

The Origin of a Nation

A look into Articles of Confederation and the Second Continental Congress

They came from every corner of Britain's American Colonies. From as far north as Massachusetts to the sunny plantations of Georgia, they traveled by ship, by wagon, by carriage as well as on horseback, to take on a job without salary, benefits, and travel expenses: a job that would demand most of their time and energies, while casting their lives and wellbeing into the gravest of jeopardies. Successful men in their own right, leaving behind their families, friends, and possessions, they came and they worked, initially in Philadelphia, and then on to Baltimore, dodging battles and skirmishes along the way. After returning to Philadelphia, concerns for safety drove them to meet for one day only in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; then it was on to York, and back again to Philadelphia. ⁸ Over the course of six years, they journeyed and met again and again for the express purpose of governing their homelands while managing a war that pitted them, as rebels, against the world's greatest military power. They had so much to lose, so little chance of success, and yet they were willing to risk everything for the purpose of winning a nation. Collectively known as the Second Continental Congress, they were the guiding force that drew unity out of diversity and created the forerunner of the U.S. Constitution: The Articles of Confederation.

The Articles of Confederation was the first written constitution of the United States. Although not ratified until March 1, 1781, the Articles functioned during and immediately after the American Revolution. Their primary purpose was to steer the American Revolution to a satisfactory conclusion: the establishment of the United States as a sovereign nation. Functioning within the guidelines of the Articles, the states remained sovereign and

independent. However, the Congress had the authority to make treaties and alliances, maintain armed forces, and coin money. It also served as a last resort on appeals and disputes. ⁵

Drafted during wartime conditions and hardships, the Articles of Confederation were by no means the only significant document produced by the Second Continental Congress. Signed on August 2, 1776, the first of these, the Declaration of Independence, was addressed to George III, the reigning monarch of England, and its message was stunningly clear: England's American Colonies were writing to say that they had decided to dissolve their relationship with England, and would henceforth govern themselves. ²

King and Parliament were equally outraged. The very idea of British subjects thinking that they had the right to govern themselves was absolutely ridiculous! They should know better than to defy their sovereign king, a man chosen by God to rule over them! They had lost their minds, hadn't they? Didn't they know that their situation was hopeless? ⁹

The British had their opinions, but the Americans also had theirs. Their statements were the result of much thought, debate, and planning, and they intended to back those statements up with meaningful actions, thanks in large part to their newly formed governing body, which was comprised of representatives from each of the thirteen colonies. Known as The Second Continental Congress, they set out to draft an official plan of government: the Articles of Confederation. This document, they hoped, would provide the necessary guidance that would bring their revolution to a satisfactory conclusion. ¹

In the meantime, however, there was urgent work to be done concerning the actual war. To that end, the Second Continental Congress authorized the raising of a continental army by means of conscription, with George Washington appointed as its commanding general. ⁵ Those simple decisions brought them face to face with a seemingly insurmountable task: that of

financing the war. Taxation was the standard solution, but Congress was fearful of losing support if they authorized taxing the people. Consequently, Congress only gave itself the authority to appeal to the states for donations - and many states politely refused to honor any such requests. ⁴ Now, the next question was obvious: where would the money be coming from? A partial solution came with the decision that the Congress would print its own money for resources; but who could supply those resources? ⁶

It was widely known that the French wanted nothing better than to check England's ever expanding empire, so the Continental Congress decided to send their most seasoned diplomat, Benjamin Franklin, to seek assistance from France. It was easily agreed that he was the man for the job, but where would they get the money for travel expenses? The answer came when a member of the Congress, a businessman and financier named Robert Morris, donated a large portion of his personal fortune. ⁷ Soon, other members of Congress stepped forward with similar, private donations, and the war could probably not have been won if they had not chosen to do so. Thanks to their assistance, Franklin's mission resulted in securing exactly what the colonists lacked: men, money, and ships. ³

Despite its many successes, the Second Continental Congress failed to address several problems. They debated whether all citizens: free, slave, or both, should be taxed, but they could not reach an agreement. Consequently, no taxes were ever officially levied. ⁴ The results were predictable: more often than not, the Continental Army found itself facing the world's biggest army without adequate supplies and equipment. In addition, the Congress did not address the problem of regulating commerce. ⁶ They left it up to the individual states to make their own rules about doing business with other states, and inconsistencies were the result. ⁴ It should be noted, however, that the Second Continental Congress had consciously chosen not to focus on these

particular problems because their primary purpose was to guide and support the American Revolution.

As the Revolutionary War continued, it gradually became apparent that the American Colonies were on a path to success. Now the Second Continental Congress began to turn its attention to matters that had previously been put aside - matters that had little to do with the war, and everything to do with the future success of the nation.

The time for revamping the Articles of Confederation was drawing near; soon, they could begin to craft a document that would provide the nation with strong leadership, equal representation, and a stable judicial system. Their work and dedication had paved the way for the United States Constitution, a document that continues to guide and inspire the American people today.

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