I can describe the successes and challenges of the first American government, the Articles of Confederation.

The year is 1787, and you are a citizen in the young United (or is it united) States of America. The country is in disarray, the states are more divided than united, and the form of government seems to be a failure. Why is there a need for a new government? Read the story of the first American government below and use guided reading activity to make notes and respond to important questions.

After the American colonies declared independence in 1776 and continued to fight against the British, some guys in the Continental Congress realized that they needed some form of organization and rule if they wanted to win the war and keep some sense of order at home. That's why, on November 15, 1777, the Continental Congress voted to accept a plan of government called the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union.

You have heard about this new government – the Articles of Confederation - the first national constitution in the history of the United States of America. As you perused the document, you noticed a very important principle that set the standard for the new government - that "each state should retain its sovereignty, freedom, and independence and every power, jurisdiction, and right not expressly delegated to the federal government". In other words, the states are very powerful. Each state has a new state constitution, and they are not looking to give up any of their strengths as individuals. The national government that was created is very weak and can do only what the individual states allow it to do. That's what a confederation is – a loose alliance of states with a weak central or national government. It took a long time for this document to actually become law – four years, to be exact – but it was finally ratified, or approved, by all 13 states in 1781.

Each of the new thirteen states has set up their own state governments and written their own state constitutions. Once the states declared their independence, they needed some way of running their affairs, right? They all got to work (some even before independence was declared) and planned out their own form of government within the boundaries of the state.

The new governments all look pretty similar to the governments they had as colonies, with a few important changes. The people who wrote the new constitutions all believed in the idea of the social contract, or that government must protect the people and their rights. Because of this idea, these new constitutions all were based on the people electing the members of the government – in other words, a republican form of government. Some states clearly stated that the people had the power in the government under these new constitutions, and a few states (especially Virginia) wrote down the specific rights of the people, making it a Declaration or Bill of Rights.

The structure of each of the 13 new governments varies, but all falls into one of three models. As a common person of the time, you don’t need to know everything about each state, it’s probably important to remember that all of the constitutions include three branches of government – a legislature to make laws, an executive to enforce laws, and a judiciary to interpret laws. Some of the legislatures had one group (or house) of people to make laws, while others had two houses. All of the new states developed assemblies or legislatures with members elected by the people (the white male people, that is).
In these new governments, the governor was elected either by the people or by the assemblies, and governors were given very limited powers. Not surprising, right, since we didn’t like those powerful royal governors running the show before July of 76! The courts were either chosen by the people of the assemblies, and they did not have the power to say that state laws were wrong … which therefore made the lawmakers the most powerful people in the government.

These new state governments will be very important in the development of the new nation, both in running the states and also in creating a foundation for a national government. Making the state governments was a pretty easy chore compared to what the men in Philadelphia did when they wrote the Articles. You see, all of the 13 states wanted a weak national government, since they were trying to escape from the tyranny of the British king (Mean George III) and Parliament. Why would they fight against a strong national government, only to replace it with a strong national government? That’s not common sense! And the people (like yourself) would go crazy.

Also, each state wanted to protect its own interests, almost in a selfish way. The 13 states are very different from one another, especially because of their geography. The northern states are more involved in business and manufacturing, while the southern states are agricultural. Slavery is an issue that divides the north and south as well. According to Pierce Butler, a gentleman from South Carolina, the interests of the North and South are “as different as the interests of Russia and Turkey”.

Many of the smaller states were worried that a powerful national government would bend to the will of the populous and prosperous states, so they wanted to make sure that each state had the same influence in the Confederation congress. Therefore, when the Articles were written, they made sure that each state had one vote, no matter how big or small, rich or poor, populated or unpopulated. Each state could name its own delegates to the national congress and pay them. Since the states could hire and fire their delegates, the representatives had to be boosters for the state and not for a strong national government. It was all about the power of the states!
Before you think that the national government is a total wimp under the Articles, realize. The government does have some power. Under the Article, the national government can negotiate foreign treaties and provide for a national defense by raising and maintaining and army and navy. Those were the most important matters when we were fighting against British. With no army and no foreign affairs, we couldn’t have won the war! Our diplomats have made important alliances with European powers like France and Spain and also negotiated the Treaty of Paris at the end of the revolution, which gained recognition of independence from Great Britain. The Confederation congress can also coin and print money, borrow money, and establish post offices and post roads in the country. It’s not a ton of power, but let’s face it – we won the Revolution under the Articles, so it can’t be all that bad, right?

In addition, western lands were organized and settlement began under two major laws passed by the Confederation congress – the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. In the Land Ordinance, land in the Ohio country was divided up and sold, mostly to raise money for the meager treasury in the country. The government negotiated with local Indians and the states of the country, and the land was divided into townships. Each township was a square, six miles by six miles, and divided into thirty-six sections. Those sections could be further divided for sale. There would be one section set aside for a public school in each township – hooray for education!
Once people settled out west, the Northwest Ordinance provided territorial government and a way for the territory to enter the Union as a new state. The Northwest Ordinance set the creation of at least three but not more than five states out of the Northwest Territory. Once sixty thousand people lived in a territory, they could apply for statehood, entering the union "on an equal footing with the original states." They could form a constitutional convention, draft a state constitution, and then submit the document to the United States Congress for approval. The state constitution had to guarantee basic rights to its people, including religious freedom, trial by jury, the right to bail except in capital cases, and several additional rights. The states were to encourage education, but the Northwest Ordinance did not require states to provide public education. In addition, the ordinance forbade slavery in the area.

What was the overall impact of these two laws? Simple – it meant that the new United States would not be limited to the Atlantic coast. People were going to spread to the west, all the way to the Mississippi River. Westward settlement will certainly change the nation, and I'm sure it will bring its own benefits and challenges in the near future.

Even with all of those positive aspects, the government set up under Articles is tured out to be pretty lousy for the new nation. First of all, it is very hard for the government to make decisions. All decisions were made by committees, which can act very slowly. For anything to pass through the congress, decisions had to be approved by nine of the thirteen states. It was hard to get these different states to agree on anything! It is even more difficult to amend or change me, since all 13 states would have to agree on a change – that's nearly impossible!

Once a decision is made, there is no way to for the national government enforce it, since there is no executive branch or independent executive. There is a President of the congress, whose actual title is "President of the United States in Congress Assembled." The first one of these guys to use the title was John Hanson of Maryland (even though he was actually the third person in the position). His position and duties weren’t really defined, however, so he wasn’t really an executive. Still, you could (sort of) call him the first President of the U.S.! Whatever you call him, it doesn’t mean that he has any real power. If the Confederation congress passes a law, the states can pretty much choose to ignore it. Congress isn’t going to send someone to the states to make sure they follow the law. Also, there isn’t a national judicial system. Without a national executive or a national court system, states can pretty much do as they please.

The country is also experiencing problems with foreign nations. Even though we beat the British in the Revolution, they are still hanging around in Canada and western forts and many of their troops have yet to leave American ports. The Spanish are also claiming all of the land south of the Ohio River and they control the Mississippi River, not letting western settlers use the river to move their goods. England and Spain aren’t very worried about the power of our young nation, especially since the government established under me is pretty weak.

One of the big problems of our government is money (it’s always money, isn’t it?). There is nowhere in the Article that allows the national government to collect taxes. The states are supposed to collect taxes to pay for the government, but the national government can’t force them to pay anything! Some states gave money to pay for the debt after the Revolution, but only $3 million of the $12 million asked for by Congress. North Carolina and Georgia refused to pay anything. Our government is so cash poor that we couldn’t even pay $200 ransom for American sailors captured by pirates over in the Mediterranean!

Also, the national government can’t solve land disputes between states. States were given land in their colonial charters, but the land in the West was disputed. Since land is so valuable, the states want as much as they can claim. The area of Vermont wants to be independent from New York and New Hampshire, and it is talking about becoming a British colony – but the Confederation Congress can’t do anything about it!
In addition, the national government can’t regulate trade among the states. Since most states aren’t trading much with Britain (for obvious reasons), they have to trade with each other. However, the states see each other as competitors and not partners. Some states have made very high tariffs on goods from other states to help improve the business within their borders. In addition, some of the states with wealthy ports (like New York, Massachusetts, and Virginia) won’t share their economic benefits with others. Other states have to use these ports to ship their goods, but the wealthier states tax the goods from other states – or sometimes simply confiscate the goods. When states have problems about trade, there is nothing the national government can do about it.

When it all comes down to it, the states in the “United States” aren’t all that united right now. They see each other more as foreign countries than as part of the same nation. When I was ratified in 1781, they wanted an alliance of thirteen independent and sovereign states, entering into a “firm league of friendship with each other”. That’s what we have right now! Each state has its own currency, which causes major confusion when trade happens between states. States set taxes on each other, fight about boundaries in the west, and make agreements with other foreign countries. Nine states actually have their won navies! Critics have begun to call for a change in the government, mostly because of the problem of trade between states.

Specifically, there is a big trade problem between Maryland and Virginia, concerning the use of the river that runs between them, the Potomac. Both states sent some representatives to the home of George Washington to try to solve the dispute. Some of the big wigs in other states thought that the issue of trade or commerce was too much of a problem, so they decided to talk about it at a bigger meeting in Annapolis, Maryland in September of 1786. Five states (only five) sent representatives to this Annapolis Convention, so the turnout wasn’t all that impressive. While they were there to talk about trade, some of the delegates realized that there were bigger problems than just commerce. They actually made a decision to call for another convention the following spring in order to discuss me, the Articles of Confederation. The resolution that they made in Annapolis was sent to the Confederation Congress, which agreed to call a convention in May of 1787.

The Articles are obviously not working – but who really wants to change them? Remember, the states all want a weak national government, especially after breaking away from the tyrannical British government. Any change in the Articles would probably lead to the states losing power. Also, only five states sent representatives to Annapolis, so there must not be total agreement on making changes. While some pretty important people, like Alexander Hamilton of New York and James Madison of Virginia, are pushing for a stronger national government and a huge change in me, that opinion is not popular throughout the nation.
Some events in Massachusetts may change that opinion, however. Poor farmers were struggling to pay their debts, high taxes, and excessive legal costs in Massachusetts. It was a mini-depression! Many of these farmers had served in the Revolution, including Daniel Shays, a former captain in the Continental army. If the farmers couldn’t pay, their land could be taken or they may be sent to prison. The farmers, led by Shays, rose up in rebellion, demanding lower taxes and protective laws to help them keep their land. In 1786, armed mobs prevented the sitting of the courts at Northampton, Worcester, Great Barrington, and Concord; and Shays, with his followers, broke up a session of the state supreme court in Springfield. The problem? The national government was too weak to stop them.

Early in 1787, Shays and his men marched into Springfield to seize the federal arsenal, but they were stopped by a force of Massachusetts militia. The farmers were finally defeated a few weeks later, with most of the framers arrested. Most of the men were pardoned later in the year; Shays, who was condemned to death, escaped to Vermont and was pardoned a year later.

A lot of people are worried that rebellions like this could happen in their towns, and people are calling for a change in the national government. What might happen? We will see soon.

RESOURCES CONSULTED -
If you lived in the United States in 1787...

According to Edwin J. Perkins, the material standard of living enjoyed by the typical white family unit in the 13 mainland English Colonies was almost certainly the highest in the world.

You felt closer to your local area, since the country was really a collection of regions which differed considerably in economics, religion, attitudes, customs, ethnic mix and in some cases language. The regions seem to be like foreign countries to one another.

While it was more diverse than most European nations, it was still 75% of the white population was it was a British and Irish ancestry. Well the country was overwhelmingly Protestant, 85% of the population speaks English, and almost everybody is clustered along the seaboard near the Atlantic Ocean.

You ate better than the majority of human beings eat in 2013. With all of the meat you consume, your diet is rich in protein. An average American over 15 years old drank just under 6 gallons of alcohol each year—about twice as much as modern standards.

90% of white American men were farmers—most worked on their own farms, while some worked as laborers on farms owned by others. A smaller group owned large commercial farms are plantations. Even the 10% or so American men who were professionals, businessmen, or urban artisans owned a small farm with the cows and chickens and maybe some vegetables.

You (and most Americans) lived in a world that was mainly rural. Cities were small, with only New York and Philadelphia at populations over 25,000.

Over 600,000 Americans, roughly 20% of the total population, were black, and most of them were slaves. 90% of them lived in the south, almost all of them and plantations, large and small.

You probably lived in a small wooden frame house, cooking over a large fireplace, relaxed in simple and sparse furniture, and enjoyed infrequent and self-created entertainment.

You would live somewhat far from your neighbors, isolated to a degree unusual to most human societies at the time. Your family would probably be large, as 35% of Americans lived in households of seven or more.

You live in a country that was far larger than most other nations in the world, and therefore most of the population is spread out. Due to this size and spread, most people thought it was a place too large to be effectively governed as a unit.

You rarely traveled very far or very often due to the size of the nation and the lack of decent roads. Only the wealthy and merchants and business can afford time and money to visit big cities.

Early Americans had a huge sense of pride in their new country, having just defeated the mightiest army on earth. You think of Americans as virtuous, plain living people. Freedom matters deeply to you and your fellow Americans, and you are suspicious of authority in quick to resent a strong hand in government.