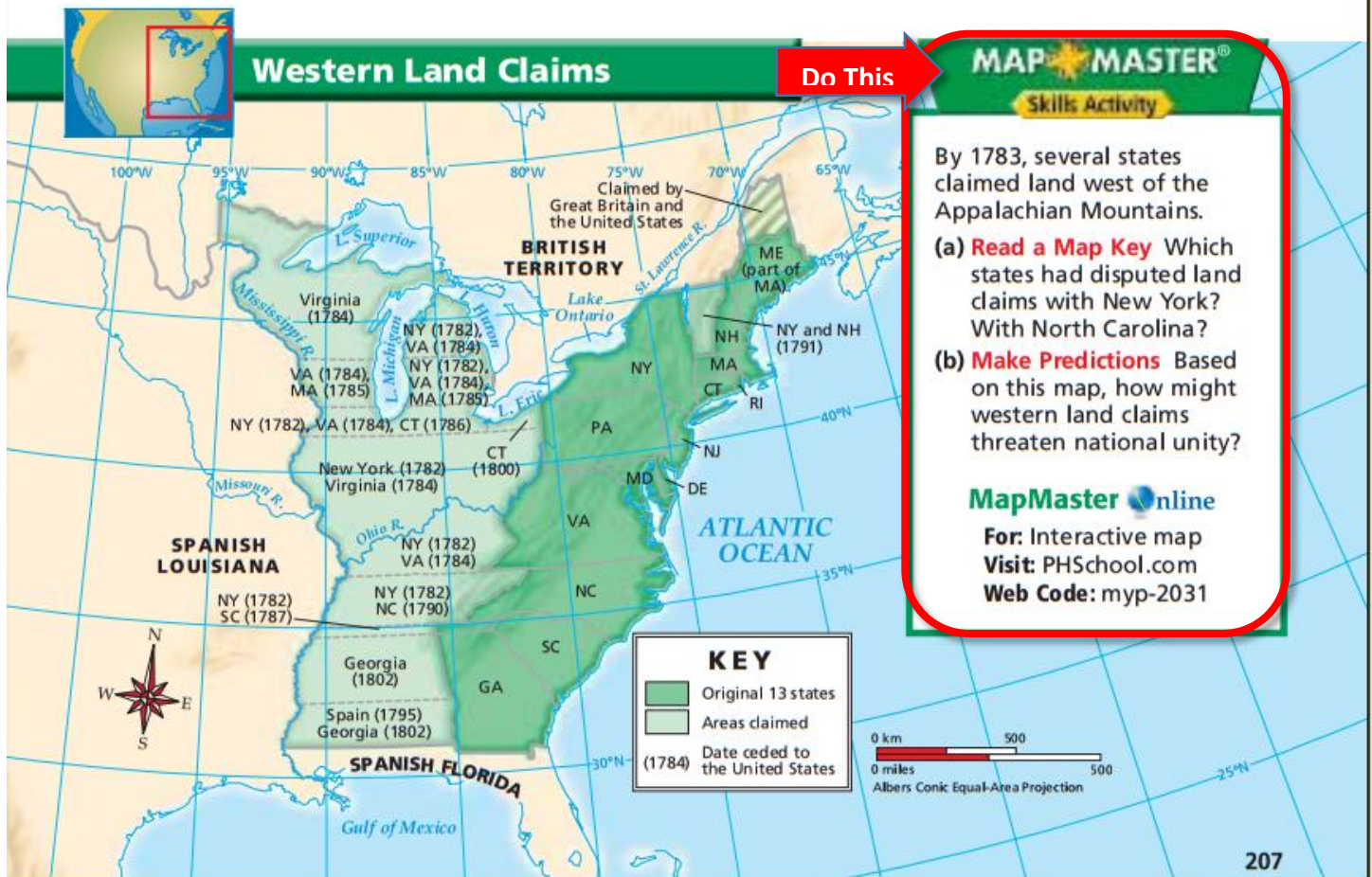
—Thomas Jefferson, letter to Charles Yancey, 1816

**Northwest Ordinance of 1787** Investors were eager to buy land in the Northwest Territory, north of the Ohio River. They pressed Congress to determine how this area would be governed. In response, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. It guaranteed basic rights for settlers and banned slavery there.

The Northwest Ordinance set a three-step process for admitting new states. When a territory was just starting to be settled, Congress would appoint a governor, a secretary, and three judges. Once the territory had 5,000 free adult male settlers, it could elect a legislature. When the free population reached 60,000, the territory could ask to become a state. In time, five states—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin—were carved out of the Northwest Territory. (For more on the settling of the Northwest Territory, see the Geography and History feature.)

**Checkpoint** How did the two ordinances turn national land into private holdings?

Do This



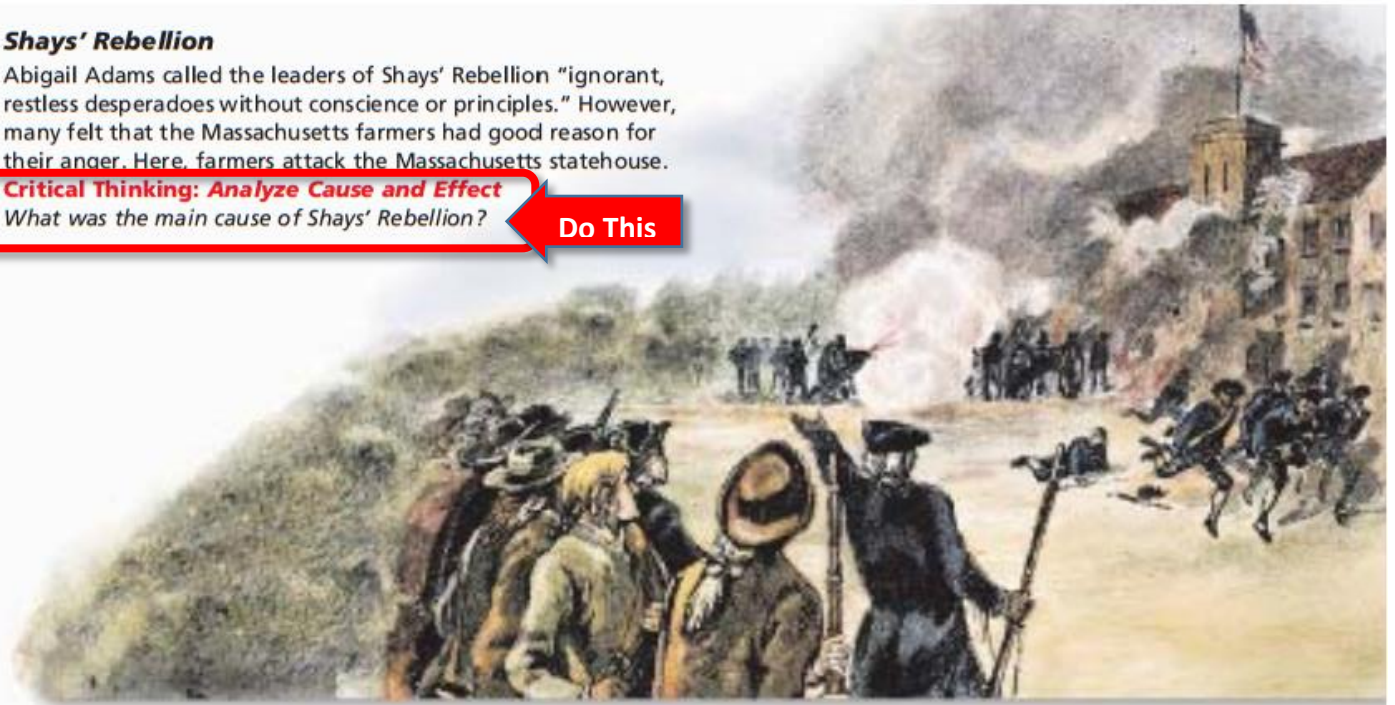


### Shays' Rebellion

Abigail Adams called the leaders of Shays' Rebellion "ignorant, restless desperadoes without conscience or principles." However, many felt that the Massachusetts farmers had good reason for their anger. Here, farmers attack the Massachusetts statehouse.

**Critical Thinking: Analyze Cause and Effect**  
What was the main cause of Shays' Rebellion?

Do This



## Growing Problems

Under the Articles of Confederation, the United States had many successes. It waged a successful war for independence, negotiated a peace treaty with Britain, and set up rules for settling new territories. But the United States faced growing problems during the 1780s. Many Americans concluded that the Articles did not give the government enough power to solve these problems.

**Economic Problems** Under the Articles, each state set its own trade policy. Each state tried to help its own farmers and manufacturers by setting taxes on goods brought in from other states. This practice discouraged trade among the states. In addition, each state printed its own money, making trade between states harder.

Another problem grew from the fact that the central government did not have the power to tax. As a result, there was little money to run the government. The situation grew more desperate every year.

**Foreign Affairs** Because the United States seemed to be weak, powerful nations viewed it with scorn. British troops continued to occupy forts in the Northwest Territory, although the peace treaty required that the forts be turned over to the United States. The Spanish, who controlled New Orleans, refused to let Americans ship products down the Mississippi River. Therefore, western farmers had to send products along the rugged trails over the Appalachian Mountains, which was far more costly.


**Shays' Rebellion** In the mid-1780s, a severe economic depression hit the United States. An **economic depression** is a period when business activity slows, prices and wages drop, and unemployment rises. As the depression deepened, there was widespread despair and anger.




The depression hit farmers in Massachusetts especially hard. As crop prices declined, many were unable to pay their taxes. The state government then began seizing some farms and selling them in order to get the back taxes. Angry farmers demanded that the legislature stop the farm sales. They also demanded that the state issue more paper money to make it easier to get loans. Still, the legislators took no action.

In August 1786, a former Revolutionary War captain named **Daniel Shays** led an uprising of about 1,000 Massachusetts farmers. When the farmers tried to seize arms from a state warehouse, the state called out the militia. Shays and other leaders were arrested.

Although Shays' Rebellion fizzled, it had frightened some leading Americans. They believed that a stronger central government would protect against popular unrest. In response, Congress asked the states to send delegates to a convention in Philadelphia in 1787. Their task was to revise the Articles of Confederation.

 **Checkpoint** What did Shays' Rebellion demonstrate about the strength of the national government under the Articles of Confederation?

**Do This**

 **Looking Back and Ahead** After 10 years of independence, some leading Americans had come to the conclusion that the Articles of Confederation needed improvement. The Philadelphia convention was called to revise the Articles. But were the Articles of Confederation worth saving? Or was an entirely new framework required? This decision would be one of the first issues that the delegates at the Philadelphia convention would confront.

## Section 1 | Check Your Progress

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### Comprehension and Critical Thinking

- 1. (a) Recall** Why did the Continental Congress make the federal government weak when it drew up the Articles of Confederation?  
**(b) Explain Problems** Why did foreign powers treat the U.S. government under the Articles of Confederation with scorn?
- 2. (a) Recall** Why was a section of public land set aside to support public schools under the Land Ordinance of 1785?  
**(b) Analyze Cause and Effect** How does education contribute to a successful democracy?

### Reading Skill

- 3. Identify Propositions** Reread the text following the heading "Land Ordinance of 1785." What belief did the nation's leaders have about education? What did they propose to further this belief?

### Key Terms

- Fill in the blanks with the correct key terms.
- 4.** After the break with Britain, each of the states wrote a new \_\_\_\_\_, a framework for the state government.

- 5.** The \_\_\_\_\_ is the person in a government responsible for carrying out the laws.
- 6.** In the 1780s, when business slowed and unemployment rose, the nation entered a period of \_\_\_\_\_.

### Writing

- 7.** Identify two problems caused by the creation of a weak national government under the Articles of Confederation. Write a sentence about each problem, explaining why it was important that it be solved.

**Do This**