

Maryland Society of the American Revolution

First Place 2009-2010 Knight Essay

The Impact of Shay's Rebellion on Creation of the U.S. Constitution

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The Constitution of the United States provided the structure not only for the current U.S. government, but also for the transition from a warring nation to a peacetime nation. However, the Constitution was not the first creation of the Continental Congress, but a revised and improved edition on the first "Constitution," otherwise known as the Articles of Confederation (Jackson). The Articles of Confederation were specifically designed for the sole purpose of allowing thirteen separate colonies to bond together in order to gain their independence from mother Britain. However, any institution is only as effective as circumstances allow it to be. The Articles were not effective once the British rule had been removed and under that limitation, certain peace-time roles could not be taken (Jackson). A new system of government needed to be devised to allow the thirteen states to function as an independent federation, capable of working efficiently in war as well as peace.

The Articles of Confederation, created in 1777 and ratified by all 13 American colonies in 1781, (Maryland being the last state to ratify it in March) provided a loose, confederate government between the independent colonies. The colonies were still very politically autonomous and wished to continue their tradition of self-government. Therefore the confederate government designed by the Articles was extremely limited as the thirteen states had just won their rights of self-government from Great Britain and were not about to let another government control them. Essentially Congress could not regulate commerce, because the individual states made their own tariffs and could not enforce taxation, because the states would not meet the tax quotas assigned to them (Kennedy 172-73).

The American Revolution left a huge debt on the American economy that, under the Articles of Confederation, could not be lessened through 'federal' government taxation. In Post-Revolutionary western Massachusetts, eighty five-percent of the

population consisted of yeoman farmers who had virtually no money because of the horrible economic condition (Richards 4). These impoverished farmers, many of whom were veterans of the Revolution, found a leader in Captain Daniel Shays, who rallied his brothers-in-arms on a march against the local Massachusetts debtors who threatened the poor farmers with tax evasion and foreclosure. Captain Shays called for lower tax rates and more paper currency to stop the mortgage foreclosures and unjust taxation on the former veterans (Kennedy 176). In response, the governor and other merchant leaders fielded an army to meet Shays' rebels at the Springfield arsenal, where the rebellion collapsed (Calliope). The Articles were proved dysfunctional with Shay's Rebellion, because nothing in the document allowed the central government to fix the problems presented to them. Congress had no power of its own to operate as a strong, effective, central government; one that would be able to control the entire population and all of the states, to keep order and to regulate commerce directly in order to heal the nation's economic woes (Kennedy 177). George Washington's letter to Henry Knox showed his belief that if Shays' Rebellion would have spread, the entire war would have been to no avail; the union of the states would have fallen apart: "On the prospect of the happy termination of this insurrection...hoping that good may result from the cloud of evil which threatened...its baneful influence, the tranquility of the Union" (Washington). The potential power of each of the individual states was too great for the feeble government created by the Articles to counteract any large scale rebellions which would have weakened the states and shattered the union between them: if Shays' Rebellion would have been successful. Congress realized this weakness and called a convention in Philadelphia to discuss and revise the Articles of Confederation.

Some delegates followed James Madison and the Virginia Plan, which called for a strong national government with a legislature based on population (Linder). These delegates argued that the Articles could not be effective in any way and that a stronger government would allow the fledgling United States to recuperate from internal strife and survive. Some delegates followed the New Jersey Plan, which called for a limited federal government with a legislature with equal state representation; much like Congress but with more power and authority (Linder). The Constitution, in its completed form, took somewhat of a middle road; a compromise between delegates like Adams, Madison, Jefferson and Henry and the Virginia and New Jersey Plans (Kennedy 181). The Constitution provided for a federation, with a central government responsible for all "national" affairs, but also kept the states relatively autonomous. The central government would be divided into three equal branches: the executive, legislative, and judicial. The executive would be elected by the people, through a new concept called the Electoral College, and would retain the ability to make appointments to public offices, to

wage war, and to veto legislation. The legislature would be bicameral; each state would receive two senators in the Senate and an appropriate number of representatives based on their population [because of the Connecticut Compromise]. The judicial would consist of all of the courts, with the Supreme Court being the highest court with final judgment over legal cases. The federal government would take over responsibilities of national defense and protection of the states politically as well as economically. The Bill of Rights, a product of the Anti-Federalists, ensured the protection of individual liberties of all Americans, which is one of the most important parts to the Constitution (Constitutional). Only under such a government could America truly prosper and become a great nation; the Articles were too fragile and the states too powerful for a national government to allow it. Americans had already broken away from Great Britain, arguably the most powerful nation in the world in the late 18th century. They could just as easily break away from the Articles of Confederation, and with events like Shay's Rebellion, that almost became a possibility. Without Shays' Rebellion, the delegates in Philadelphia may not have seen the weaknesses of the national government as clearly as they did (Kennedy 177). Congress might have continued through the economic hardships in 1786, but the United States may have not without the Constitution, because of that extremely weak bond that held them together. Through the course of history, the Constitution has proved to be one of the most important documents ever conceived; a fluid, yet adamant masterpiece that has allowed the United States to progress and develop into one of the most powerful nations ever known to man.

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Christopher Joseph Raborg's name honors his Revolutionary War ancestor. Chris is an active learner in the Harford Technical Computer Networking and Technology program (CANT). He attended the Gilder Lehrman Saturday Academy for American History at the University of Maryland, taking a course on Imperial Democracy. Chris' academic schedule includes AP English, AP Calculus AB, AP Biology, AP U.S. History, Physics, French III and two classes of CANT. He participates with the Jazz band, French Club, the National Honors Society and the National Technical Honors Society. Chris expects to begin his undergraduate studies in Computer Science at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.