

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview.

Article – “Did the Articles of Confederation Fail? Probably Not” (15–25 Minutes)

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS/KEY

Goal

Students learn that the Articles of Confederation worked largely as they were supposed to work—not to grant large powers to a centralized government.

Instructions

1. Instruct students to read the article and answer the Questions for Review. (Take 10-12 minutes.)
2. Have students discuss in pairs/groups (if time), then together as a class.

Questions/Key

1. Sum up the “That was precisely why it was created” scenario with Rhode Island.
The AOC was criticized for allowing only one state to stop the desires of other states, as Rhode Island did. But if Rhode Island’s government/people didn’t support a policy that other states did, why should it have to suffer with the results if they thought it wouldn’t benefit their state?
2. What does the author mean by saying that when the national government took action, it needed to be good for all the states/nations, or handled locally?
The AOC didn’t allow a powerful centralized government to simply win a majority vote and put into place some policy that wouldn’t benefit all states. States had powers (acting as nations, remember) to pass laws for “their” residents, and if a government over states passed a law, it needed to be good for ALL the states, or not pass.
3. Why did men like Hamilton and Madison want a powerful centralized government?
They wanted this centralized government to have the power to override the will of the states, to pass laws that benefited some, while not others, or even at the expense of others! Clearly if all states didn’t agree that a law benefit all of them...it shouldn’t have been passed, but Hamilton and Madison wanted to force their will upon others, a highly questionable/suspicious mindset.
4. What is your take on those who seek more power over others who would otherwise disagree with them?
AWV, but as mentioned briefly above, it is highly suspicious to want to gain more power because you can’t convince others to support an idea. It demonstrates that you can’t convince others of the benefit of some policy or belief, so you resort to force instead.

Debrief

Ask students:

- When all states have to agree upon a policy before it is adopted, what does it show about that policy? How does this protect rights? *AWV, but it shows that it benefits all concerned. It protects rights, because it is unlikely that a government policy that violates rights of some would be approved of by all the states.*
- Is it clear how many Americans in the 1770s and 1780s distrusted powerful, centralized governments? *AWV.*

Did the Articles of Confederation Fail? Probably Not

Mises Daily

Larsen Plyler • 01/29/2026

It is taken, in many cases, to be fact that the reason the Constitutional Convention was called and that the Constitution was ratified was because of the failure of the Articles of Confederation system. The folks at Heritage have made their position clear:

The first plan the Framers tried after declaring independence was called the Articles of Confederation. The government that the Articles created failed because it was too weak to coordinate national policy among states with different priorities.

Now, this is not particularly a criticism of the Constitution, though I believe there is room for that. But, I simply want to raise questions: What if the Articles were not failing? What if they were doing exactly what they were intended to do? What if the Articles were successful, but success was not in the agenda of powerful people?

First, consider the words above: "...it was too weak to coordinate national policy among states with different priorities." Exactly! But that's not why it failed. That was precisely why it was created. The regions and the states did have different priorities. Yes, Rhode Island could, on its own, veto legislation. When other states agreed to a tariff, Rhode Island could—as a lone New England state—say no. Of course, the other 12 states were welcome to pass their own tariffs and donate the revenues to the central government. Why did Rhode Island have to do what they did? That was no failure; it was success. In fact, the Constitution made demands on all of the regions and states that violated their priorities.

Second, the Articles of Confederation demonstrated that a weak central government was not incapable of accomplishing what needed to be done. But, it did demonstrate that the causes and purposes to which the national government took action needed to be in the interest of all, or it needed to be handled on a local basis. But, keep in mind that it was under the Articles government that the War for Independence had been won. It was under the Articles that the treaty which drew favorable boundaries for the new nation was drawn....

Third, consider that the greatest example of Articles failure should tell us precisely the opposite. Shays's Rebellion is often used as evidence that there needed to be a stronger central power to address the needs of the young nation. But, that comes from a perspective that says that placing more power in the hands of people farther away from the people is better. What folks often miss is that the issue with Shays's Rebellion was corruption in the local government, in this case, of Massachusetts. Rather than being evidence of the need for more power, it was a demonstration of the danger of corruption even on the state level that needed to be addressed....

Fourth, ponder the people behind the writing of a new Constitution. Men like Madison, Hamilton, and even Washington, were men who wanted stronger central power in order to make other states go along with their plans.... Madison...was responsible for the organization of the Constitutional Convention, which was underhanded in its own way because it was supposed to be a revision of the Articles. That plan went out of the (proverbial) window. All of the actual windows were shut so that no one knew what was going on behind those closed doors....

And this only brings us to the reality that the Constitution, under which we live today, is not the one they wrote, due to Supreme Court decisions, overreaching executives, expanding bureaucracy, and Amendments....

The above article may be found here: <https://mises.org/mises-wire/did-articles-confederation-fail-probably-not>.

Questions for Review:

1. Sum up the "That was precisely why it was created" scenario with Rhode Island.
2. What does the author mean by saying that when the national government took action, it needed to be good for all the states/nations, or handled locally?
3. Why did men like Hamilton and Madison want a powerful centralized government?
4. What is your take on those who seek more power over others who would otherwise disagree with them?