

## We Are NEVER Getting Back Together



The Declaration of Independence was America's official break-up letter with the British government. And why the breakup? (Well, that depends on who's telling the story.) As far as the colonies were concerned, Britain's king, King George, was controlling. He took away colonial legislatures, gave himself the authority to make colonial laws, and taxed the colonists' goods without their consent. This all boiled down to one thing: King George had grown to be a **tyrant**. So what happened if the people didn't think what their monarch said was a good idea? And what if a ruler abused his power at the people's expense? Then what? (According to the colonists: Break up!) But the biggest what-if was what should a government that could keep these what-ifs away look like? The colonies were about to figure that part out.

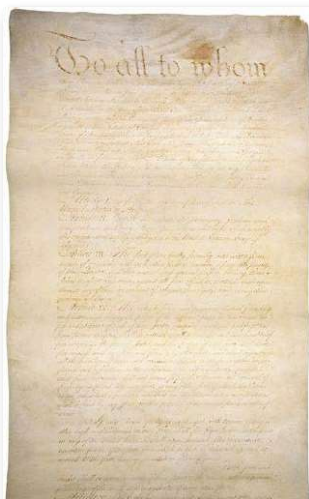
### New Government Alert!

Members of the Continental Congress needed to figure out how to organize a government for the newly independent colonies. It definitely couldn't be anything like the British monarchy. They didn't even have an official document (like a **constitution**) to spell out the rules and structure of their own government. America wasn't going to make that mistake. They knew it was important to write down exactly what the government had the power to do (and NOT do) and how it would work.

On November 15, 1777, the committee adopted the **Articles of Confederation**. This document set in place a national government for the new states, which was pretty important considering they were still in the middle of a war. (Yes, the *Revolutionary* one.) They needed a national body that could make decisions, especially ones to help further and fund their war. The Articles weren't officially **ratified**, or approved, by all 13 states, until later on March 1, 1781. Once ratified, it became the official governing document of the United States for another seven years until it was replaced by the U.S. Constitution in 1787.

### What Justified the Split?

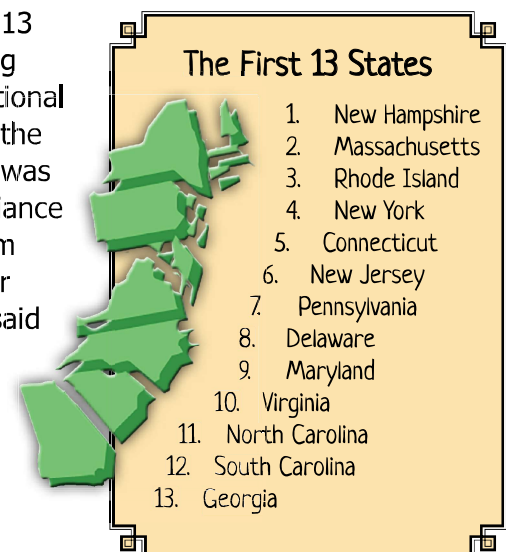
Social contract theory is the idea that people agree to follow the government in exchange for the things that government can do to serve them, like provide justice and security. If a government violates their end of the deal, the people have the right to seek to change it.



Articles of Confederation  
Source: National Archives

### What were these Articles of Confederation Anyway?

The Articles of Confederation included 13 sections (or articles... get it?) describing the organization and powers of the national government and some of the rights of the citizens. The new form of government was called a **confederation**, or a loose alliance of states. This was totally different from the government the colonies had under British rule. The governing document said that the states were uniting in a "firm league of friendship". That meant they basically agreed to support one another and work together if, say, a foreign country arrived on the shores with cannons and stuff.

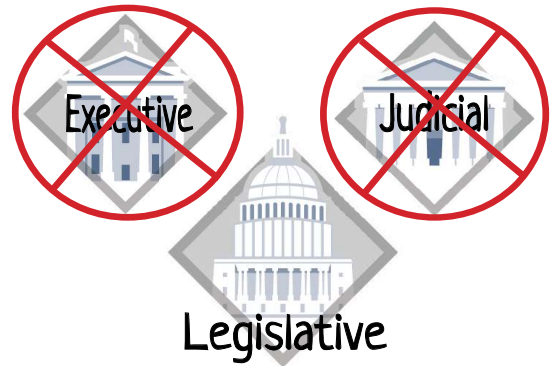


# Trying Self Government

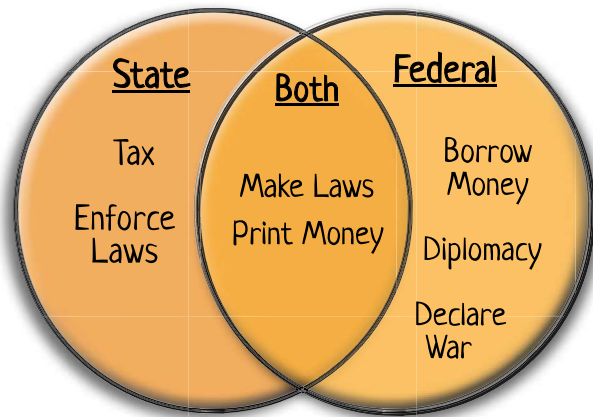
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## National Government = Limits Please!

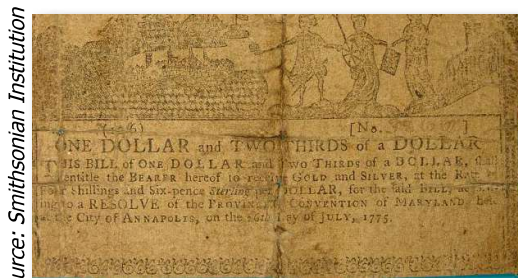
The government that the Founders came up with had a single legislative body, a **unicameral legislature** called Congress. You might be wondering about the other branches of the federal government, but government under the Articles wasn't structured like our government is today. Congress was it. There was no executive (aka the president) and no judiciary either (aka the courts). As colonies, Americans learned that a good national government couldn't be too powerful. Otherwise, what would stop it from trampling on the people's liberty?



Under the Articles of Confederation the federal government had just one branch: legislative.



Because of this, the Articles included only a few specific jobs for the national, or **central**, government. Congress could legislate, if nine of the thirteen states agreed on a law or measure. They also had the power of diplomacy, which meant they could make treaties and negotiate relationships with other countries. The point of creating a confederation was for protection, so Congress had the authority to declare war if needed. And they could coin and borrow money and negotiate relationships with Native American tribes.



Source: Smithsonian Institution

Each state maintained its own currency under the Articles like this Maryland note from 1775.

## Real Power = State Power

The states were their own **sovereign** governments. Sovereign means that each state had the power or authority to make decisions and rule over itself. Each state was pretty much its own little nation. They had their own laws, courts, troops, money, and some of them were even led by someone with the title of "President". Unless the national government was specifically given the right to do something, like declare war, it was a power that belonged to the states.

Under the new confederation, the states had virtually all governmental authority in America. They could tax and pass laws. They had their own militias. *And they could tax.* (Did we say that twice?) Remember how annoyed the colonies had been with King George for imposing taxes without their consent? They weren't about to make that mistake again, so they made sure to maintain the power to tax for themselves. Taxes are needed to pay soldiers, build ships, make roads and bridges, basically to pay for anything that a government might do. The national government could ask for money, but they couldn't force states to pay it. When the request for cash came through, the answer by states was almost always, not surprisingly, "No!" Having so little money limited the power of the national government to do much of anything.

A callout box with a yellow arrow pointing right. The text inside reads: "Straight from the Articles!" followed by "Art. II. Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence..."