



CLASSROOM MATERIALS

Creating a New Nation

Overview:

At the end of the Revolutionary War, the new nation was faced with another extremely difficult task—creating a single, unified country out of a loose association of states, transforming the “United States” from a plural to a singular noun. America had thrown off one oppressive form of government, but now they had to develop a *new* form of government strong enough to enforce the law, yet based on the democratic and economic premises of the Revolution.

The result was a Constitution that has lasted longer than other document of its kind in world history. This lesson will examine the tensions that existed between proponents of individual liberty and advocates of national strength and how the evolution of their debate shaped the Constitution and the new government.

Related resources for the Lesson

In this lesson, students will use the following resources:

1. Episode Six of *Liberty!* (The related web page for the episode is at <http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/chronicle/episode6.html>). Students should view the episode prior to completing this lesson.
2. The Articles of Confederation (<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/artconf.htm>)
3. The US Constitution (<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/usconst.htm>)
4. The Bill of Rights (<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/rights1.htm>)
5. Question Sheet PDF (for students)
6. Question Sheet PDF (for teachers, with answers)

Relevant Standards

This lesson addresses the following national content standards established by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>)

Civics:

- Understands some of the major competing ideas about the purposes of politics and government (e.g., achieving a religious vision, glorifying the state, enhancing economic prosperity, providing for a nation's security) and knows examples of past and present governments that serve these purposes
- Understands how constitutions, in the past as well as in the present, have been disregarded or used to promote the interests of a particular group, class, faction, or a government (e.g., slavery, exclusion of women from the body politic, prohibition of competing political parties)
- Understands how constitutions may be used to preserve core values and principles of a political system or society (e.g., prohibition of religious tests for public office and protection of private property by the United States Constitution)
- Knows the advantages and disadvantages of confederal, federal, and unitary systems in fulfilling the purposes of constitutional government
- Understands how various provisions of the Constitution and principles of the constitutional system help to insure an effective government that will not exceed its limits

US History:

- Understands the efforts of the Continental Congress and the states to rebuild the economy after the American Revolution (e.g., by addressing issues of foreign and internal trade, banking and taxation)
- Understands political and economic issues addressed by the Continental Congress (e.g., the accomplishments and failures of the Continental Congress, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, revolutionary war debt and the dispute over the sale of western lands)

Strategy for the Lesson

Prior to viewing Episode Six of *Liberty!*, the teacher should highlight the basic concerns and issues that faced the new nation after the war.

Some of these issues might include:

- Sovereignty of each individual state to conduct its own affairs without what it considered “undue influence” from a central government
- Protections against an oppressive central government
- Economic issues, such as taxation without representation, as well as maintaining a laissez-faire system which would protect business and industrial interests
- The ability of the national government to protect business interests from foreign interference
- The ability of the national government to protect itself and the nation from foreign military power as well as protecting itself from internal sedition.

- The division of the new nation into two camps – those who feared a strong, powerful central government and wanted to preserve individual liberties as well as the local sovereignty of each state and those who believed that the union would fall apart without a strong central government.

Next, allow students to view Episode Six of *Liberty!* The teacher may wish to cue specific chapters in the film, including the following:

- Chapter 3, *A National Vision* (14:14-19:04), which discusses the development of the Articles of Confederation as well as the debate over limited versus strong national government
- Chapter 4, *All Is Not Well* (19:06-24:30), which discusses the failings of the Articles to serve as a suitable government for the new nation
- Chapter 5, *A Convention in Philadelphia* (24:32-30:58), which discusses the Constitutional Convention as well as the varied interests and philosophies of the framers
- Chapter 6, *Blueprint for a New Nation* (31:00-34:16), discusses the make-up of the Constitution itself
- Chapter 7, *Reactions Are Divided* (34:18-40:54) deals with the controversy and resistance to the Constitution.
- Chapter 8, *Compromise and Approval* (40:56-45:59) describes the compromises and debate that led to ratification of the Constitution as well as the development of the Bill of Rights

After viewing, distribute question sheets to students. Allot sufficient time for students to complete the worksheets. Once students have completed the questions, the teacher should evaluate them according to the depth of the answer desired, the amount of time allowed for the assignment as well as any other criteria established by the teacher, for example, spelling and grammar.

Extension Activities:

Have students work in groups to evaluate the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Ask them to assume they are a newly-appointed “Constitutional Convention.” What provisions in the Constitution or amendments might they be likely to re-write or eliminate? Students should develop “position papers” to defend their choices.

Question Sheet for Creating a New Nation (with answers)

1. In the opening minutes of Episode 6, Historian Gordon Wood remarked that George Washington's resignation of his commission and taking leave of public life at the end of the Revolutionary War was an "electrifying event throughout the world." Why was it so electrifying?

Wood was referring to the fact that Washington, who had just led a successful revolution and commanded a large army, gave up control of that army rather than using it to seize power himself. Wood remarked that no other commander in world history had done anything like that before.

2. Wood also mentions the difficulty of "bringing together separate states." Why do you think the states might have resisted having a national government instead of 13 separate governments?

Students will probably note that the states were worried about "trading one tyrant (George III) for another (a strong central government)." They may also note that the states might have resisted because they had developed separate identities as independent states, and it would have been very difficult for them to give up sovereignty and give authority to a central government.

3. In Episode 6, Abigail Adams writes a letter to her sister in which she refers to the "inherited power" of British nobility and aristocracy saying, "There's a servility of manners here, a distinction between nobility and common citizens, which, happily, is foreign to Americans." Do you agree with Abigail Adams's statement? Explain your view.

Many may disagree, due to treatment of African-American slaves or women during the period. However, some may note that the end of the war allowed all white men some level of equality in society and gave all an opportunity to raise themselves in society.

4. In the episode, Alexander Hamilton laments the inaction of the government to enforce the law put forth by the Articles of Confederation. Review the Articles. List at least three issues or problems you see that would back up Hamilton's view.

Student answers will vary, but some possible examples include:

In Article 2, each state is given its own sovereignty, freedom and independence, making it very difficult for a central government to carry out its actions or enforce laws or foreign policy.

Since each state would be sovereign, each state could develop its own currency, which would undermine the national economy.

No national government would be able to compel states to send troops, obey national law, levy national taxes or regulate trade.

In Article 5, each state was given one vote, making it impossible to allocate representation reflective of big states' populations versus small ones.

There is no mention of a national executive in the Articles

There is no mention of a national court system.

An “extraordinary majority” was required to pass legislation, as a mere four states could block actions desired by the other nine.

5. After Shay’s Rebellion, it became obvious that something needed to be changed, so the Constitutional Convention was called to revise the Articles of Confederation. The first vote of this Convention was to, in the words of the narrator, “keep their proceedings absolutely secret”. Why do you feel the convention was not open to the public? Could this be done today? Explain your answers.

Most students would recognize the need for secrecy in light of the fact that if the meetings were held in public, most of the delegates would be fearful to say or do anything. Having meetings in secret would allow them to freely say what they believed or felt.

Most students would feel that it would be difficult for a convention today to be private, especially with the number of American homes with television sets, and with news networks and public affairs broadcasting such as C-SPAN, CNN, Fox News, and others “chomping at the bit” to cover the story.

6. Compare the preamble to the Articles of Confederation with the preamble to the US Constitution. Why would the framers of the Articles write the names of all the states in the preamble, while the framers of the Constitution simply wrote, “We, the People...”?

First, the framers of the Constitution wanted to highlight that the power of government, according to the Constitution, lay in the people. Second, by simply stating “We, the People...”, the framers hoped to prove that the new Constitution was a product of a national government instead of thirteen independent nations.

7. In Episode 6, the narrator mentions that the role of checks and balances in a large democracy is to protect the rights of minorities from potential tyranny. How do you think checks and balances might accomplish this? Give at least two examples, either hypothetical or historical, from your reading and/or studies of the Constitution.

The system of checks and balances was designed to keep any branch of government in the new Constitution from gaining too much power. In this way, the other two branches of government could protect the rights of minorities, because they had some leverage over the third branch.

Some examples (“real world”) where rights of the minorities have been protected by checks and balances include the following:

- The Supreme Court ruling in 1954 which desegregated public schools
- The use of Federal troops to integrate the University of Alabama and University of Mississippi during the early 1960s, as ordered by the President.
- The Supreme Court ruling in 1974 which forced President Richard M. Nixon to release the “White House Tapes” in relation to the Watergate scandal. Within days of being forced to release the tapes, Nixon resigned.
- The role of the Congress in the process of impeachment of the president and members of the Federal judiciary.
- The War Powers Act of 1973, which restricts the President’s power to send troops to foreign countries indefinitely without Congressional approval.

8. As the Constitution is completed and submitted for ratification, the supporters of the document are known as “Federalists” and the opponents as “Anti-Federalists”. One issue that divided the two groups was whether the Constitution should contain a “Bill of Rights”. What arguments both for and against a Bill of Rights might the two groups have developed?

The Federalists would probably say that they felt checks and balances along with the separation of powers would protect the rights of individuals more effectively than a bill of rights. In addition, they might have also felt that since state constitutions already included a bill of rights, it would be wrong for a federal constitution to overrule those state documents.

The Anti-Federalists would probably advocate the Bill of Rights as a way to protect the rights of individuals from abuses of a strong national government.

9. Gordon Wood notes that the Bill of Rights is “what makes us a single people... We’re the first nation, I suppose, in modern times, to make ideology the basis of our existence.” In your view, does the Bill of Rights fill that role? Explain your answer.

Answers will vary. Most students will probably say the Bill of Rights does make us a single people, because it gives everyone equality through the basic freedoms listed, such as freedom of speech and the press. Even the poorest man has a right to state his opinion in an open forum or the right to due process of law in the judicial system.

10. Historian Pauline Maier states in the closing minutes of Episode 6 that, “I think it’s one of the greatest ironies of human history that the American Revolution is sometimes considered no revolution at all. That honor goes to others -- the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution -- revolutions that fail to realize their promise of liberty, revolutions that ultimately failed. Our revolution, I think, is underestimated mainly because it succeeded.” Do you agree with this assessment? Explain your answer.

Answers will vary. Some students may note that the statement is true, because in many other revolutions of the same period, revolution was marked by consistent disruption and turmoil in the country which as Maier states, can be regarded as a failure. In the case of the American Revolution, a nation was created which, with minor adjustments, remains intact to this day.

Some students may note the statement is false, because while other revolutions did incur substantial turmoil over a long period of time, they also caused a dynamic change in those governments -- monarchs fell and governments were overhauled, just as they were in the American Revolution.



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