Why did the Articles of Confederation fail?

By Martin Kelly, About.com Guide

The Articles of Confederation established the first governmental structure unifying the thirteen states that had fought in the American Revolution. They went into effect on March 1, 1781 and lasted until March 4, 1789 when they were replaced by the US Constitution. Why did the Articles of Confederation only last eight years? In effect why did the Articles of Confederation fail?

Answer: The purpose of the Articles of Confederation was to create a confederation of states whereby each state retained "its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every power, jurisdiction, and right ... not ... expressly delegated to the United States in Congress assembled." In other words, every state was as independent as possible with the United States only responsible for the common defense, security of liberties, and the general welfare. To this effect, the Articles were purposely written to keep the national government as weak as possible. However, there were many problems that soon became apparent as the Articles took effect.

Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation

Following is a list of the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation:

- Each state only had one vote in Congress, regardless of size.
- Congress had not have the power to tax.
- Congress did not have the power to regulate foreign and interstate commerce.
- There was no executive branch to enforce any acts passed by Congress.
- There was no national court system.
- Amendments to the Articles of Confederation required a unanimous vote.
- Laws required a 9/13 majority to pass in Congress.

Under the Articles of Confederation, states often argued amongst themselves. They also refused to financially support the national government. The national government was powerless to enforce any acts it did pass. Some states began making agreements with foreign governments. Most had their own military. Each state printed its own money. There was no stable economy.

In 1786, Shays' Rebellion occurred in western Massachusetts as a protest to rising debt and economic chaos. However, the national government was unable to gather a combined military force amongst the states to help put down the rebellion.

Gathering of the Philadelphia Convention

As the economic and military weaknesses became apparent, individuals began asking for changes to the Articles that would create a stronger national government. Initially, some states met to deal with their trade and economic problems. As more states became interested in meeting to change the Articles, a meeting was set in Philadelphia on May 25, 1787. This became the Constitutional Convention.