

The States Sent Their Delegates To Philadelphia In 1787 For The Purpose Of Discarding The Articles Of

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In 1787, a pivotal moment in American history unfolded as delegates from the various states gathered in Philadelphia with a shared goal: to overhaul the existing framework of government established under the Articles of Confederation. This gathering, known as the Constitutional Convention, was initially convened to address problems facing the young nation's governance, but it ultimately led to the drafting of an entirely new Constitution. The decision to discard the Articles of Confederation and replace them with a stronger, more effective federal system was driven by widespread recognition that the Articles were insufficient to unify the states, support economic growth, and defend the nation. This article explores the circumstances leading to this historic gathering, the debates that shaped the new Constitution, and the lasting impact of this transformative event.

The Background: Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation

Origins and Intentions of the Articles of Confederation

- Adopted in 1777 and ratified in 1781, the Articles of Confederation served as the first constitutional framework for the United States.
- Designed to preserve the independence and sovereignty of individual states while creating a loose alliance.
- Created a unicameral Congress with limited powers, such as conducting foreign policy, war, and coinage.

Major Flaws and Limitations

- Lack of Central Authority: The federal government had no executive branch or national judiciary.
- Financial Weaknesses: Congress could not impose taxes; it could only request funds from states, leading to financial instability.
- Regulation of Commerce: No authority to regulate interstate or foreign trade, resulting in economic discord.
- Amendment Difficulties: Any change required unanimous approval, making

reforms nearly impossible.

- Military and Defense Limitations: No standing army or navy; relied on state militias.
- Sovereignty of States: States retained most powers, hindering effective national governance.

Consequences of These Weaknesses

- Economic disputes and interstate conflicts increased.
- Difficulty in raising funds for national defense.
- Inability to respond effectively to internal and external crises.
- Growing dissatisfaction among leaders and citizens about the effectiveness of the government.

The Call for a Constitutional Convention

Initial Purpose and Misconceptions

- Originally convened in May 1787 in Philadelphia to amend the Articles of Confederation.
- Many delegates believed reforms could strengthen the existing framework without complete overhaul.
- Some states, like Rhode Island, refused to send delegates, highlighting disagreements about federal power.

Shifting Goals and Realizations

- As debates progressed, it became clear that mere amendments would be insufficient.
- Key leaders, such as George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison, recognized the need for a new constitution.
- The convention's agenda evolved from fixing the Articles to crafting an entirely new government structure.

Secrecy and Deliberation

- The convention operated in secrecy to encourage open debate.
- Delegates discussed controversial issues candidly, away from public scrutiny.
- This environment fostered innovative ideas and compromise.

The Process of Discarding the Articles and Drafting the Constitution

Key Debates and Compromises

- Representation: The Virginia Plan proposed proportional representation; the New Jersey Plan favored equal votes.
- Slavery: The Three-Fifths Compromise determined how enslaved persons would be counted for representation and taxation.
- Federal vs. State Power: Debates centered on how much authority the federal government should possess.
- Executive Branch: Discussions about the structure and powers of the presidency.

The Major Features of the New Constitution

- A Strong Federal Government: Power to tax, regulate trade, and maintain a standing army.
- Separation of Powers: Executive, legislative, and judicial branches with checks and balances.
- Representation: A bicameral legislature with the House of Representatives and Senate.
- Federalism: Division of powers between national and state governments.
- Protection of Rights: Inclusion of the Bill of Rights to safeguard individual liberties.

Key Figures and Their Roles

- George Washington: Presided over the convention and provided leadership.
- James Madison: Known as the "Father of the Constitution" for his detailed notes and ideas.
- Alexander Hamilton: Advocated for a strong central government.
- Benjamin Franklin: Offered wisdom and a conciliatory voice amid heated debates.
- Roger Sherman: Helped craft the Connecticut Compromise, shaping the structure of Congress.

Ratification and Adoption of the New Constitution

The Road to Ratification

- The Constitution was signed on September 17, 1787, but needed ratification by nine states to become law.
- State conventions were held to debate and approve the document.
- Federalists supported ratification; Anti-Federalists expressed concerns over insufficient protections for individual rights.

The Federalist Papers and Public Support

- A series of essays written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay to promote ratification.
- Addressed concerns about the concentration of power and explained the Constitution's provisions.

The Bill of Rights and Final Approval

- To secure ratification, Federalists promised to add a Bill of Rights.
- The first ten amendments were ratified in 1791, assuaging fears and ensuring broad support.

The Legacy of Discarding the Articles of Confederation

Establishment of the United States Constitution

- The new Constitution laid the foundation for the federal government still in use today.
- It created a balanced system of government capable of addressing the nation's needs.

Impact on American Governance

- Established the principles of federalism, republicanism, and the separation of powers.
- Provided a framework for democratic processes and protections of individual rights.

Ongoing Significance

- The Constitution has been amended 27 times, reflecting evolving societal values.
- Serves as a model for constitutional democracies worldwide.

Conclusion

The gathering of delegates in Philadelphia in 1787 marked a decisive turning point in American history. Originally convened to amend the ineffective Articles of Confederation, the convention's deliberations led to the revolutionary decision to discard the old framework and craft a new Constitution. This bold step was driven by urgent needs for a stronger federal government capable of uniting the diverse states, fostering economic stability, and ensuring national security. The resulting Constitution not only addressed the weaknesses of the Articles but also laid the enduring foundation for American democracy. Its ratification was a testament to the collective resolve of the founding fathers and the vision of a unified nation. Today, the Constitution continues to symbolize the principles of liberty, justice, and governance that the framers sought to establish, making their decision in Philadelphia one of the most consequential in the history of the United States.

Frequently Asked Questions

What was the main purpose of the delegates gathering in Philadelphia in 1787?

The main purpose was to revise the Articles of Confederation to create a stronger federal government.

Did the delegates in 1787 intend to completely discard the Articles of Confederation?

Initially, they aimed to amend the Articles, but they ultimately decided to discard them and draft a new Constitution.

Which states sent delegates to the Philadelphia Convention in 1787?

All thirteen states sent delegates to participate in the Constitutional Convention.

Who was the key figure in leading the effort to discard the Articles of Confederation?

James Madison is often called the 'Father of the Constitution' for his influential role in shaping the new government.

What was the significance of discarding the Articles of Confederation?

Discarding the Articles allowed the creation of a stronger federal government, leading to the drafting of the U.S. Constitution.

How did the decision to discard the Articles impact the formation of the U.S. government?

It led to the establishment of a federal system with separate executive, legislative, and judicial branches under the Constitution.

Were any major debates or disagreements during the Philadelphia Convention about discarding the Articles?

Yes, there were debates over the balance of power between states and the federal government, but consensus was reached to replace the Articles.

What role did George Washington play during the Philadelphia Convention?

George Washington served as the president of the Convention and provided leadership and support for the constitutional drafting process.

How did the Articles of Confederation fall short, prompting the need to discard them?

The Articles lacked provisions for a strong central government, were ineffective in regulating commerce and defense, and could not enforce laws.

When was the new Constitution ratified after discarding the Articles of Confederation?

The Constitution was ratified in 1788, officially replacing the Articles and establishing the framework for the U.S. government.

Additional Resources

Constitutional Convention 1787: The Birth of the United States Constitution

Introduction: The Historic Gathering in Philadelphia

In the summer of 1787, a pivotal event unfolded that would shape the future of the United States forever. Delegates from thirteen states converged on Philadelphia with a singular purpose: to overhaul the Articles of Confederation, the fledgling nation's first constitution, and replace it with a more robust, effective governing document. This extraordinary assembly, known as the Constitutional Convention, was not merely a political meeting but a foundational moment that articulated the principles of American democracy, federalism, and the rule of law.

At its core, this gathering was about discarding the Articles of Confederation—an imperfect framework that had, by 1787, demonstrated significant weaknesses—and forging a new constitutional blueprint capable of uniting a diverse collection of states into a cohesive, functional union. The decision to convene in Philadelphia was strategic—chosen for its central location and historical significance—and the stakes were high. The outcome would resonate through generations, establishing the framework for the American republic.

The Context Leading to the Convention

The Articles of Confederation: An Overview

Penned during the tumultuous years of the American Revolution, the Articles of Confederation, ratified in 1781, served as the first national constitution. They established a loose confederation of sovereign states with a weak central government. While they provided a necessary foundation for independence, they soon revealed critical limitations:

- Lack of Executive Authority: There was no president or executive branch to enforce laws.
- No Power to Tax: The federal government could request funds but had no authority to impose taxes, leading to financial instability.
- Inability to Regulate Commerce: States often imposed tariffs and trade barriers against each other, hampering interstate commerce.
- Weak National Defense: The federal government lacked the power to raise armies effectively.
- Unanimous Consent for Amendments: Any change required approval from all thirteen states, making reform nearly impossible.

These weaknesses underscored the urgent need for a new governing document,

capable of providing stability, fostering economic growth, and ensuring national security.

The Growing Calls for Reform

By the mid-1780s, dissatisfaction with the Articles intensified. Economic turmoil, interstate disputes, and threats from foreign powers underscored the system's deficiencies. Notably:

- Shays' Rebellion (1786–1787): An armed uprising by farmers in Massachusetts protesting economic injustices highlighted the federal government's inability to maintain order.
- Trade and Commerce Disputes: Lack of federal authority to regulate interstate and international trade caused economic fragmentation.
- State Sovereignty vs. National Unity: States prioritized their interests, leading to conflicts and instability.

These issues prompted influential leaders and states to reconsider the framework of their union. The call for a constitutional overhaul gained momentum, culminating in the decision to convene a convention in Philadelphia.

The Road to Philadelphia: Planning the Convention

The Annapolis Convention and the Move Toward a New Constitution

In 1786, a preliminary meeting at Annapolis, Maryland, drew representatives from several states to discuss interstate trade. Recognizing the broader issues, these delegates recommended further deliberations—specifically, a convention to amend the Articles of Confederation, with the possibility of drafting an entirely new document if necessary.

This recommendation was well-received, and in February 1787, Congress called for a constitutional convention to be held in Philadelphia, "for the sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation." However, many delegates and leaders, including Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, saw this as an opportunity to craft a new, more effective national government rather than merely amend the existing one.

The Composition of the Delegates

Thirteen states appointed delegates—though not all participated fully. The delegates were carefully selected, often among the most influential, educated, and experienced leaders of their states. Key figures included:

- James Madison (Virginia): Known as the “Father of the Constitution,” he played a central role in shaping the document.
- George Washington (Virginia): Elected president of the convention, providing stability and leadership.
- Benjamin Franklin (Pennsylvania): The elder statesman, respected for wisdom and diplomacy.
- Alexander Hamilton (New York): An advocate for a strong central government.
- Roger Sherman (Connecticut): Instrumental in shaping the Great Compromise.

The delegates represented a mix of backgrounds—from planters and lawyers to diplomats and merchants—bringing diverse perspectives to the debate.

The Convention Begins: Discarding the Articles of Confederation

Secrecy and Strategy

The convention was conducted behind closed doors, ensuring candid discussion without political pressure from outside interests or the public. This secrecy was essential for frank debate, as many delegates held differing visions of government power and structure.

Initial Goals and Challenges

While the initial goal was to amend the Articles, it quickly became apparent that superficial changes would be insufficient. Key challenges faced by the delegates included:

- Balancing Power: How to distribute authority between state and federal governments.
- Representation: Whether to base representation on population or equal votes.
- Slavery and Commerce: How to address the contentious issues of slavery and international trade regulation.
- Preserving State Sovereignty: Ensuring states retained certain powers without sacrificing national unity.

The delegates debated fiercely, often split along regional and ideological lines.

Major Compromises and Innovations

Faced with divisions, the delegates brokered several critical compromises:

- The Connecticut Compromise (Great Compromise): Proposed by Sherman and others, it established a bicameral legislature—Senate with equal representation (two per state) and House of Representatives based on population.
- Three-Fifths Compromise: Addressed how enslaved people would be counted for representation and taxation—three-fifths of enslaved individuals would be counted.
- Commerce and Slave Trade Clause: Allowed Congress to regulate interstate and international commerce but prohibited banning the slave trade before 1808.
- Separation of Powers: Dividing government into three branches—legislative, executive, and judicial—to prevent abuse of power.
- Checks and Balances: Mechanisms to ensure no single branch could dominate the others.

These compromises aimed to create a workable system that balanced diverse interests and preserved the union.

The Result: A New Framework for the Nation

The Drafting of the Constitution

By September 1787, after months of intense debate, the delegates produced a draft Constitution. Key features included:

- A stronger federal government with the power to tax, regulate commerce, and maintain an army.
- A system of representation designed to balance large and small states.
- Clear delineation of powers among branches of government.
- Protections for individual rights, although these would be explicitly added later through the Bill of Rights.

The document was signed by 39 of the 55 delegates on September 17, 1787, marking the birth of the United States Constitution.

Ratification and Implementation

The new Constitution required ratification by nine states to become law. This process sparked vigorous debates between Federalists, who supported the new government, and Anti-Federalists, who feared the concentration of power and the lack of explicit protections for individual rights.

After intense campaigns, the Constitution was ratified in 1788, with New Hampshire becoming the ninth state. The new government officially began operations in 1789, with George Washington inaugurated as the first President.

Legacy and Impact of the Philadelphia Convention

Transforming American Governance

The Philadelphia Convention's decision to discard the Articles of Confederation and craft a new Constitution established a durable framework for American governance. It created a federal system that balanced national authority with state sovereignty, laying the foundation for the world's oldest functioning written national constitution.

Enduring Principles

The principles embedded in the Constitution—popular sovereignty, separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism—continue to underpin American political life. The convention also set precedents for constitutional design, including the importance of compromise, the role of a written document, and the need for adaptability.

Challenges and Revisions

Despite its success, the Constitution has faced challenges, leading to amendments such as the Bill of Rights and subsequent modifications. The ongoing debate over states' rights, individual liberties, and government power reflects the enduring influence of the foundational debates in Philadelphia.

Conclusion: The Significance of Discarding the Articles

The decision of the states to send delegates to Philadelphia in 1787 was a transformative act—an acknowledgment that the Articles of Confederation were inadequate to meet the needs of a growing, diverse nation. By discarding the old framework and adopting a new, more effective Constitution, the founders laid the groundwork for American democracy, stability, and prosperity.

This momentous gathering exemplifies the power of collective deliberation, compromise, and vision—qualities that continue to define the American experiment. The Constitution, born from this historic assembly, remains a living document, guiding the nation through centuries of change and challenge.

In essence, the 1787 Philadelphia Convention was not just about replacing a failed set of rules; it was about forging a new identity for a nation destined to become a beacon of governance and liberty worldwide.

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