

The Articles of Confederation Revisited, By: Rose Vest

"To all to whom these Present shall come, we the undersigned Delegates of the States affixed to our Names send greeting."

Such words of optimism begin the Articles of Confederation. The year was 1781 and the new nation, the United States of America, began to take shape. Delegates met in Philadelphia to draft the particulars of their governing document. The document established a permanent central government for the country. The sovereignty, freedom, and independence of each state was recognized as well as power, jurisdiction and rights not "expressly delegated to the United States in Congress assembled." (Article II)

Statesman John Dickinson of Philadelphia, leader of the draft committee, recognized potential obstacles and provided the needed leadership in resolving the problems. Obstacles surfaced early. One issue, states rights, was resolved in a number of ways. To begin with, the states entered a league of friendship for their mutual defense and agreed to assist each other against forces and attacks made upon them. Representation was left to the individual states, with the document calling for at least two but no more than seven representatives. Representatives were expected to be the eyes and ears of the state and could be recalled if the state governor or leadership felt their interests were not being represented. In addition, representatives were prohibited from holding any office "for which he or another for his benefit receives any salary, fees or emoluments of any kind." The central government was referred to as the Congress and its powers included the power to conduct foreign affairs, maintain an army and navy, make treaties, establish post offices and coin money. The Articles prohibited Congress from raising revenue through taxes, relying instead upon the good will of the states to provide funds for the central government as requested. The delegates spent countless hours fine tuning and organizing the provisions of the document. Satisfied with their accomplishment, the document was presented to the assembly and signed on July 9, 1778. It took effect four years later when the last state, Maryland, formally approved the document.

In 1786, events occurred that would cause the leadership of the new nation to question the strength of their governing document and of the new nation. A former Revolutionary War army captain named Daniel Shays would lead a group of three hundred and fifty men in rebellion.

Why would a group of ex-Revolutionary War soldiers rebel against the country they fought to protect, defend, and secure independence for? The answer to that question becomes apparent when examining the period immediately following independence. The colonies gained their freedom from Britain, but economic stability was not part of the guarantee. Freedom left the colonies without the commercial ties they depended on for exchange of goods and products. As a result, states were forced to seek new markets and develop new ties to replace old ties. Massachusetts felt the economic slump extensively. The state emerged from the war with debt in the millions of dollars and a shortage of goods. Currency values fell dramatically. Additional harm was caused from Britain's decision to curtail trade between the United States and the British West Indies. The loss to the shipbuilding, distilling, and lumber exporting industries spelled economic disaster for the state.

Most residents of the state were unaware of the seriousness of the situation. As times and conditions worsened, the signs became all too apparent. By the early 1780's, farms were seized and sold for one-third or less of their true value. Debtor prisons filled, emptying only as friends and relatives bailed out men jailed for a situation for which they had no control. The residents turned to their state government for leadership to solve the problems and restore the economy. Unfortunately, the leadership of the government was not as wise or dedicated as the people had hoped. The legislature responded to the current crisis by imposing higher court costs and allowing certain foodstuffs and lumber to be used in place of currency. Disillusionment set in. People began taking matters into their own hands. Mobs success in barring the doors to the courts in Pittsfield and Northampton convinced others to do likewise. Veterans knew where to find leaders and sought out the men who previously led them in battle. Leadership developed within each locality. One of these leaders was Daniel Shays of Pelham.

Shays related all too well to the problems experienced by returning veterans. He turned to farming after a successful army career. He found himself among the many who sold war momentous for cash. He met with others at a local

tavern and listened to their stories of hardship. He was aware that the governing compact delayed payment of overdue wages and invalidated the pensions of military officers. Shays found himself in the uncomfortable

position of his fellow veterans when he was sued for a debt of twelve dollars. Within two years, he joined other veterans in rebellion.

Massachusetts residents again turned to their states government for leadership and again were disappointed. The legislature responded again with a tax increase to make up for the shortage in revenue. The increase--from fifteen cents to one dollar and seventy-five cents--was substantial and intensified the anger and frustration of the citizens. Rebels continued to protest the excessive taxes levied on their property, the continually rising court costs, and the unstable economy. Conventions were convened to deal with the issues at hand. The citizens outlined their own proposals to remedy the situation and called for a reduction in taxes and court fees and the issuance of paper money. Their proposals were largely ignored.

The time for peaceful resolution of the situation had come to an end. In August 1786, a mob

1,500 people strong, armed with guns and swords, seized the county courthouse at Northampton and forced the court to adjourn *sine die*. Mobs prevented the courts at Springfield and Concord from meeting and in Great Barrington abused the judges and released prisoners. Painfully aware that anarchy could grip the state and spread throughout the country, Governor James Bowdoin began developing a plan for enlisting the aid of federal troops. Violence was avoided in Worcester when the rebels put their energies towards drafting a legislative resolution calling for the redress of their grievances. The

governor and others knew they could not count on this course of action becoming commonplace. The Hampshire County Court was scheduled to meet in Springfield in January. In addition to preventing the meeting of the court, Shays also hoped to seize the federal arsenal as weapons and supplies were running low. The attack was to begin on January 25th.

At the last minute, Luke Day, who was to lead the movement from the west, sent word that the battle was to begin one day later. Daniel Shays and his followers never received the note. Major General Benjamin Lincoln, commander of the state forces, received word of pending actions in Springfield and headed there. General William Shepherd, commander of the troops at Springfield, prepared as best he could for what was to come. On the way two of Shepherd's soldiers intercepted the note Shays was to have received.

Shays preceded as scheduled. Shepherd's men moved in expecting a battle, and were surprised as to what unfolded. Only three cannon shots were needed, the latter exploding in their midst. Three rebels died on the spot, and a fourth was severely wounded. The remaining men fled in confusion. The rebels were captured in February 1787 and sentenced to death for treason, but were later pardoned.

Rebellion brought to light the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation. Congress was prohibited from raising revenue through taxes. When the state of Massachusetts requested assistance, Congress could call a militia, but had no means to pay the men. Congress could pass legislation condemning the action and calling for specific actions, but could not force the states to comply with the law(s). Congress could propose amendments to the Articles, but they would not come into effect unless all thirteen states voted to do so. The central government was in the position where it could neither pay debts or provide needed services. Congress was criticized for being slow to act, but the reality of the situation was that neither side could gain the needed majority to act. Congress' sad lesson learned was that the good will of the states could not always be depended upon for action. Much to Congress' credit they did not dwell on the failures but moved ahead to convention to try to strengthen the document.