

# The Articles of Confederation

## Essential Question

How effective was government under the Articles of Confederation?

## Reading Guide

### Content Vocabulary

constitution (p. 187) petition (p. 190)  
 bicameral (p. 187) ordinance (p. 190)  
 republic (p. 188) depreciate (p. 191)

### Academic Vocabulary

abandon (p. 189) clause (p. 191)

### Key People and Events

Articles of Confederation (p. 188)

John Adams (p. 193)

### Reading Strategy

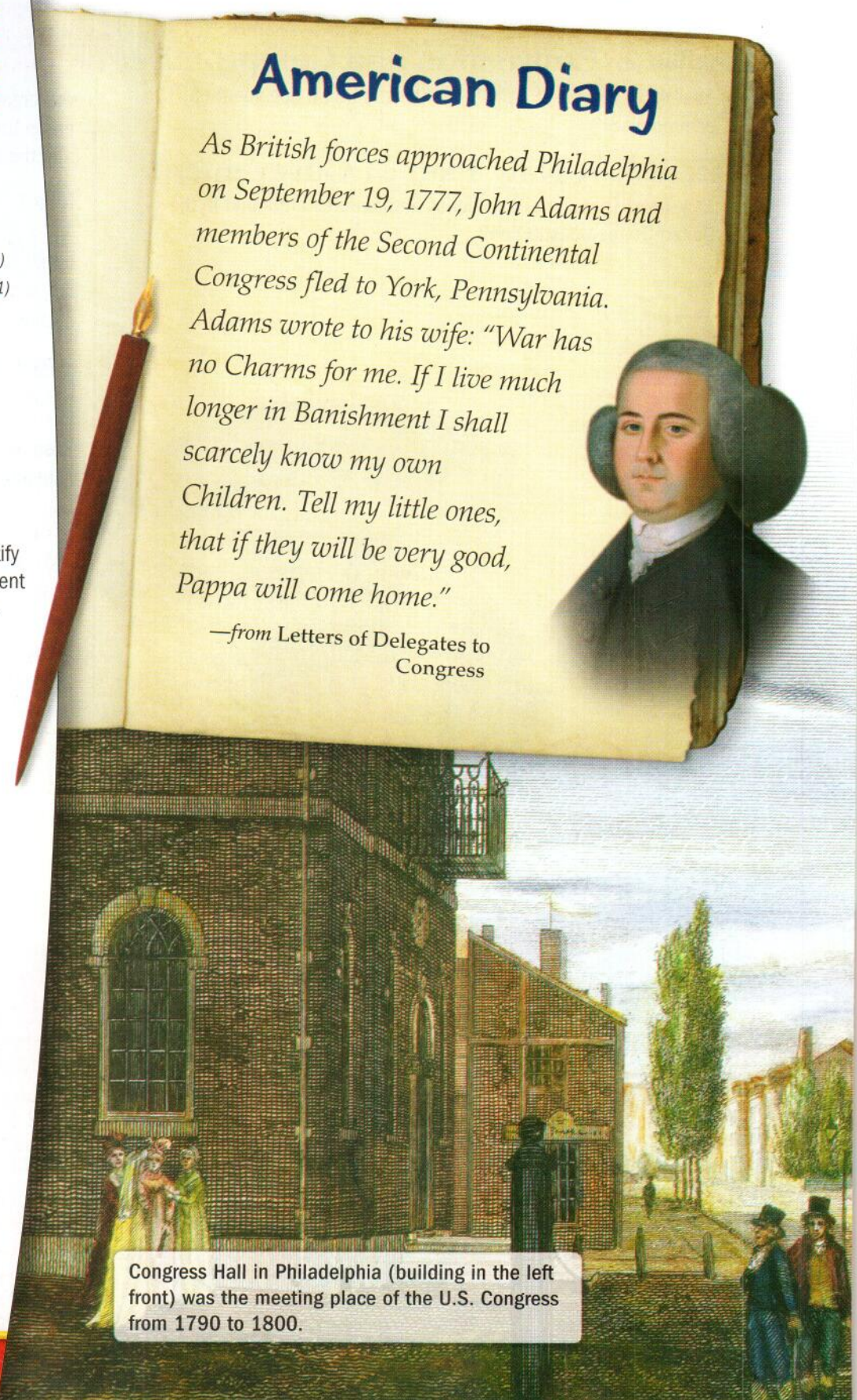
**Taking Notes** As you read, use a diagram like the one below to identify the powers of the national government under the Articles of Confederation.



## American Diary

As British forces approached Philadelphia on September 19, 1777, John Adams and members of the Second Continental Congress fled to York, Pennsylvania. Adams wrote to his wife: "War has no Charms for me. If I live much longer in Banishment I shall scarcely know my own Children. Tell my little ones, that if they will be very good, Pappa will come home."

—from Letters of Delegates to Congress



Congress Hall in Philadelphia (building in the left front) was the meeting place of the U.S. Congress from 1790 to 1800.



# From Independent States to a Republic

**Main Idea** The Articles of Confederation created a weak central government and strong state governments.

**History and You** How hard is it to get a group of friends to agree on what type of movie to watch or game to play? Read about what was necessary for the new Congress to pass a law.

It was important for the Second Continental Congress to create a plan for government that would satisfy the needs of all 13 states. The states were united against the British, but would they be able to work together and still maintain their independence? How would each state's government be organized? After rejecting British rule, the states' first task was to establish their own political institutions.

## State Constitutions

In May 1776, the Continental Congress asked the states to organize their governments. Each state moved quickly to adopt a state **constitution**, or plan of government. By the end of 1776, eight states had drafted constitutions. New York and Georgia followed in

1777 and Massachusetts in 1780. Connecticut and Rhode Island kept their colonial charters as state constitutions.

Their experience with British rule made Americans cautious about placing too much power in the hands of a single ruler. For that reason, the states adopted constitutions that limited the power of the governor. Pennsylvania even replaced the office of governor with an elected council of 12 members.

## Limiting Power

States also divided government functions between the governor (or Pennsylvania's council) and the legislature. Most states established two-house, or **bicameral**, legislatures to divide the power even further.

The writers of the constitutions not only wanted to prevent abuses of power in the states, but they also wanted to keep power in the hands of the people. State legislators were popularly elected, and elections were frequent. In most states, only white males who were at least 21 years old could vote. These citizens also had to own a certain amount of property or pay a certain amount of taxes. Some states allowed free African American males to vote.

## When and Where

## Capitals of the United States

Capital Cities of the United States

City	Length of Time as U.S. Capital
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	May 10, 1775 to December 12, 1776
Baltimore, Maryland	December 20, 1776 to February 27, 1777
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	March 4, 1777 to September 18, 1777
Lancaster, Pennsylvania	September 27, 1777 (one day)
York, Pennsylvania	September 30, 1777 to June 27, 1778
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	July 2, 1778 to June 21, 1781
Princeton, New Jersey	June 30, 1783 to November 4, 1783
Annapolis, Maryland	November 26, 1783 to August 19, 1784
Trenton, New Jersey	November 1, 1784 to December 24, 1784
New York City, New York	January 11, 1785 to August 12, 1790
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	December 6, 1790 to May 14, 1800
Washington, D.C.	November 17, 1800 to present

Nine different cities have served as capitals, or seats of government, of the United States.



## Critical Thinking

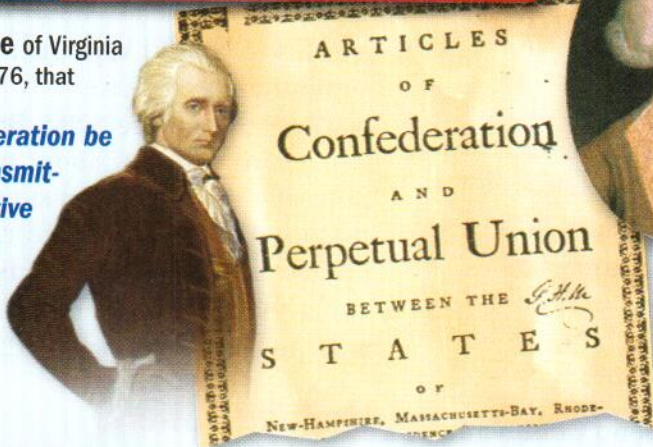
**Making Inferences** Why do you think the United States had numerous capital cities between 1775 and 1800? Do you think it is important for a country to have a permanent location for its seat of government? Explain.



## Primary Source The Articles of Confederation

Richard Henry Lee of Virginia moved on June 7, 1776, that

*“a plan of confederation be prepared and transmitted to the respective colonies, for their consideration and approbation [approval].”*



**Writing the Articles** Even though he opposed independence, John Dickinson was asked to chair the committee to draft the Articles of Confederation because of his knowledge of government institutions.

★ **1781** March 1  
Articles of Confederation ratified

★ **1783** March 10  
Troops demand back pay from Congress, threaten to mutiny

★ **1786** September 14  
Annapolis Convention to reform regulation of commerce

★ **1787** May 17  
Constitutional Convention convenes in Philadelphia

★ **1783** November 2  
Continental Army officially disbanded

★ **1785** July 6  
Congress approves a currency system based on the dollar

★ **1787** February 21  
Congress calls convention to amend Articles of Confederation

State constitutions generally restricted the powers of the governors, which made the legislatures the most powerful branch of government. The state legislatures struggled to make taxes more fair, but disagreements arose. New challenges emerged as dependent colonies became self-governing states.

### Forming a Republic

Americans agreed that their country should be a **republic**, a government in which citizens rule through elected representatives. They could not agree, however, on the organization and powers of their new republic. At first, most Americans favored a weak central government. They assumed the states would be like small, independent countries—similar to the way the colonies had been organized. The states would act independently on most issues, working together through a central government only to wage war and handle relations with other nations.

### Planning a New Government

In 1776 the Second Continental Congress appointed a committee to draw up a plan for a new government. After much debate, the Congress adopted the **Articles of Confederation** in November 1777. The Articles, America's first constitution, provided for a new central government under which the states kept most of their power. For the states, the Articles of Confederation were “a firm league of friendship” in which each state retained “its sovereignty, freedom and independence.” Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress had the authority to conduct foreign affairs, maintain armed forces, borrow money, and issue currency.

Congress, however, did not have the power to regulate trade, force citizens to join the army, or impose taxes. If Congress needed to raise money or troops, it had to ask the state legislatures—but they were not required to contribute.



## Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation

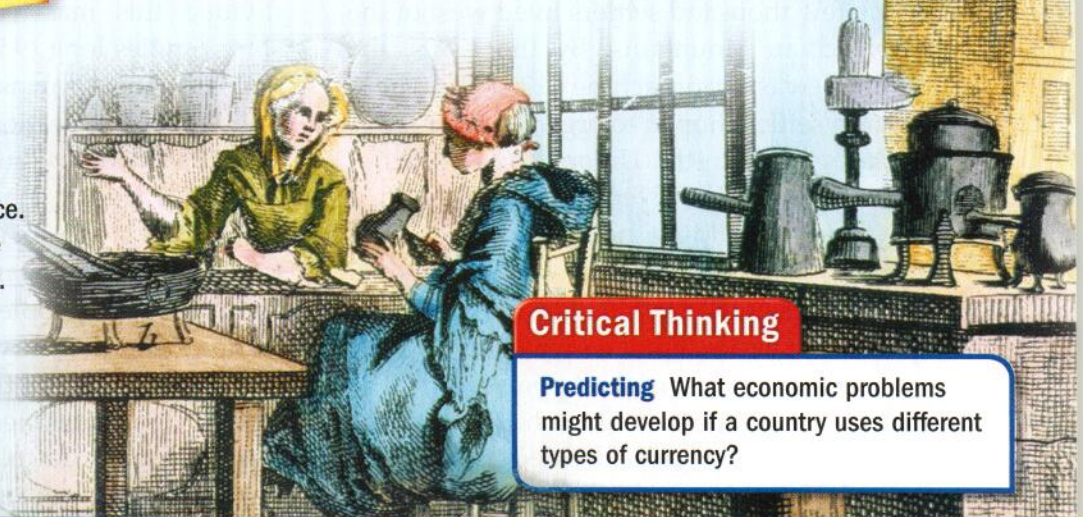
- Congress had no authority to raise money by collecting taxes
- Congress had no control over foreign trade
- Congress could not force states to carry out its laws
- All 13 states had to agree to any amendments, making it nearly impossible to correct problems



**A Common Currency** The national currency had little value. States issued their own money, and values varied from state to state.

According to George Washington, the Articles of Confederation were **“little more than the shadow without the substance.”**

**Regulating Trade** Under the Articles of Confederation, the federal government did not have the authority to regulate commerce. In 1784 Congress wanted to take control of commerce for 15 years. The states, however, refused because they were afraid that Congress would then have too much power.



### Critical Thinking

**Predicting** What economic problems might develop if a country uses different types of currency?

In addition, the government lacked a chief executive. The Confederation government carried on much of its business, such as selling western lands, through congressional committees.

The Articles of Confederation were not wholly supported by the states. Under the new plan, each state had one vote, regardless of its population, and all states had to approve the Articles and any amendments. States with large populations, however, believed they should have more votes. The states were also divided by whether or not they claimed land in the West. Maryland refused to approve the Articles until New York, Virginia, and other states **abandoned**, or gave up, land claims west of the Appalachian Mountains. Finally the states settled their differences. With Maryland's ratification, all 13 states approved the Articles. On March 1, 1781, the Confederation formally became the government of the United States of America.

## The Confederation Government

The years between 1781 and 1789 were a critical period for the young American republic. The Articles of Confederation did not provide a government strong enough to handle the problems facing the United States. The Congress had limited authority. It could not pass a law unless 9 states voted in favor of it. Any attempt to change the Articles required the consent of all 13 states. This made it difficult for the Congress to pass laws when there was any opposition. Despite its weaknesses, the Confederation made some important achievements. Under the Confederation government, Americans won their independence from Britain and expanded the country's foreign trade. The Confederation also aided with settling and governing the nation's western territories.

**Reading Check** **Specifying** How many votes did each state have in the new Congress?



# New Land Policies

**Main Idea** As people moved west, the country needed a process for new states joining the Union.

**History and You** Do you have to meet certain requirements to join some clubs or organizations? Read to learn the requirements for territories to become states.

At the beginning of the Revolutionary War, only a few thousand settlers lived west of the Appalachian Mountains. By the 1790s, the number was approaching 120,000. These western settlers hoped to organize their lands as states and join the Union. The Articles of Confederation, however, did not contain a provision for adding new states. Congress realized that it had to extend its national authority over the frontier. During the 1780s, all of the states except Georgia gave up their claims to lands west of the Appalachians. The central government took control of these lands. In 1784 Congress divided the western territory into self-governing districts. When

the number of people in a district reached the population of the smallest existing state, that district could **petition**, or apply to, Congress for statehood.

## The Ordinance of 1785

In 1785 the Confederation Congress passed an **ordinance**, or law, that established a procedure for surveying and selling the western lands north of the Ohio River. The new law divided this massive territory into townships 6 miles long (9.7 km) and 6 miles wide (9.7 km). These townships were to be further divided into 36 sections of 640 acres (259 ha) each that would be sold at public auction for at least a dollar an acre. Land speculators viewed the law as an opportunity to accumulate large tracts of land cheaply. Concerned about lawless people moving into western lands, Richard Henry Lee, the president of the Congress, urged that "the rights of property be clearly defined" by the government. The Congress drafted another ordinance to protect the interests of hardworking settlers.

## The Northwest Territory



**New Land** The British gave up their claim to the Northwest Territory in the Treaty of Paris. After acquiring the land, Congress had to convince individual states to give up any claims they had on it. Then Congress had to negotiate treaties with Native Americans who were living in the Northwest Territory.

### Township: American Building Block

Western lands north of the Ohio River were divided into townships 6 miles to a side. Each township contained 36 square miles, or "sections."





## The Northwest Ordinance

The Northwest Ordinance, passed in 1787, created a single Northwest Territory out of the lands north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River. The lands were to be divided into three to five smaller territories. When the population of a territory reached 60,000, the people could petition for statehood. Each new state would have the same rights and privileges as the original 13 states. The Northwest Ordinance included a bill of rights for the settlers, guaranteeing freedom of religion and trial by jury. It also stated, "There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in said territory." This **clause**, or condition added to a document, marked the first attempt to stop the spread of slavery in the United States. The Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance opened the way for settlement of the Northwest Territory in a stable and orderly manner.

**Reading Check** **Explaining** What rule did the Northwest Ordinance have about slavery?

## Trouble on Two Fronts

**Main Idea** Financial problems and disputes with Britain and Spain revealed serious weaknesses of the Confederation government.

**History and You** Imagine paying ten times the normal price for a gallon of milk or a loaf of bread. Read about the economic problems of the late 1700s.

**T**he Confederation government did not have enough power to deal with the country's financial problems and issues with other nations.

## Financial Problems

By 1781, the money printed during the Revolutionary War **depreciated**, or fell in value, so far that it was almost worthless. Unable to collect taxes, the Continental Congress and the states printed their own paper money. No gold or silver backed up these bills, so they had no real value.

**Paying Debts** The government needed money to pay off the debt from the Revolutionary War. Much of the new territory's land was sold at auction to raise money to pay off that debt. The government did not have enough money to pay the Revolutionary War veterans' salaries. Instead, it gave veterans land in the Northwest Territory. ▼



▲ **New Settlements** Land speculators also bought large tracts of land in the Northwest Territory to sell to settlers for a profit. A group of land speculators built Campus Martius when they arrived in the Northwest Territory. Campus Martius served as a fort until the town of Marietta, in present-day Ohio, was established.

### Critical Thinking

**Analyzing** How did settlers benefit from the Northwest Ordinance of 1787?





# Economics & History

Money is anything that is widely accepted as payment. Throughout the history of the American colonies and the United States, a number of different items served as currency.



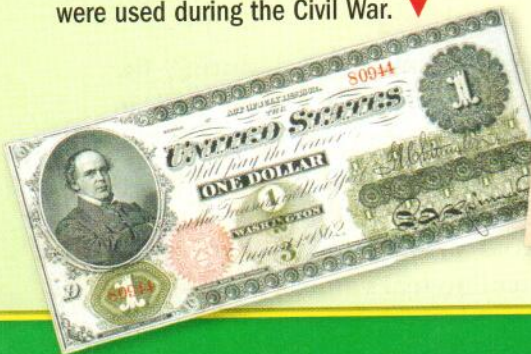
▲ Native American wampum, or clam-shell beads, served as money during the 1600s.

In colonial Virginia, tobacco leaves were accepted as paper money. ▶



▲ Continentals were printed to pay for the Revolutionary War.

Greenbacks, named for their color, were used during the Civil War. ▼



In the U.S. today, people pay with Federal Reserve notes. ▼



## Purposes of Money

- 1. Medium of exchange** People accept money as payment for goods and services.
- 2. Standard of value** Money is a way to measure how much something is worth—its price.
- 3. Store of value** Money can be saved and used in the future.

## Critical Thinking

**Making Inferences** Why do you think paper money was created?

As more Continental dollars, or “Continental,” flowed into circulation, people realized that Congress could not redeem these bills for gold or silver. The public lost confidence in the money, and the value of the bills plummeted. Between 1779 and 1781, the number of Continental dollars required to buy one Spanish silver dollar rose from 40 to 146. “Not worth a Continental” became a common saying. At the same time, the price of food and other goods soared. In Boston and some other areas, high prices led to food riots.

The war for independence left the Continental Congress with a large debt. Congress had borrowed money from American citizens and foreign governments during the war. It still owed the Revolutionary soldiers their pay for their military service. Lacking the power to tax, the Confederation could not pay its debts. The Continental Congress

requested funds from the states, but they were not required to contribute. The amount that was collected from the states amounted to only a small portion of the total money needed to pay off the debt.

## Robert Morris's Import Tax

In 1781, faced with a total collapse of the country's finances, Congress created a department of finance led by Philadelphia merchant Robert Morris. While serving in Congress, Morris had proposed a 5 percent tax on imported goods to help pay the national debt. The plan required that the Articles of Confederation be changed to give Congress the power to levy the tax. Although 12 states approved the plan, Rhode Island's opposition killed it. A second effort in 1783 also failed to win unanimous approval by the states, and the financial crisis continued to worsen.



## Problems With Britain

The weaknesses of the new American government became more evident as the United States encountered problems with other countries. In the Treaty of Paris of 1783, Britain promised to withdraw from the lands east of the Mississippi River. British troops, however, continued to occupy several strategic forts in the Great Lakes region.

British trade policy caused other problems. American merchants complained that the British were keeping Americans out of the West Indies and other profitable British markets. In 1785 Congress sent **John Adams** to London to discuss these difficulties. The British, however, were not willing to talk. They pointed to the failure of the United States to honor *its* promises made in the Treaty of Paris. The British claimed that Americans had agreed to pay Loyalists for the property taken from them during the Revolutionary War. The Congress had, in fact, recommended that the states pay the Loyalists. However, the states refused, and Congress could not require them to pay.

## Problems With Spain

If American relations with Great Britain were poor, affairs with Spain were worse. Spain, which controlled Florida as well as lands west of the Mississippi River, was anxious to stop American expansion into its territory. As a result, Spain closed the lower Mississippi River to American shipping in 1784. Western settlers no longer had access to the Mississippi River, which they used for trade.

In 1786 American diplomats reached an agreement with Spain. Representatives from the Southern states, however, blocked the agreement because it did not include the right to use the Mississippi River. The weakness of the Confederation and its inability to deal with problems worried many leaders, including George Washington. Americans began to agree that the country needed a stronger government.

 **Reading Check Analyzing** Why did Spain close the lower Mississippi River to American shipping in 1784?

## Section 1 Review

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### Vocabulary

1. Define each of the following terms in a sentence:  
*constitution, bicameral, republic, abandon, petition, ordinance, clause, depreciate.*

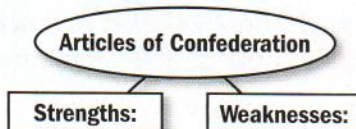
### Main Ideas

2. **Explaining** Why did most states limit the power of their governors and divide the legislature into two bodies?
3. **Specifying** According to the Northwest Ordinance, when might the people of a territory petition for statehood?

4. **Explaining** Why did the Continental Congress have difficulty raising money?

### Critical Thinking

5. **Predicting** How do you think the Northwest Ordinance would affect Native Americans?
6. **Analyzing** Use a graphic organizer like the one below to summarize the strengths and weaknesses of the Confederation government.



7. **Persuasive Writing** You are a delegate to the Second Continental Congress. Congress is debating whether to allow the central government to impose taxes. Take a stand on this issue, and write a short essay defending your position. Give specific reasons for your opinion.

8. **Answer the Essential Question**  
How effective was government under the Articles of Confederation?