

Aftermath of the Revolution

Introduction

The American Revolution succeeded in accomplishing independence from England. But after achieving independence, Americans were faced with problems that they tried to overcome.

In domestic affairs:

- The national government was close to bankruptcy.
- Competition between different states led to political tension and a weak economy.
- Continental Army officers threatened military action against Congress.
- Armed mobs in Massachusetts closed courts and threatened a state armory.

In foreign affairs:

- North African pirates enslaved American sailors.
- Britain, refused to remove soldiers from its forts in western lands owned by the US.
- Spain was looking to take advantage of the United States' weak condition and gain land in North America.

By 1787, many of the new nation's leaders were convinced that the success of the American Revolution was at risk. And under the Articles of Confederation, the national government was powerless to do anything.

The Articles of Confederation

The Articles of Confederation was the first constitution of the United States. Because American leaders feared that the national government of the United States might abuse its power (like the English government had done before), the Articles created a weak national government and powerful state governments.

Under the Articles, the national government had the power to declare war, appoint military officers, sign treaties, make alliances, appoint foreign ambassadors, and manage relations with Indians. State governments had the power to tax, which meant that Congress could raise money only by asking the states for money, borrowing from foreign governments, or selling western lands. Also, Congress could not draft soldiers into the army or make laws about trading between states.

The people who wrote the Articles assumed that the states would carry out their duties and follow decisions made by Congress. But states often refused to make their contributions to the national government. As a result, Congress was not able to meet its financial responsibilities -- it had to stop paying back money that it had borrowed from foreign governments and the Continental army threatened to rebel over lack of pay.

Problems with the Economy

To raise money, many states placed taxes on goods from other states. Different states did not work well together and the national government did not have the power to force the states to cooperate. By the mid-1780s, Connecticut was putting heavier taxes on goods from Massachusetts than on those from Britain!

Meanwhile, the national government was close to bankruptcy. The Dutch and French didn't trust the national government to repay its debts and were unwilling to lend it more money since only state governments had the power to tax. Because there was no national currency, each state printed its own money, making it difficult to trade between states. And to make matters worse, individual states printed so much currency that it became basically worthless.

Problems with Safety and Security

After the Revolution, American trading ships did not have the protection of the British navy. Since the U.S. navy was weak, North African pirates were able to capture American ships without much fear of being caught. In 1785, Algerian pirates boarded an American merchant ship sailing off the coast of Portugal, took its 21 member crew, and enslaved them for 21 years. Over the next 8 years, a hundred more Americans became captives.

Meanwhile, Britain was angry that state governments did not give back loyalist property that had been taken during the Revolution. As a result, Britain refused to leave its military posts in western lands that had been given to the U.S. as part of the Treaty of Paris. At the same time, Spain refused to recognize American claims to these lands and secretly tried to plot with westerners to take areas that would later become the states of Kentucky and Tennessee.

Problems with State Governments

By the mid 1780s, many of country's most influential leaders were convinced that state governments had become the greatest source of tyranny in America. In the 10 years after independence, state governments passed more laws than in the previous 100 years.

The nation's leaders were especially distressed by the kinds of laws that were being passed. In Pennsylvania, people running the state government were angry that Quakers (who were pacifists) had refused to fight in the Revolution. As a result, the state government took away the right of Quakers to vote and even imprisoned some of them -- clearly violating their rights.

In addition, several states started making agreements with European nations and Native Americans. This led to confusing situations where Europeans and Native Americans had to negotiate separate agreements with different states, rather than working out one agreement with the national government.

Shay's Rebellion

In 1786, farmers in western Massachusetts who had borrowed money were having trouble repaying their debts. As a result, these farmers were forced to give up their property to make up for the money that they owed. They appealed to the state government for help, but the state government was unwilling to offer them the help that they wanted.

When courts in Massachusetts started to seize the property of farmers for repayment of debts, farmers led by a Revolutionary War veteran named Daniel Shays decided to take action. They took up weapons, marched to the county courthouse and threatened the judges with violence if they didn't do something to help the farmers keep their land.

Because the national government did not have the power to raise an army, they could do nothing to stop the farmers from using intimidation and threats of violence. Eventually, the farmers were defeated by the state militia. But the rebellion had made two things clear. First, many Americans were very unhappy with how things were going in the newly formed United States. Second, the national government was too weak to enforce its laws and protect the rights of its citizens.

Conclusion

By the spring of 1787, many national leaders believed that the new country's survival was at risk. The threat of national bankruptcy, economic conflicts between the states, Britain's refusal to leave its military posts, Spain's desire to take western lands, unfair laws being passed by state governments, and the armed rebellion in western Massachusetts all showed the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation. Many Americans believed that the only solution was to create a new constitution that would give the national government more power. But questions remained about how much power to give the new national government and how to make sure that it would not be able to abuse its power. It is in this environment that the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in 1787, 11 years after the Declaration of Independence and 4 years after the Treaty of Paris, with the purpose of creating a new constitution for the United States government.