

# TRANSCRIPT: THE ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION - RATIFICATION - EXTRA HISTORY - #2

**i** *The following transcript is a verbatim account of the video or audio file accompanying this transcript.*

After over a year of debate and revision,  
The Continental Congress presented the states with their new Articles of Confederation.

♪ Intro Music ♪

The congress had done their best to create the government that the states wanted.  
One that left them free to govern themselves without any congressional meddling,  
but also one that let congress continue it's work  
conducting that tiny little matter of  
the American Revolutionary War  
which was, still going on, by the way.  
Hoping to keep things moving,  
Congress set a deadline:  
the states must ratify the Articles of Confederation,  
and make them official, within three months.  
It would take over three years.

Long before the Revolutionary War had started,  
when Great Britain had been granting charters to start colonies in North America,  
they had been a little lax about defining the territory each colony would control.  
It was a new world; nobody had good maps yet. What are you gonna do?  
What they did was tell several colonies that their borders extended  
all the way from the East Coast to the West Coast,  
uh, wherever that was.

It kept things simple.

And after all this new world couldn't be THAT big, right?

Turns out, it WAS that big.

And now that the colonies had become independant states,  
the lucky one who had gotten huge territories  
granted by those early charters, wanted to argue  
that they still had the right to all that land.

But states like Maryland felt left out.

With no Western claims of their own,  
they feared that all that extra land  
would make their neighbors bigger, and richer, and more important than them.

They saw a future where they faded into irrelevance,  
while giant, western-facing states ruled the nation.

So, Maryland refused to ratify the Articles of the Confederation,  
unless everyone agreed to give congress, not individual states, control of the west.

Congress liked that idea,

but they knew, that if they let one state to start making changes, all of them were gonna want to.

So, they said 'no'.

And Virginia, who was exactly the neighbor Maryland was worried about, suggested that they all needed to join together in harmony to focus on the war; get these Articles ratified, already.

And, hey, if Maryland wants to be a pain about it, maybe we just cut them out of this entirely.

Also, by the way, the West is ours, and we're going to do what we want with it, so back off. Maryland dug its heels in, Virginia played innocent, and the deadline to ratify the Articles of the Confederation flew by.

But ten of the thirteen states did ratify them, and Congress needed some form of organization, so the Articles became, if not the law of the land, then, at least its semi-official rule set.

Meanwhile, the British had not exactly agreed to take a time-out, while the Americans decided what they wanted their new government to be. The war was still going on, and the situation looked pretty dire for the Continental Army. That same winter that the states had spent bickering over who got to control what lands, the soldiers spent freezing and starving to death, in their camp at Valley Forge.

George Washington, whom Congress had appointed to lead the army back when all this war business began, had tried desperately to petition for help. Congress had tried, just as desperately, to provide that help, but they ran into some major problems. Congress had been just printing money.

And I mean that literally.

Need to buy equipment?  
Print some money!

Need to pay your soldiers?  
Print some more money.

By the winter of 1777, they had printed so much money that it had become practically worthless. When Washington tried to purchase supplies from the local farmers using that money, they said 'no, thank you', and sold those supplies to the British army instead for good, reliable pound sterling.

See, it wasn't that there was NO food in Valley Forge, the locals and the British enjoyed a very comfortable winter, in fact, it was just that Washington and his army couldn't buy anything with these worthless dollars Congress kept printing for them.

So Congress turned to the states for money. The idea, at least as the Articles of Confederation intended, was that the states would raise money through taxes, Congress would tell them how much the army needed, and the states would pitch in to a general fund to make it happen. But contributions from the states had been drying up. They all had their own issues to deal with, including their own local state militias to fund.

So they began to treat the requests from Congress as entirely optional. If they couldn't see the immediate benefit for themselves, they would not pay. As the winter reached its peak, Washington began to fear that his army, and the backbone of the Revolution, would be defeated, not by the British, but by this confederation model of government. Congress could go nothing without the aid of the states,

and the states had become too wrapped up in their own concerns to help.  
Even when Washington skipped Congress and wrote directly to them  
about the desperate situation of his army.  
In the end, he resorted to plundering the very countryside he wanted to protect.  
Being a good Virginia gentleman,  
he tried to make it a genteel-sort of plundering.  
His troops would take whatever food they could find from local farmers by force,  
but then give them an I.O.U. for their trouble.  
But seeing that clearly nobody had the money to pay those I.O.U.s,  
the farmers still felt pretty plundered.  
But what mattered to Washington was that it worked.  
The Continental Army crawled out of Valley Forge  
in much the same condition it had started:  
not great, but not dead.  
Still both his, and his officers, faith in the Confederation had been shattered.  
Washington called it a 'many headed monster that never will nor can steer to the same point.'  
He still believed in an independent America,  
but he feared that this government would either lose the war or fall apart when peace arrived.  
While Washington struggled, another agent of the Confederation Congress pulled through for him.  
Benjamin Franklin had taken a break from his hobby of writing constitutions,  
and now served as the U.S. ambassador to France.  
Drawing on their mutual hatred of the British,  
he convinced the French to become full allies of the United States.  
and reinforce Washington's army.  
His breakthrough came in the nick of time.  
The British had launched a new campaign against the Southern states,  
hoping to break the spirit of resistance there.  
They crept steadily Northward on a trail of victories,  
getting closer and closer to that one recalcitrant state:  
Maryland.  
By now, every state but Maryland had ratified the Articles of Confederation.  
They stood fast in their refusal, but totally alone.  
They begged the French for help,  
and the French told them to ratify the Articles like a good little state and they would think about it.  
With no other options left,  
Maryland decided that, Virginia might be a bad neighbor, but, Britain would be worse.  
So, they ratified the Articles.  
The Confederation Congress FINALLY became official.  
And yet, it was already falling apart.  
States continued to ignore requests from Congress except when it suited them.  
And even then, they never had as much as they were asked to pay.  
Realizing that Congress has no real power,  
the delegates themselves began to ignore their duties.  
Time after time,  
meetings of congress had to be disbanded  
because over half the delegates simply didn't bother to show up to vote.  
Support from the French had helped to keep the Continental Army together, but, they were still starving,  
and Congress had no way to raise money to feed them.  
Their early methods of funding the army without support from the states had stopped working.  
The money they were printing had practically no value,  
and the loans they had taken out from citizens and foreign powers

had ballooned into wildly uncontrollable debt.  
If the Confederation Congress had any hope of seeing this war to the end,  
they needed somebody to get their house in order,  
they needed to stabilize their currency,  
establish reliable sources of revenue,  
and prove to the watching nations of Europe  
that they were not a government on the verge of collapse.  
They needed a financier.  
♪ Music ♪