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Forming a Republic

How do you translate an ideology into an actual government? There was not much consensus beyond the need for some form of representative government.

The first and second Continental Congresses were not really intended as governing bodies, but were supposed to protest British acts. After the Revolution started, the Continental Congress assumed responsibility for governing by default. It was very weak and entirely dependent on the ex-colonies, now known as states.

The Continental Congress would eventually form a new government under the Articles of Confederation, known as the Confederation. During its short life, many of its early adherents turned on it (largely due to its inadequacies) and a sharper focus on the structure of what a republican government should be came into focus.

John Adams – Adams's "Thoughts on Government" embraced the British notions of balance without monarchy or aristocracy as the base. Adams instead articulated the need for three separate branches of government that would check and balance the "power" of each other. Thus, an executive, legislature and judiciary would check each other, while the legislature (where the people's power lay) would have two different branches balancing each other.

Adams wasn't sure how to create this government, but believed that the people in a convention, not the Continental Congress had the power to form the government.

Confederation weaknesses – Why, almost immediately after creating a government, did some look to replace it? First, it took nearly 5 years for a majority to ratify the darn thing. Too many states had issues with the new government because of their recent experience with the Empire and were hesitant to join another government. In reality, people were much closer to their state than the national government.

There were also problems about how to decide things. Should representation be based on population or one vote per state? Larger states (with more population) wanted the former, while smaller states wanted the latter.

Would slaves be counted for representation? Would states with land claims in the west surrender those claims?

Eventually, these issues were resolved. One vote per state, for example. But the confederation was weak.

It could:

Raise an army and navy
Handle foreign affairs
Control Indian trade
Coin and print money
Create a post office
Set uniform weights and measures.

No ability to tax and you needed a unanimous vote to amend the Articles.

It had serious weaknesses:

Financial – no central bank was created to control monetary policy
Commercial
Diplomatic

Only in dealing with western lands was there any success. In the early years of English colonization the Virginia Companies and the Massachusetts Bay Company claimed western borders all the way to the Pacific Ocean. These claims were eventually dropped, but settlement was restrained by the 1763 proclamation. When the Revolution ended, settlers, many of them ex-soldiers who had been paid in land, rather than worthless money, began to flood into Kentucky, Tennessee and the Northwest Territory (Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin). The British, though, had refused to evacuate the "Old Northwest" as provided by the Paris Peace Treaty.

In spite of the continues British presence and difficulty in settling other western areas, Kentucky especially had trouble with land being sold several times over, the Confederation Congress proceeded to "organize" the Old Northwest for settlement and government.

These dealings with the Old Northwest were the most successful accomplishments under the Articles.

In order to create a system that would bring stable, efficient republican government to the Old Northwest and its settlers. This was important. Why would someone risk migrating west if they would not have the benefits of good republican government. The Confederation achieved this through three ordinances (though only the second two really took effect).

1784 Ordinance – Divided the Old Northwest into 10 different states that would be equal to the original 13 states.

1785 Land Ordinance – provided for survey and division of land prior to settlement. Land was set off into 36 square mile townships that were further sub-divided into 36 one-mile square sections, which were further divided

into smaller plots. Section 16 was reserved so that money from its sale went to education (being an important republican principle). This is why we have the 6-mile by 6-mile townships in Michigan. Setting aside land through survey provided for security and stability.

Northwest Ordinance of 1787 – Where the 1785 Ordinance dealt with land, the 1787 Ordinance dealt with government and created a method by which the various parts of the Old Northwest would move to equal statehood. Again, the goal was good republican government. There were three stages.

Initially a committee of five men (Governor, Secretary and 3 judges) ran everything.

When the population reached 5000 adult male residents, a legislature was created.

When the population reached 60,000 inhabitants, the territory could move to statehood.

Also, the 1787 ordinance set out the borders, number of potential states and a bill of rights that outlawed slavery.

It wasn't until 1794-95 that General "Mad" Anthony Wayne defeated Britain's Indian allies and forced the British to evacuate the Old Northwest.

Shays' Rebellion- The economy in the 1780s was very poor. To relieve the burden some states printed more money and issued stay laws to prevent creditors from auctioning of debtor's property for money. Massachusetts did neither and farmers in the western part of the state reacted. A rebellion led by revolutionary veteran Daniel Shays marched on the Hampshire County courthouse to stop auctions. They also raided a federal arsenal to secure weapons. Shays believed that he was merely carrying out the spirit of the Revolution and Jefferson wrote, "a little rebellion now and then is a good thing. The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." Of course, Jefferson was in France at the time. Other Americans reacted differently.

Men of standing, like George Washington, were distressed by Shays and believed that the cause was the weak, ineffective Confederation Government. Those that 10 years earlier rejected a stronger government now favored creating one.

For the property holder, the choice between excess democracy and strong government was an easy one.



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