Primary Sources: The Articles of Confederation

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The original cover of the Articles of Confederation, printed by Alexander Purdie in 1777. Photo: Library of Congress

Editor's Note: The Articles of Confederation were written over 17 months. The Continental Congress approved them on Nov. 15, 1777. The vote had to be unanimous. Three and a half years later, on March 1, 1781, the document became the United States' first constitution. Six years after that, in 1787, a committee met to revise the Articles of Confederation. It took almost four months, and the result was the United States Constitution. It was approved by all 13 states in 1790.

The following are the Articles of Confederation that were approved by Congress on Nov. 15, 1777. Roman numerals were used to number the articles.

To all readers, we the Delegates of the States, who have written our names below, send greeting.

The Delegates of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, did, on November 15, 1777, and in the Second Year of the Independence of America, agree to certain articles of Confederation. These Articles of Confederation create a Union between the

Article I. The name of this confederacy shall be “The United States of America.”

"Each State Shall Keep Control, Freedom, And Independence"

Article II. Each state shall keep control, freedom, and independence. Each state shall keep all rights and powers, except for those specifically given to the United States.

Article III. The states enter into a strong friendship with each other, for their common defense, the security of their Liberties, and their general welfare. They promise to assist each other, against all forces, or attacks made upon their religion, trade, or any other reason.

Article IV. There must be friendship and communication among the people of the different states in this union. Therefore the people of each state shall have the same privileges as those in any of the other states. The people of each state shall have the freedom and right to enter and leave any other state. They shall all have rights to business and trade. They must pay the same taxes. They must follow the same rules as people who live in the state. No state taxes can be put on the property of the United States.

If any Person guilty of, or charged with treason or crimes against the government, or other serious crimes, runs away to another state, he can be arrested there. Then he must be sent back to the state where the crime was committed. Records, acts and court decisions in one state will be honored in any other state.

"Delegates Shall Be Chosen In Each State"

Article V. Once a year, Delegates, who will take part in the United States Congress, shall be chosen in each state by that state's lawmakers. They will meet in Congress on the first Monday in November. Each state can change its Delegates at any time.

A State shall be represented in Congress by two to seven members and no person can be a member for more than three years out of any six years. Members cannot work and receive money in any other government job.

Each state shall pay its own Delegates for their work in meetings and on committees in Congress.

Each state shall have one vote in the United States Congress.

"Freedom Of Speech And Debate"

Freedom of speech and debate in Congress shall not be blocked or questioned in any Court.
Article VI. No state can meet with or make agreements or treaties with any king, prince, or state. No person holding any office for the United States can take a present from any king, prince or foreign state. The United States in congress cannot give out titles, such as earl or duke.

States shall not enter into any treaty or alliance between them unless the United States in congress gives permission to do so.

No state shall collect any taxes that interfere with international treaties entered into by Congress.

No vessels of war shall be kept up in time of peace by any state. No fighting forces or forts can be kept up by any state, in time of peace, unless directed by the United States in congress. Every state can have a small army for defense, armed with cannons, tents, arms, and ammunition.

"No State Shall Engage In Any War"

No state shall engage in any war without the agreement of the United States in congress. However, if the state is suddenly invaded, or has information that some nation of Indians will invade, and there is no time to inform the United States in congress, it may engage in war.

Article VII. Each state, to help defend the United States, can form and manage its own army. All officers, at or below the rank of colonel, shall be named by the state.

Article VIII. All costs for each state, to help defend the United States, shall be paid for by the treasury of the United States. Each state will send money to the treasury based on the value of all land and buildings within each state.

"The Right And Power To Declare War"

Article IX. The United States shall have the right and power to declare war and to send and receive ambassadors to and from other countries. The United States can make treaties and alliances with other countries, can attack ships in times of peace, and can set up courts for crimes committed at sea. The states shall keep the power to tax the export or import of any goods.

The United States in congress will be the last court of appeal in all cases between two or more states. One state shall present a signed paper or petition to congress stating its argument and asking for a meeting. The other state or states will be told when to come before Congress. The lawyers for the states will agree on who will be the judges for the case. If they cannot agree, congress shall name three persons out of each of the United States. From the list of 39, 13 will be chosen, and from those 13, Congress will choose 7-9 names. By choosing lots, 5 shall be the judges. Each judge shall take an oath stating, “well and truly to hear and determine the matter in question, according to the best of his
judgment, without favor, affection or hope of reward." If any of the parties shall refuse to appear and defend their claim or cause, the court shall make a final judgment. All cases about the private right to land claimed under different grants of two or more states will be decided in the same way.

"The Right To Create Post-Offices"

The United States in congress shall have the right to create and set the value of coins and to choose the standard of weights and measures throughout the United States. The United States in congress shall have the right to set the rules for the trade and managing all affairs with the Indians. The United States in congress shall have the right to create post-offices and set the cost of postage. This money will pay for the cost of running the post-offices. The United States in congress shall have the right to appoint all officers of the land and naval forces that serve the United States and make rules for these forces.

The United States in congress shall appoint "A Committee of the States," to work when congress is not in session. It will have one delegate from each state. The United States in congress shall appoint other committees and civil officers to manage the business of the United States. No person shall be allowed to serve in the office of president more than one year in any term of three years.

"Congress Can Borrow Money"

The United States in congress shall decide how much money is to be raised to run the government. Congress can borrow money in the name of the United States. Every half year, a report of the sums of money so borrowed must be sent to the states. The United States in congress shall build and equip a navy and shall set the number of land forces. The number of soldiers in each state will be in proportion to the number of white people living in the state. The lawmakers in each state shall appoint the officers and decide how to choose the men. The soldiers' clothes, arms and equipment will be the expense of the United States. The United States in congress can decide that any state should not send men into the army, or should send a smaller number. A state can decide if a number of soldiers cannot be safely spared.

The United States in congress must have the votes of nine of the states in congress to use any of the powers listed in this article. They can end a session of Congress with majority vote.

"Congress Must Meet At Least Once Every Six Months"

The congress of the United States shall have power to set a schedule for meetings of Congress. Congress must meet at least once every six months. A Journal about their meetings shall be printed monthly, except such parts that require secrecy. The yeas and
nays of the delegates of each state on any question shall be entered on the Journal, when
it is desired by any delegate. At the request of the delegates of a state, they can receive a
copy of the Journal.

Article X. When congress is not in session, "The Committee of the States," or any nine
states, may act in its place, if 9 of the 13 states agree. The powers of the committee shall
be limited.

Article XI. If Canada chooses, it can join this confederation with the United States. No other
colony shall be admitted unless nine states agree.

Article XII. All monies borrowed under the authority of congress shall be a charge against
the United States. The congress pledges to pay all debts of the United States.

Article XIII. Every state shall follow these rules set down by the United States in congress.
The Articles of this confederation shall be followed and obeyed by every state. The union
shall never end. Any future changes must be approved by the congress of the United
States, and afterwards approved by the lawmakers of every state.

The Great Governor of the World has guided this congress to create and approve these
articles of confederation and this union which will last forever. Know that we, representing
our states, fully and entirely approve each and every of the said articles of confederation.
We do further promise that the people of our states shall follow all rules set down by the
United States in congress in these articles of confederation. We set our hands in Congress
done at Philadelphia in the state of Pennsylvania, July, 9, 1777, in the third year of the
independence of America.

On the part and behalf of the State of New Hampshire: Josiah Bartlett John Wentworth
Junr. August 8th 1778

On the part and behalf of The State of Massachusetts Bay: John Hancock Samuel Adams
Elbridge Gerry Francis Dana James Lovell Samuel Holten

On the part and behalf of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations: William
Ellery Henry Marchant John Collins

On the part and behalf of the State of Connecticut: Roger Sherman Samuel Huntington
Oliver Wolcott Titus Hosmer Andrew Adams

On the Part and Behalf of the State of New York: James Duane Francis Lewis Wm Duer
Gouv Morris

On the Part and in Behalf of the State of New Jersey, November 26, 1778. Jno Witherspoon
Nath. Scudder

On the part and behalf of the State of Pennsylvania: Robt Morris Daniel Roberdeau John
Bayard Smith William Clingan Joseph Reed 22nd July 1778
Quiz

1 How do Articles III and IV in the section "Each State Shall Keep Control, Freedom, And Independence" reflect a central idea of the document?

(A) They outline the power given to individual states and the role of the U.S. government.
(B) They explain that a person guilty of a crime in one state can be arrested in another state.
(C) They outline the powers of Congress to make laws for the states to follow.
(D) They explain the benefits and protections of states joining with one another.

2 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the section "Congress Must Meet At Least Once Every Six Months"?

(A) “The Committee of the States” may meet but its powers will be limited.
(B) Congress is responsible for meeting regularly and paying the nation’s debts.
(C) The delegates of each state may request and receive a copy of the journal.
(D) The articles were signed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1777.

3 According to the section "Each State Shall Keep Control, Freedom, And Independence," why is communication between the states important?

(A) so that they can share the same rights and do business with one another
(B) so that each state will have the same privileges as every other state
(C) so that state taxes cannot be put on the property of the United States
(D) so that all states will be required to pay the same taxes as other states

4 What is the MOST likely reason the authors included Article VI in the section "Freedom Of Speech And Debate"?

(A) They wanted to keep states from entering into agreements or wars that the whole country did not want.
(B) They wanted to keep foreign powers from giving any kind of gift or title to someone from the U.S.
(C) They wanted to make sure that the army of the U.S. did not grow to be too large and too powerful.
(D) They wanted to make sure that fighting forces and forts would be maintained for the defense of the nation.