

Course Learning Outcomes for Unit I

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Summarize the origins of American political thought.
 - 1.1 Identify how the Enlightenment and philosophers such as John Locke influenced the Founding Fathers.
 - 1.2 Indicate the major goals of the Founding Fathers.
 - 1.3 List the events preceding the creation of the Articles of Confederation and the weaknesses that led to the Articles' demise.

Course/Unit Learning Outcomes	Learning Activity
1.1	Unit I Lesson Reading: "2. Foundations of American Government" Unit I Assignment
1.2	Unit I Lesson Unit I Assignment
1.3	Unit I Lesson Reading: "2a. The Colonial Experience" Reading: "2b. Independence and the Articles of Confederation" Unit I Assignment

Reading Assignment

To access the following resources, click the links below.

Independence Hall Association. (n.d.). 2. Foundations of American government. Retrieved from <http://www.ushistory.org/gov/2.asp>

Independence Hall Association. (n.d.). 2a. The colonial experience. Retrieved from <http://www.ushistory.org/gov/2a.asp>

Independence Hall Association. (n.d.). 2b. Independence and the Articles of Confederation. Retrieved from <http://www.ushistory.org/gov/2b.asp>

Unit Lesson

Many of us have a general concept and understanding of the leadership of the Founding Fathers working to establish a government with more democratic principles and ideals. While the term Founding Fathers is used a great deal, one must note that there was a general sense of agreement on the need for a new government and country, but there were differences in their political ideologies. Some Founding Fathers were for a more powerful federal government, while others were more focused on state powers. The point to be made here is that the Founding Fathers were not an ideologically unified group of people. The Founding Fathers had a vision of making America a melting pot, but the path of setting up a different style of government had many trials and tribulations. After many obstacles were overcome, the United States was formed under the political structure of a democratic republic, which is mentioned in the Pledge of Allegiance. In this unit, the thoughts and strategies behind the founding of the United States and the ideas and principles utilized to create the Constitution will be examined.



"The First Prayer in Congress." The First Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia on September 5, 1774. Stephen Crane is the second person to the right of the Rev. Jacob Duché at the lectern.

(Matteson, 1848)

In the Beginning

What is politics? What part do citizens have in the political process? The United States has a political culture that began during Colonial times and was refined during the Revolutionary War. When the colonists declared their independence from Great Britain, the Founding Fathers declared that Americans were entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Along with these natural rights, the Founding Fathers believed citizens had a duty and responsibility to maintain good government and to be good citizens. It should be an active goal for U.S. citizens to understand how politics affects every part of their lives. Citizens should be informed and educated about the workings of government, American political history, and the people who represent them.

Early American core values for governing were centered on the ideas of liberty, individualism, equality, and self-government. Establishing these ideals was not without issue. The First and Second Continental Congresses were fraught with turbulence and animosity, as were the weeks and days before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. When Richard Henry "Light Horse" Lee presented a three-part resolution to Congress on June 7, 1776, his motion served to create even greater tension. In what was a blatant call for severing all ties with Great Britain, Lee called upon Congress to declare independence, form foreign alliances, and prepare a plan for a colonial confederation (A&E Networks, 2009). This platform remains deep within the American government today and is the ideal that serves as the foundation for the United States.

New Ideas and a New America

United States leaders have worked over the years to transplant American ideals regarding government and individual freedoms to other areas around the world. While the United States utilizes a unique brand of democracy, the efforts to establish other democratic countries have been very successful in many parts of the world, including Europe. The United States is different among most countries of the world because, while most countries are built on a shared heritage, the United States consists of people from every part of the world who work from shared ideals. These shared ideals stem in part from the period of Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, which spread throughout Europe during the 1600s and 1700s. The Enlightenment was a movement in which the ideas of liberty, reason, and the scientific method rose to the forefront of thought.

The Enlightenment was originally a French movement inspired by human potential and manifested in the ideas of vacating or even rebelling against political oversight and religious tradition. It quickly moved into the Americas. Whereas Europe had centuries of tradition to help slow the effects of this philosophy, the United States was largely a blank canvas for new ideas and worked like a sponge to soak up the potential for innovation. In tandem with the strengthening of communities and increased literacy among multigenerational families, the ideas of free thinkers would quickly spread from the elite to the lower classes through public displays and intentional attempts to rouse a response. These free thinkers included John Locke, John Smith, Thomas Paine, François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire), Denis Diderot, and eventually American leaders such as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and James Madison.



Signing of the Declaration of Independence
(Trumbull, 1819)

It was during this period that the Founding Fathers began developing the original laws that were to govern the United States. Many of the ideas of government were written into local and state governments and laws. Their first attempt was the creation of the United States' first constitution, the Articles of Confederation.

The Articles of Confederation

The Articles were approved on November 15, 1777, in what would ultimately be known as the Second Continental Congress, but were not ratified until 1781 with Maryland voting for approval of the Articles. The Articles legally established the United States of America as a confederation of sovereign states and served as its first governing document. They also provided for an international agreement that would establish central institutions for conducting vital domestic and foreign affairs (OpenStax American Government, 2018).

The Articles of Confederation were drafted as a means of unifying the colonies with a limited central government. By formalizing this political structure, the Continental Congress sought to legitimize the U.S. government both domestically and abroad. The Articles also afforded the United States with the ability to establish spending by the central government, to raise military units, to direct war efforts, to conduct overseas diplomacy, and to negotiate with the Native Americans on territorial issues (OpenStax American Government, 2018). The Articles also describe many other limited powers of the federal government in multiple areas.

The development of the Articles and the issues they addressed were a clear reflection of the political, cultural, and social environment.

Newly separated from a monarchy with a unitary or highly centralized power structure, the representatives sought an emphasis on local government within the states, which they believed were best suited to manage states' separate interests. Fearful of replacing one oppressive national government with another, the framers of the Articles of Confederation created an alliance of sovereign states held together by a weak central government. (OpenStax American Government, 2018, para. 3)

The weak central government would prove to be a major issue when trying to get common action from the states.

Issues Emerge

As might be expected with the differences among regions and the power struggle between state and federal authority, there was soon to be a series of debates. Just as it is today, local government was much more visible to the common voter than the federal government. Likewise, local government was more likely to hear the voice of the common voter. As a result, this was part of the expectation of true republicanism reflected in the Articles.

There were many problems with the Articles of Confederation, which were influenced in large part by the conflicts and war with King George III and Parliament of England. With the English central government being

very powerful, the Founding Fathers were concerned that the rights of citizens were at risk with a powerful central government. The Articles focused in large part on states' rights, thus removing power from the central or federal government and putting more power into the lower and local levels of government. The lack of power was problematic in that the central government had no power to tax and no power to maintain a proper military or navy. These powers were vested in the states. While there was a President of the United States in Congress Assembled that would be similar to a prime minister in that the member in this position is a member of the Parliament, the role was ceremonial in nature with minor duties relating mainly to paperwork. This left the United States without a defined executive branch, thus weakening the central government. Perhaps the greatest social issue was the debate regarding slavery, a regional issue that would quickly blossom into a national concern and, later, a crisis.

Within a few years of the United States being formed, domestic and international issues began to cause strain on the new government. Many soldiers from the Revolutionary War had not been paid, and citizens had not been compensated for food and personal property bought for the war effort or that had been stolen and/or damaged during the war. European nations who sided with the colonies demanded attention to international relationships and debt payment by the government of the United States. The states, as a loose association, simply did not have the strength, finances, or unity to represent themselves as one economic entity. A need for a stronger centralized government was pressing to address these issues and the many other challenges the new country faced.

The Articles of Confederation	
Faults and Weaknesses	Strengths
Unicameral legislature with one vote per state	Could declare war and make peace
No separation of powers	Had the power to issue money
Central government that had no power to collect taxes, raise an army, or regulate trade	Could engage with foreign countries
No executive branch	Provided for settlement of the West
No court system	States were empowered
All 13 states had to vote unanimously to make or change laws	Allowed for creation of new states

Provisions of the Articles of Confederation
(OpenStax American Government, 2018)

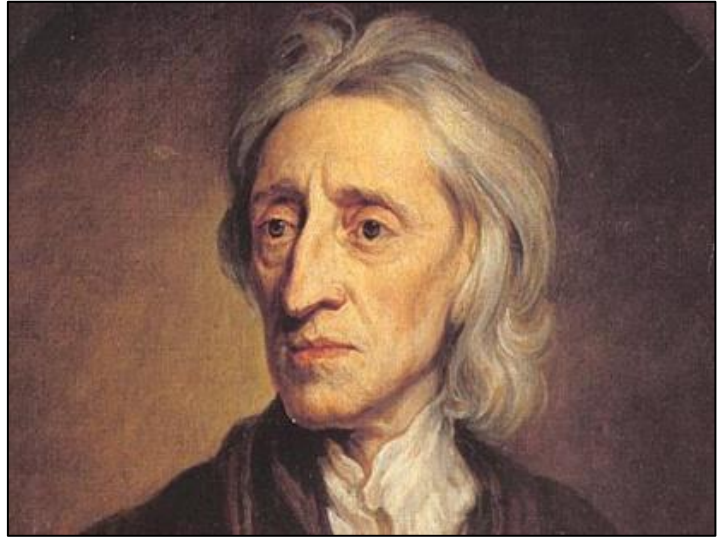
Once the revolution ended and the everyday business of running a country commenced, the Founding Fathers recognized that the Articles simply were not enough to govern the country. Changes were needed. They needed a new guiding document, one that would better set forth the powers and governance of the United States.

The Path Forward

It was clear that the Articles of Confederation were not working, and the envisioned utopian republic was not thriving; therefore, a new government was necessary. Leaders from the 13 states were called to Annapolis, Maryland, in 1786 to amend the Articles, but only five delegations opted to attend. Absent a quorum, the only decision that could be made was the setting of another meeting in Philadelphia for May 1787. This second attempt in 1787 would be called the Philadelphia Convention of the United States Constitutional Convention.

The Philadelphia Convention sought to create a stronger central or federal government. In developing their vision, the Founding Fathers looked to several philosophers of note who had emerged during the Enlightenment. In particular, the teachings and principles of John Locke were highly regarded. Locke spoke of a social contract and liberties, ideas that also served as part of the Founding Fathers' vision for the United States.

This social contract is an individual's agreement to abandon some freedoms in order for the government to regulate life and ensure safety. Locke's concept of a social contract played a significant role in creating a framework for the new Constitution, as did his belief in human rights, such as life and property. The other philosophers that impacted the ideas and writings of the Constitution were Montesquieu, Thomas Hobbes, and Rousseau.



John Locke, circa 1689
(Kneller, 1697)

These were the circumstances and vision that would serve as the premise for the new Constitution. The next unit will take a closer look inside the creation and contents of the Constitution, federalism, and democracy.

References

- A&E Networks. (2009). Lee resolution presented to Continental Congress. Retrieved from <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/lee-resolution-presented-to-continental-congress>
- Kneller, G. (1697). *JohnLocke* [Painting]. Retrieved from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:JohnLocke.png>
- Matteson, T. H. (1848). *The-first-prayer-in-congress-September-1774* [Painting]. Retrieved from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The-first-prayer-in-congress-september-1774.jpg>
- OpenStax American Government. (2018). 2.2 The Articles of Confederation. Retrieved from <https://cnx.org/contents/W8wOWXNF@15.35:GAg9oV-J@8/The-Articles-of-Confederation>
- Trumbull, J. (1819). *The Declaration of Independence July 4 1776 by John Trumbull* [Painting]. Retrieved from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Declaration_of_Independence_July_4_1776_by_John_Trumbull.jpeg

Suggested Reading

To access the following resource, click the link below.

To read the full text of the Articles of Confederation, please click the link below.

Independence Hall Association. (n.d.). The Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union – 1777. Retrieved from <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/confederation.htm>