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WORKSHEET:

THE ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION

OVERVIEW

* The Articles of Confederation provided for a loose confederation or “firm league of friendship.” In a confederation, the bulk of power is in the state governments and there is little national power.
* Under the Articles, there was no executive branch, judicial was left to the states, and there was just 1 national congress. Each state had one vote in Congress – to pass a bill required 9/13 votes, and amendments of the Articles required 13/13 votes. This made the amending process unworkable, because unanimous vote was almost impossible.
* Congress had no power to regulate commerce and no power to enforce tax-collection. They asked states for taxes on a voluntary basis.
* The national government (based in Philadelphia) could not command any individual under a sovereign state.
* Articles were praiseworthy as confederations went, but America really needed a tightly knit federation
* Though the Articles were unsuccessful, they were a necessary stepping-stone from the Association boycott agreement in 1774 to the Constitution of the United States. The Articles were an intermediate stage that held states together until they were ripe for the establishment of a strong constitution by peaceful, evolutionary methods.
* Land Ordinance of 1785: Provided that the acreage of the Old Northwest should be sold and the proceeds should be used to help pay off national debt. Area surveyed and divided into townships
* Land Ordinance of 1787: Related to the governing of the Old Northwest. There would be two stages of governing for an area. First, it would submit to the federal government. Once the population of a territory reached 60,000, it will be admitted by Congress as a state, with all the privileges of the exiting 13 colonies. Also forbade slavery in the Old Northwest.
* Advantages: Land Ordinance of 1785, Land Ordinance of 1787, perfect as confederations went, peaceful stepping stone – provided for evolution rather than revolution into the Constitution.
* Disadvantages: No executive branch, and judicial left to states, 1 Congress, unanimous voting system made amending Articles almost impossible, Congress had no power to regulate commerce, Congress had no power to enforce tax-collection (state taxes voluntary), national government could not directly control citizens.
* Significance: Flaws of Articles provided for the creation of the Constitution. Proved that majority of power in the states would be ineffective for a nation of this size.

**A NEW BEGINNING IN 1781: ONE NATION OR THIRTEEN?**

The Americans won the Revolutionary War. People around the world saw it as a remarkable accomplishment. But after the war the new nation faced serious economic problems. Here is a summary of four of those problems. Read about each one in ***The problem*** sections below. Then use economic reasoning to respond to questions posed in the ***Predicting consequences*** sections.

**1. Debt**

***The problem.*** After the Revolutionary War, Congress faced enormous debt. The United States owed money to the French, who had helped to support the war. Money also was owed to American citizens who had bought bonds from the government to help support the war. The total debt was so steep that some Americans recommended simply not paying it back. They argued that, since the war bonds had changed hands several times, payment now would not go to the people who originally helped to support the war, instead, it would go to speculators who had purchased the bonds from the original bond holders. Under the Articles of Confederation, moreover, Congress had no power to tax and thus no way to raise money to use in paying off war debts.

***Predicting consequences.*** You are a member of the Congress of Confederation (the new name for the Continental Congress) in 1781, considering the issue of war debts. Predict the consequences likely to follow if war debts are not repaid.

**2. The Power to Tax**

***The problem.*** Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress had no power to tax. It could levy a tax only if the revenue it raised were turned back to the states on the basis of each state’s population. In other words, the U.S. government was severely restricted in its capacity to handle debts and expenses. Even if it seemed prudent to repay war debts, therefore, Congress in 1781 had no obvious means of raising the revenue that would be needed for repayment.

***Predicting consequences.*** You are a member of the Congress of Confederation, considering whether the federal government should be granted new powers to tax. Predict the consequences likely to follow if Congress gains no new power to tax

**3. Tariff Wars**

***The problem.*** Under the Articles of Confederation, the federal government had little power, but the states were empowered to act independently, as sovereign bodies. In matters of trade, they could pursue their self-interest even at the expense of neighboring states. Thus it seemed likely that tariff wars would erupt, pitting states against states. For example, New York imposed a fee on vessels traveling to and from Connecticut and New Jersey. Not to be outdone, New Jersey imposed its own tax on a New York owned lighthouse on New Jersey soil. New Jersey, lying between New York City and Philadelphia, found its imports heavily taxed. Leaders in other states watched attentively and considered placing their own taxes on products from neighboring states.

***Predicting consequences.*** You are a member of the Congress of Confederation, considering whether Congress, rather than the several states, should be authorized to regulate interstate commerce. Predict the consequences likely to follow if the several states retain exclusive authority to govern interstate commerce.

**4. Military strength**

***The problem.*** Although America won the Revolutionary War, Britain continued to occupy territories in the Great Lakes region, in open violation the Treaty of Paris. British occupation interfered with Americans who sought to develop the Northwest Territory for settlement and trade. At the same time, Spain refused to grant Americans navigation rights on parts of the Mississippi River; and in parts of the Mediterranean Sea, Barbary pirates were attacking American shipping. Pockets of civil unrest — the armed rebellion of poor Massachusetts farmers led by Daniel Shays in 1786, for example — also threatened the peace in some places at home. Having separated themselves from the British Empire, Americans now faced the need to provide for their own security in these cases. Under the Articles of Confederation, however, the federal government had no means to provide for Americans’ defense and security.

***Predicting consequences.*** You are a member of the Congress of Confederation, considering whether the federal government should be authorized to develop a strong military force to provide for Americans’ defense and security. Predict the consequences likely to follow if no such authority is granted.