

Articles of Confederation History Lab

"From 1781 to 1789 the Articles of Confederation provided the United States with an effective government."
Using the documents and your knowledge of the period, evaluate this statement.

Document A:

Source: Letter from the Rhode Island Assembly to Congress (November 30, 1782).

"Sir: In obedience to the direction of the lower house of assembly of this State, I enclose their unanimous resolution [to reject] the recommendation of Congress, respecting an impost on imported goods, &c. and to state some of [their] principal reasons.
...

"1st. Because it would be unequal in its operation, bearing hardest on the most commercial states, and so would press peculiarly hard upon this State, which draws its chief support from commerce:

"2dly. Because it proposes to introduce into this and the other states, officers unknown and unaccountable to them, and so is against the constitution of this State: and

"3dly. Because, by granting to Congress a power to collect moneys from the commerce of these states, indefinitely as to time and quantity, and for the expenditure of which they are not to be accountable to the states, they would become independent of their constituents; and so the proposed impost is repugnant to the liberty of the United States."

Document B

Year	Estimated Market Value of United States Exports to Great Britain (in thousands)	Estimated United States Population (in thousands)
1770	\$3,248	2,148
1771	5,978	2,211
1772	5,078	2,275
1773	4,960	2,335
1774	4,842	2,400
1775	6,555	2,463
1784	4,429	3,236
1785	4,901	3,351
1786	4,134	3,461
1787	4,488	3,576
1788	4,901	3,688
1789	4,901	3,808
1790	4,905	3,929
1791	4,724	4,056
1792	4,311	4,194

Document C

Source: Letter from Delegate Joseph Jones of Virginia to George Washington (February 27, 1783).

"One ground of discontent in the army, and on which they found the opinion that justice is not intended to be done to them, is the delay in complying with their requests [for bonus and back pay]. But with those acquainted with the deliberations of public bodies, and especially of so mixed a body as that of Congress, allowances will be made for slow determination. Every class of public creditors must know the inability of Congress to pay their demands, unless furnished with the means by the several States, and the exertions of that body have not been [lacking] heretofore to obtain the means.

Document D

Source: John Jay's instructions to the United States Minister to Great Britain (March 7, 1785).

"You will in a respectful but firm manner insist that the United States be put, without further delay, into possession of all the posts and territories within their limits, which are now held by British garrisons. And you will take the earliest opportunity of transmitting the answer you may receive to this requisition . . .

"You will represent to the British Ministry the strong and necessary tendency of their restrictions on our trade to incapacitate our merchants in a certain degree to make remittances to their's. . . .

"You will represent in strong terms the losses which many of our and also of their merchants will sustain if the former be unseasonably and immoderately pressed for the payment of debts contracted before the war."

Document E

Source: John Jay's speech to Congress on negotiations with Spain's Minister Diego de Gardoqui (August 6, 1786).

"My attention is chiefly fixed on two obstacles which at present divide us, viz., the navigation of the Mississippi and the territorial limits between them and us.

"Mr. Gardoqui strongly insists on our relinquishing [our right to navigate the Mississippi]. It always has been, and continues to be, one of their maxims of policy to exclude all mankind from their American shores.

"I have often reminded him that the adjacent country was filling fast with people; and that the time must and would come when they would not submit to seeing a fine river flow before their doors without using it as a highway to the sea for the transportation of their productions; that it would therefore be wise to look forward to that event and take care not to sow in the treaty any seeds of future discord. He said that the time alluded to was far distant; and that treaties were not to provide for contingencies so remote and future. For his part he considered the rapid settlement of that country as injurious to the states, and that they would find it necessary to check it. Many fruitless arguments passed between us; and tho' he would admit that the only way to make treaties and friendship permanent was for neither party to leave the other any thing to complain of; yet he would still insist that the Mississippi must be shut against us.

"Circumstanced as we are, I think it would be expedient to agree that the treaty should be limited to twenty-five or thirty years, and that one of the articles should stipulate that the United States would forbear to use the navigation of that river below their territories to the ocean. Thus the duration of the treaty and of the forbearance in question would be limited to the same period."

Document F:

Source: Report of Rawlin Lowndes' speech to the South Carolina House of Representatives, debating the adoption of the federal constitution (January 17, 1788).

Mr. Lowndes expatiated some time on the nature of compacts . . . and solemnly called on the house to consider whether it would not be better to add strength to the old Confederation, instead of hastily adopting another; asking whether a man could be looked on as wise, who, possessing a magnificent building, upon discovering a flaw, instead of repairing the injury, should pull it down, and build another. Indeed, he could not understand with what propriety the Convention proceeded to change the Confederation; for every person with whom he had conversed on this subject concurred in opinion that the sole object of appointing a convention was to inquire what alterations were necessary in the Confederation, in order that it might answer those salutary purposes for which it was originally intended. Mr. Lowndes concluded a long speech with a glowing eulogy on the old Confederation.