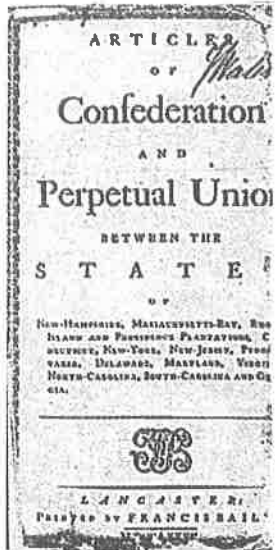


# 32 Experimenting with a Nation



The Articles of Confederation were the country's first constitution—but they were too weak to do a good job.

Imagine a city built of wooden blocks. Do you see it in your mind? Make sure it has houses and bridges and walls. Knock it down. Now build it again.

Which takes longer, destroying or building? Which is harder?

It's the same way with governments.

Revolutions are difficult—overthrowing Britain wasn't easy at all for the American colonists—but building a strong nation was much harder.

The American Revolution was unusual; it produced people who were good at nation building. When you study other revolutions, like the ones in France and Russia, you'll see how lucky we were.

At first, though, it looked like it might not happen. It seemed as if the 13 states would never get along. They certainly weren't "united." Each state

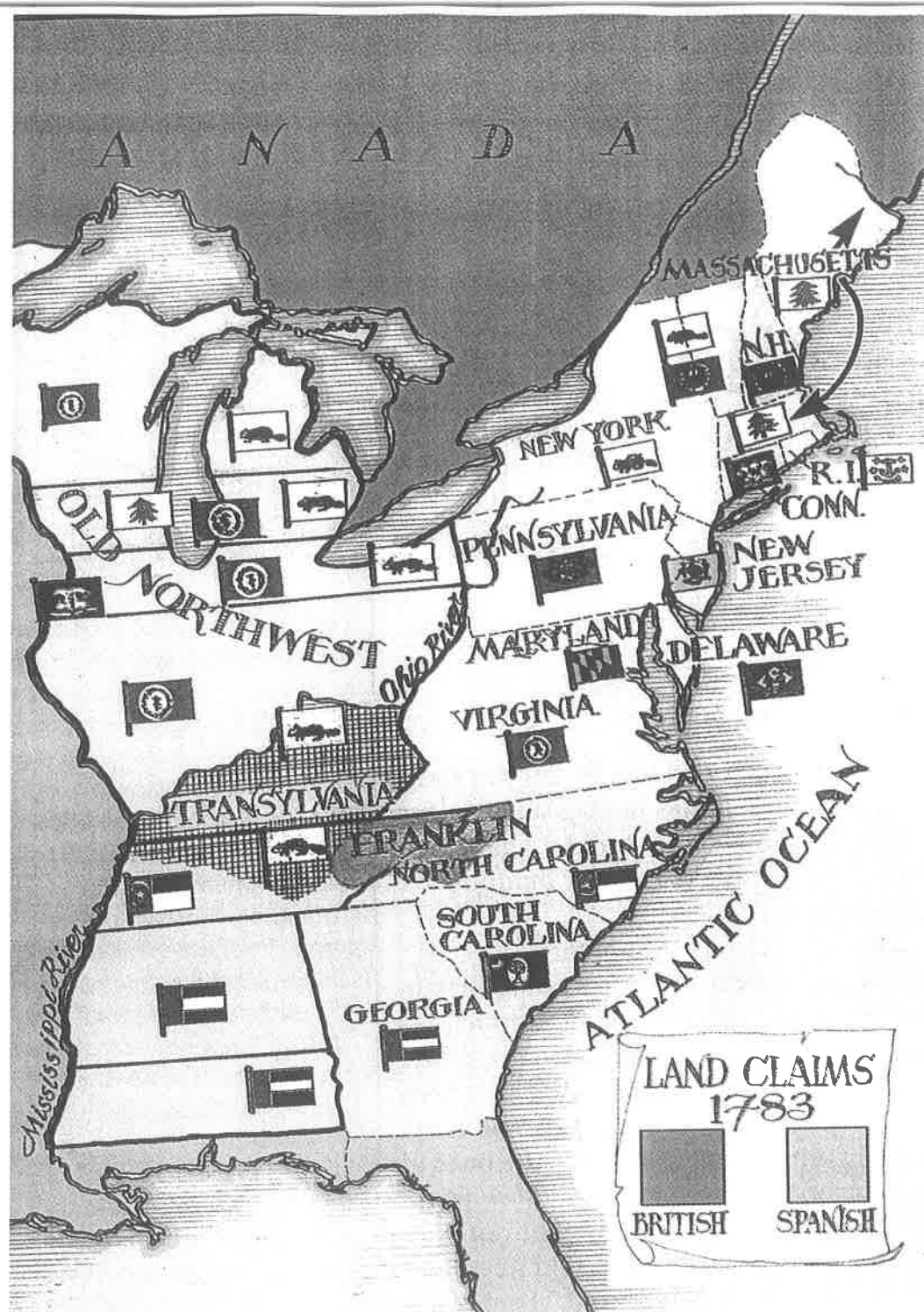
was printing its own money and making its own rules. Eleven states had their own navies. Virginia's navy had 72 ships. The Continental Congress was trying to run a national government, and it had a navy, too—but it was smaller than Virginia's. The Congress was also printing money. As you can guess, soon none of the money was worth anything, and that was terrible for most citizens.

Besides all that, each state got into the taxing business: New York was taxing goods from New Jersey, and New Jersey was taxing goods from New York. Virginia and Maryland

**In 1782**, Colonel Lewis Nicola wrote a letter to General Washington suggesting he use his army to seize power and proclaim himself king. Washington replied, "You could not have found a person to whom your schemes were more disagreeable."

## Supply & Demand

**T**here is an economic law called the law of *supply and demand*. If there is a big supply of something, the price—and the demand for it—usually goes down. Gold is expensive because it is beautiful and *rare*. If there were gold nuggets all over the place, the price of gold would go way down. Money works in roughly the same way. If a government prints lots of money, the value of its money goes down. That means it costs many dollars to buy something that once took only a few dollars. That is called *inflation*.



were squabbling over boundary lines. Little states were jealous of big states—and vice versa. In Massachusetts some farmers rebelled against the government in Boston. In Philadelphia and New York newspapers reported a movement to create three separate nations out of the 13 former colonies. In England people were saying that the Americans would soon be begging to be taken back.

As you can see, the United States got off to a rocky start. We didn't have a good working plan for a government.

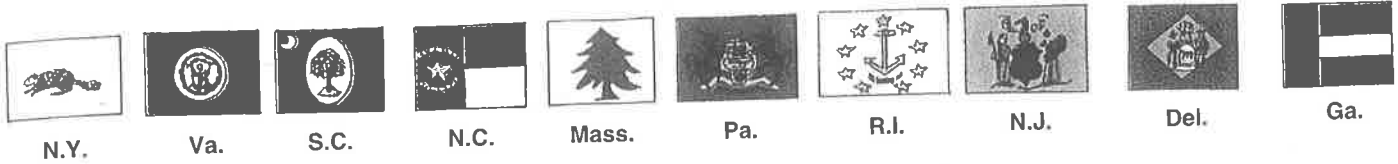
We didn't begin with the Constitution we now

have. The first constitution of the United States was called the Articles of Confederation. It didn't work well at all.

That was because the American citizens were afraid of political power. They had had a bad experience with kings and parliament. They were afraid of a strong congress and of a strong president. So they went to the other extreme. They didn't give Congress the power to do much of anything. There was no president except the president of the Congress. And there wasn't much he could do either.

Ask anyone, "Who was the first president of our country?" The answer will be "George Washington." But you can say that the first president was John Hanson. Very few people will believe you. It's true, though. Hanson became president under the Articles of Con-

Everyone who could make a claim to the lands west of the Appalachians and east of the Mississippi was doing it. Some areas were claimed by three or four states at once. (See key to the right of map.)



federation, on November 5, 1781. President Hanson didn't make himself remembered, because he had no power.

In 1781 Americans were facing one of the toughest problems there can be in designing a government. How do you provide freedom for each person and still have a government powerful enough to accomplish things?

You have to give up some freedom when you are part of a society that is ruled by laws. The question is, how much do you have to give up? The Americans, at the end of the 18th century, had just fought hard for liberty. They weren't about to give up much at all. They went too far—but they learned.

The national government, under the Articles of Confederation, was just too weak. Everyone seemed to know it. Most of the time the states wouldn't even send representatives to Philadelphia to vote at meetings of the Congress. A lot of people felt the voting wasn't fair anyway. Each state had an equal vote in Congress. That meant that 68,000 Rhode Islanders had one vote, and so did 538,000 Virginians.

Then something really insulting happened. In 1783 Congress got chased out of Philadelphia by its own army, because it hadn't paid the soldiers their salaries. But Congress had no money to pay the salaries and no power to collect taxes. (It is tax money that governments use to pay their bills.)

It would take six years for the people living in this land to create a workable kind of government.

At first the former colonists didn't even know what to call themselves. We began as a nation without a name. Some called us the American Commonwealth; others said the American Confederation. Some talked of "united states"; a few said *the United States*.

But most people still thought of themselves first as citizens of the state they lived in. They were having a hard time accepting the idea of a nation that might be more important and powerful

**The Articles of Confederation** were written by a committee appointed by the Second Continental Congress on July 12, 1776. They were ratified in 1781 and lasted until 1789.

In 1787, when this cartoon was printed, America's government was in a mess. Two groups of six states are engaged in a tug-of-war, each trying to pull a wagon labeled "Connecticut" over to their side.





### England's Indian Ally

**M**ohawk Joseph Brant (you remember, William Johnson's brother-in-law) was now fighting settlers in western New York and Pennsylvania. Easterners were ignoring Indian treaties and moving into those regions. The English were secretly helping Brant, who was a skilled warrior. They didn't think the new nation would last long. In 1785 Brant went to England and met George III. He made a big hit in England. Brant was highly educated and had translated the Bible into Mohawk.

than their separate and beloved states. They didn't even like the word "nation." They called it a "union" of states.

People in the territories felt the same way. You already know about independent Vermont. Well, some people tried to make Kentucky into a nation, too. (In 1792 the Commonwealth of Kentucky became the first state west of the Appalachian mountains.) There was even a state that called itself Franklin, off to the west of North Carolina. It was territory where Mound Builders had once flourished. Before long Franklin became a state with an Indian name: Tennessee.

Settlers were filling up the Ohio River Valley, and that was causing problems. Much of that western land was claimed by Virginia, but other big states were claiming

some of it, too. The states without western lands were jealous. How could arguments between the states be settled unless a central government had more power than any one state?

There was one good thing about the Articles of Confederation: they were so weak they made a strong constitution possible.

In this British cartoon, a triumphant America has laid down bow and arrow and is offering the olive branch of peace to a weeping Britannia.

