

THE CRITICAL PERIOD (1783-1789): FROM REVOLUTIONARY VICTORY TO CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

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Abstract

The paper examines the tumultuous era known as "The Critical Period" in the United States, spanning the years between the ratification of the Articles of Confederation and the creation of the Federal Constitution. It explores the diplomatic, economic, and domestic political challenges that plagued the young nation, exacerbated by the inherent weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, such as the inability to raise revenue, regulate commerce, or enforce laws. These deficiencies are symbolized in a political cartoon depicting the precarious state of the nation as a boat labelled "U.S.A. Articles of Confederation" nearing a perilous waterfall. Additionally, the paper delves into the social and political transformations following the American Revolution, noting an increased democratic involvement, debates over freedom and equality, and a shift towards a more inclusive society. It traces the evolving notions of political freedom and the rising participation of ordinary citizens in governance. The document outlines efforts to amend state constitutions and remedy the Articles' flaws, ultimately leading to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, which sought to establish a stronger federal government. The paper highlights the critical need for more robust central governance to address the nation's pressing issues and steer it away from chaos towards a more cohesive and effective national government.

Keywords: Articles of Confederation, Constitutional Convention, Critical Period, Political Instability, Federal Government Reform

INTRODUCTION

The time from the acceptance of the Articles of Confederation to the creation of the Federal Constitution (1783-1789) is commonly known as "The Critical Period" in American history (*From Independence to the U.S. Constitution*, 2022). This time was characterized by a range of obstacles, including from other countries and within the nation, which put the strength of the recently freed United States to the test. The initial governing document, the Articles of Confederation, did not adequately prepare the nation to handle these problems. American independence was officially acknowledged in the Treaty of Paris in 1783 ("Treaty of Paris, 1783," n.d.). Nevertheless, the British were hesitant to leave military posts in important areas, as they claimed Congress had not yet provided compensation for Loyalists who suffered property losses in the Revolution. Congress, without the power to mandate its suggestions to the states, did not make much headway in this area. This diplomatic tension highlighted the flaws of the Articles in handling international relations and upholding agreements. At home, the United States encountered significant economic and political difficulties. Lacking the authority to impose taxes or control commerce efficiently, the federal government found it difficult to generate income or clear war debts. Moreover, internal disputes and disagreements between states highlighted the deficiencies of a decentralized government. These problems prompted demands for change, resulting in the Constitutional Convention of 1787, where the Articles of Confederation were replaced with a more robust Federal Constitution to tackle these pressing issues.

Following the end of the American Revolution, the country faced economic turmoil marked by recession and rising prices. The absence of a standardized currency across states worsened economic challenges, with fluctuating currency values causing trade and commerce instability. During this time, there were increasing conflicts between various economic groups, especially between the farming communities in the west and the affluent industrial cities in the east (Wolf, 2008). Despite facing economic and political difficulties, the Articles of Confederation, although imperfect, succeeded in promoting a feeling of national togetherness. It united individuals from various regions of the nation, setting the stage for the creation of a national sense of self. Advancements in transportation and communication in this era brought the states together, encouraging the development of a common American identity. Nevertheless, the thrill and sense of accomplishment Americans experienced after winning the Revolutionary War and gaining independence were quickly dampened by internal unrest. According to political cartoons from that era, it appeared as though the country was moving towards chaos. The government's lack of ability under the Articles of Confederation to handle urgent economic matters, uphold laws, or ensure security led to a chaotic environment. Although the Articles of Confederation initially brought the states together, their flaws became evident, leading to the eventual establishment

of a more powerful federal government with the U.S. Constitution.

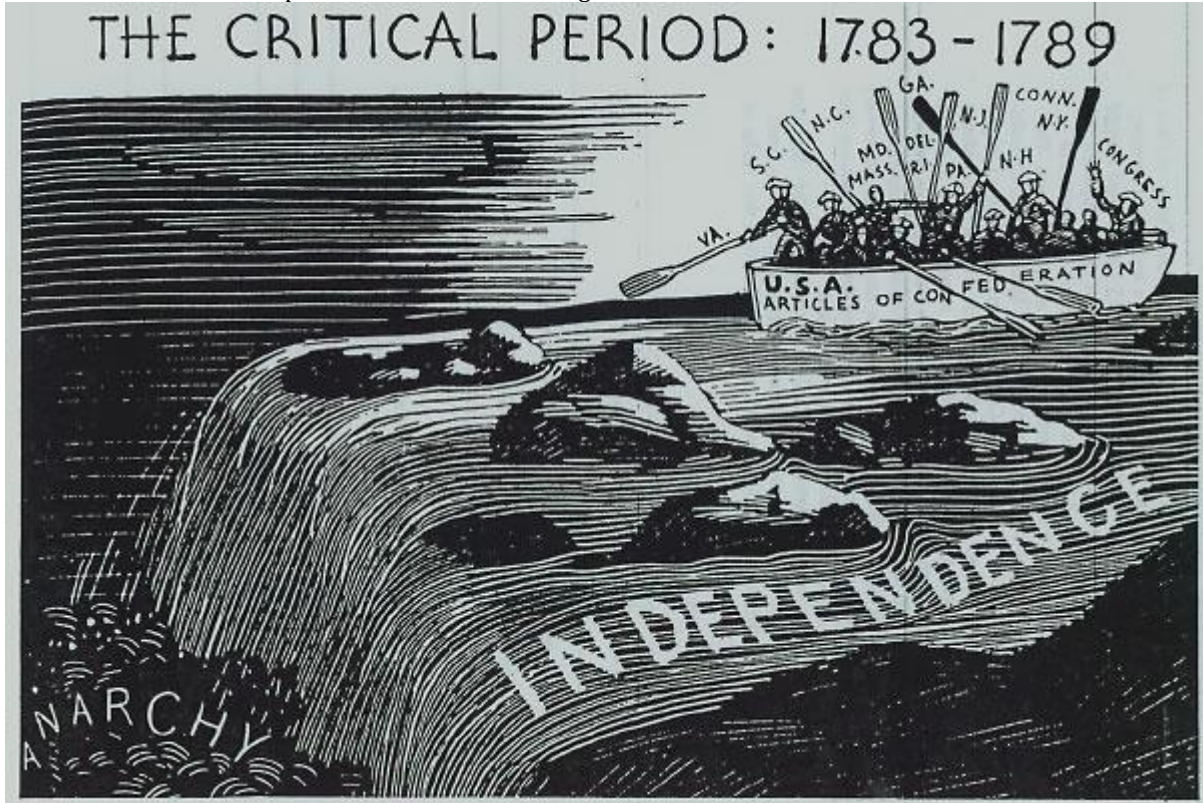


Figure 1 Critical Period by Historian John Fiske

The political cartoon called "The Critical Period 1783-1789" visually represents the delicate situation of the recently independent United States under the Articles of Confederation. The image depicts a boat named "U.S.A. Articles of Confederation" transporting multiple delegates, representing the officials guiding the country amid the tumultuous period. The boat nears a waterfall, symbolizing the upcoming crisis and struggles that the nation is dealing with, such as economic turmoil, ineffective leadership, and the risk of chaos. The rocks in the water represent the challenges faced by the developing country, like struggles with law enforcement, revenue generation, and order maintenance. The inclusion of the term "Independence" in the moving water implies that, although the nation gained independence, it was being carried by uncontrollable forces. The impending "Anarchy" suggested that, even with their newly acquired independence, the United States was heading towards disorder as a result of the flaws in the Articles of Confederation. The cartoonist depicts a combination of joy and terror. Some delegates seem satisfied, feeling proud about their recently gained independence. Nevertheless, this happiness is overshadowed by the understanding that the upcoming journey is dangerous. The leaders are guiding the country towards a future full of uncertainty, where the triumph over British rule could potentially result in chaos. The cartoon depicts the delicate equilibrium between the pleasure of autonomy and the intimidating responsibility of ruling a fledgling country.

Following the American Revolution, notable changes occurred in social and political realms, particularly within the urban working class of cities such as New York and Boston (Nisbet, 1976). Employees created political groups in order to prevent lawyers and affluent individuals from holding power, indicating an increasing demand for more inclusive democratic involvement. One of the key changes was the significant rise in the participation of ordinary men in legislatures, with their representation increasing from 17% to 60%. This change signalled a new definition of freedom, as the spirit of revolution expanded to include more than just governing oneself in communities.

Prior to the revolution, freedom was frequently connected to the ability of local groups to rule themselves. Nevertheless, following independence, the idea of freedom grew to encompass more extensive political and economic involvement. Those in power following the revolution believed that freedom entailed giving all individuals, not just the privileged few, the opportunity to participate in the political system. This idea also included reducing the impact of personal riches and possessions to encourage financial fairness. These shifts signified a transition to a society that was more welcoming and participatory, recognizing the wealth gap as a matter of politics.

By 1795, a new generation of leaders emerged as many of the initial revolutionary figures had died. These up-and-coming leaders were males who had participated in the Revolution and hailed from states such as Massachusetts, New York, and Virginia. The challenges they faced during the war brought them together, reducing the regional differences that had separated the colonies before. The latest generation aimed to uphold

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revolutionary principles but took a new direction by emphasizing national unity through a wider, more equal vision of freedom and administration.

In the 1780s, it became increasingly clear that the Articles of Confederation were deficient, and the state governments formed during the Revolution were adding to the instability. During the excitement of the Revolution, numerous state constitutions were hastily written, focusing on populism. Many states created one legislative body to empower representatives of the people, limiting the influence of governors and judges. This establishment pleased revolutionary leaders who aimed to remove barriers to majority rule, enabling the people's desires to be directly represented, free from intervention from executive or judicial branches (Wolf, 2008).

Nevertheless, this framework caused issues with governing, since unrestrained legislative authority frequently led to ineffectiveness and dishonesty. Acknowledging these concerns, a few states started amending their constitutions in the early 1780s to establish a more equitable government structure. For instance, in 1780 Massachusetts ratified a new constitution which formed a two-chambered legislative body. One house was selected by common people, while the other was picked based on property taxes, signifying richer property owners. This system of checks and balances enabled both houses to examine and make changes to each other's laws, encouraging a more moderate style of governing.

Other states did the same. In 1784, New Hampshire made changes to its constitution so that governors could select judges and lawmakers, thus increasing the power of the executive branch. In the 1780s, Virginia also suggested a new state constitution that granted the Senate authority to veto legislative decisions and created an autonomous judiciary with lifetime appointments. These changes showed an increasing understanding that too much power in the executive and judiciary could result in disorder, and stronger, more balanced state governments were needed to uphold order and safeguard citizens' rights.

Richard Henry Lee's proposal, which stated the independence of the American colonies from British control, also outlined a strategy to form a confederation among the newly sovereign states. After the motion was approved, Congress established a committee responsible for creating a new government framework, resulting in the development of the Articles of Confederation. Political cartoons from that period symbolically illustrate this concept. One example shows a boat labelled "Articles of Confederation" with delegates on board steering the ship, symbolizing the attempt to lead the new nation.

The committee in charge of creating the Articles of Confederation started their work on June 11, 1776. During the upcoming year, several versions of the drafts were discussed and modified, demonstrating the challenges of reconciling the necessity for a cohesive national government with the wish to maintain the autonomy of the individual states. Ultimately, Congress gave approval to the last version on November 15, 1777, however, complete ratification by all states did not occur until 1781 (American Perspectives: Readings in American history, 2003).

The thirteen articles of the Articles of Confederation detailed the specific authorities and restrictions of the central government. The government consisted of just one branch, named the Confederation Congress, which served as the national legislature. This entity oversaw making choices for the union, like announcing war, carrying out negotiations, and overseeing western lands. Nevertheless, the Articles of Confederation purposely delegated most important powers, such as taxation and law enforcement, to the states, causing difficulties in tackling the country's increasing issues.

The flaws of the Articles of Confederation were depicted in the political cartoon with rocks symbolizing the challenges encountered by the new government. An important problem was Congress's inability to generate income on its own. Although Congress had the power to decide the amount each state had to pay for federal costs, it did not have the ability to compel states to make these payments. Consequently, the states only settled around seventy percent of their debts, with certain states paying minimal or no amounts at all. The government struggled to operate due to the lack of financial resources, having the ability to borrow money but no secure way to settle debts (American Perspectives: Readings in American history, 2003).

Another significant weakness was the failure to implement military collaboration. While Congress could ask states to supply soldiers in times of war, it lacked the power to force obedience or punish states that declined. This made the new country exposed to danger, evident in events like Shays' Rebellion and other uprisings that challenged the federal government's ability to keep control. The cartoon depicts the disorderly state with the word "anarchy" placed at the base of the waterfall, symbolizing the feeling of uncertainty at that time.

Moreover, despite having the authority to engage in treaty negotiations with other countries, Congress was unable to ensure compliance with the terms of these treaties, resulting in a lack of diplomatic strength for the nation. These flaws emphasized the immediate necessity for a more powerful central government, ultimately resulting in the Constitutional Convention and the creation of a new federal constitution. The cartoonist skilfully depicts the feeling of impending doom as the country faced challenges in governing itself with the flawed Articles of Confederation.

After the peace talks in 1783, Britain acknowledged American independence, signifying a major triumph for the fledgling country. Nevertheless, the victory quickly became less significant due to various problems that

emerged because of the Articles of Confederation, which established a feeble national government that was incapable of adequately meeting the nation's requirements. The major flaws in governance under the Articles were illustrated by potholes and obstacles in the political cartoon. The lack of ability to generate income, implement laws, or ensure safety led to instability and discontent.

These issues reached a critical point, leading Congress to request a convention to change and improve the Articles. The main responsibility of the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 was to create a new Constitution that could fix the flaws of the Articles of Confederation ("Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian," n.d.). Even though the new Constitution replaced the Articles, it did keep some provisions, like the concept of a national legislature and certain principles of state sovereignty.

The cartoonist depicts the challenges the young nation encounters as it tries to set up a reliable government during this period of change. The image of a ship approaching a waterfall, paired with the terms "independence" and "anarchy," shows how the initial thrill of freedom rapidly turned into concern over disorder in politics and economics. However, these challenges were necessary for the development of America as an independent country. The creation of the U.S. Constitution demonstrated the nation's capacity for growth from past errors, leading to a stronger and more cohesive national government. Therefore, the cartoon depicts the tension and uncertainty that marked America's journey towards achieving lasting independence.

SUMMARY

The "Critical Period" in American history, spanning from the adoption of the Articles of Confederation to the creation of the Federal Constitution, was marked by significant international, economic, and political challenges. The Articles' weaknesses in addressing these issues led to economic struggles, social and political changes, and ultimately, the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Despite fostering a sense of national unity, the Articles failed to provide a stable government, necessitating their replacement with the stronger Federal Constitution. Political cartoons from the era, like "The Critical Period 1783-1789," depict the precarious balance faced by the young nation.

FUTURE WORK

Future work should delve deeper into the individual states' responses to the deficiencies of the Articles of Confederation and how these responses contributed to shaping the eventual Federal Constitution. Examining the specific amendments and decisions at the state level could provide a more nuanced understanding of the evolution of governance in the early United States and identify patterns that influenced the formation of a more structured national government. Additionally, exploring the emergence of new leaders and the increased participation of ordinary men in legislatures can shed light on the changing political dynamics and definitions of freedom during this period. One significant limitation is the lack of enforcement power within the Articles of Confederation, a critical aspect that future research needs to address to understand the foundational governance struggles. Furthermore, the economic challenges and the federal government's inability to generate income are crucial facets that should be examined to comprehend the instability and discontent that propelled the creation of a more robust governing framework.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

During "The Critical Period" following the acceptance of the Articles of Confederation, the newly independent United States encountered significant ethical dilemmas in governance and national well-being. The inadequacies of the Articles, notably in economic management and international diplomacy, created instability, which underscored the ethical responsibility of ensuring a functional and secure nation. This period exposed the fragility of attempting to govern a diverse union without sufficient central authority, risking citizens' rights and overall national coherence. Hence, the Constitutional Convention of 1787 exemplified an ethical pursuit to establish a more effective government framework, aimed at safeguarding the welfare, security, and order essential for the nation's prosperity. The challenges and subsequent constitutional reforms highlight a fundamental ethical commitment to the long-term stability and health of the American polity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the inherent deficiencies and challenges presented by the Articles of Confederation underscored the urgent need for a stronger federal framework in the early United States. The diplomatic tensions, economic instability, and domestic unrest experienced during the Critical Period exposed the Articles' inability to manage international relations, impose taxes, and regulate commerce effectively. The inadequacies of state governments further contributed to political and social instability, highlighting the necessity of a balanced and robust national administration. The increasing demand for inclusive democratic involvement and financial

fairness catalysed a transformative vision of freedom and governance, championed by a new generation of leaders striving for national unity. The symbolic portrayal in "The Critical Period 1783-1789" cartoon poignantly captures the precarious balance and looming chaos faced by the fledgling nation. This transition, culminating in the creation of the U.S. Constitution, was pivotal in addressing the critical shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation. It established a more cohesive and capable national government that could better navigate the complexities of independence and secure the nation's future stability and prosperity.

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