Chapter 7
The First Republic, 1776—1789

Chapter Summary

Chapter 7 explores the early American efforts to create a national government. Topics covered in this chapter include an examination of the political philosophy of republicanism, the nature and content of the early state constitutions, the nature and content of the Articles of Confederation and the document’s inability to produce effective government for the United States, British and Spanish threats to American security under the Articles, and the movement toward a stronger national government, culminating in the drafting and adoption of the United States Constitution.

I. The New Order of Republicanism
   A. Defining the People
      1. Women and the Revolution
      2. The Revolution and African Americans in the South
      3. Northern Blacks and the Revolution
      4. The Revolution’s Impact on Native Americans
   B. The State Constitutions
      1. Toward religious pluralism
      2. Radical and conservative visions of republicanism
   C. The Articles of Confederation

II. Problems at Home
   A. The Fiscal Crisis
   B. Economic Depression
   C. The Economic Policies of the States
   D. Congress and the West

III. Diplomatic Weaknesses
   A. Impasse with Britain
   B. Spain and the Mississippi River

IV. Toward a New Union
   A. The Road to Philadelphia
   B. The Convention at Work
      1. The Great Compromise
      2. Regulation of commerce and the issue of slavery
      3. The office of the chief executive
   C. Overview of the Constitution
   D. The Struggle over Ratification

V. Conclusion
Learning Objectives

After a careful examination of Chapter 7, students should be able to do the following:

1. Explain the American philosophy of republicanism embraced during the Revolution.
2. Describe the generally held beliefs in America regarding who should vote and who should hold political office. Explain the differences in the qualifications for the two.
3. Describe the status of women in America after the Revolution.
4. Understand the Revolution’s impact on slavery and the issue of emancipation.
5. Explain the impact of the Revolution on Native Americans.
6. Describe the characteristics of the state constitutions that emerged after 1776.
7. Describe the provisions of the Articles of Confederation. Explain the meaning of the term *confederation* and comment on why Americans chose this form of government during the Revolution.
8. Identify the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation as a tool of government and connect the weaknesses of the document to its eventual failure.
9. Identify Robert Morris and explain his proposals to improve the nation’s financial condition.
10. Explain the historical significance of Shays’s Rebellion and why historians consider it a catalyst in the movement toward a new United States constitution.
11. Discuss the Confederation Congress’s policy regarding western land. List the three major ordinances that were designed to regulate the land in the Northwest Territory.
12. Understand how provisions in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and the Southwest Ordinance of 1790 will contribute to sectionalism during the nineteenth century.
13. Discuss the issues surrounding American access to the Mississippi River.
14. Explain the historical significance of the Annapolis Convention as a prelude to the Constitutional Convention.
15. Comment on the socio-economic backgrounds of the framers of the United States Constitution.
16. Explain the provisions of the Great Compromise and point out the ways in which it drew from both the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan.
17. Discuss the impact of sectionalism and slavery on the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention.
18. Describe the constitutional provisions for a national executive.
20. Explain the meaning of the term *checks and balances* and point out how they are provided for in the Constitution.

21. Explain the concept of *federalism* and understand how both the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution provided for federal forms of government.

22. Identify the two factions that emerged during the debate over the ratification of the Constitution.

**Topics for Classroom Lecture**

1. Discuss the impact of the American Revolution on the institution of slavery. Focus particularly on the abolition of slavery north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Often, the emancipation of slaves by northern states after the Revolution was based on the principle of gradual emancipation. How effective was gradual emancipation as a means of liberating slaves? What happened to many slaves as they approached the age at which they were to be freed? What motivated the northern interest in emancipation: concern for the individuals enslaved or the desire to eliminate the troubling institution from its borders?

2. Prepare a lecture on the nature of early state constitutions and their historical and political importance as the link between two eras in American constitutional history. Point out the roots of state constitutions in the original colonial charters as well as their use at the Constitutional Convention as models on which to base the new federal document. Choose a state such as Connecticut and provide students with copies of the original colonial charter and the original state constitution and have them comment on the similarities. What characteristics of the state constitution predict the United States Constitution?

3. The Articles of Confederation are often dismissed as the failed first attempt by Americans to create a federal government. Prepare a presentation on the successes of the Confederation Congress ruling under the Articles. Point out the successful negotiation of the Peace of Paris of 1783, which awarded to the United States all the western lands east of the Mississippi. Place special emphasis on the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, pointing out its readoption by Congress under the new Constitution; the continued use of its plan for admitting states to the union; and the legal precedent it established for Congressional regulation of slavery.

**Topics for Class Discussion and Essays**

1. Prepare a class discussion on the socioeconomic backgrounds of the framers of the Constitution, perhaps having the students read an excerpt from Charles Beard’s *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* before the class. Was there a connection in the late eighteenth century between wealth and the rising interest among some Americans in nationalism? How could a strong federal government provide security for the upper class? Was the United States Constitution conceived as an elitist document?

2. Prepare a class discussion focusing on the concept of federalism. What is the meaning of the term, and what characteristic of the American political system does it describe? How does the movement from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution reflect eighteenth-century American concerns about federal versus state and local power? To what extent is American fear of centralized power rooted in American colonial and revolutionary experience? Do ambiguities regarding this balance of power persist today? Invite students to comment on how modern-day Democrats and Republicans disagree on this issue. How is this disagreement reflected in their views on current political issues?
3. Discuss the debate over the ratification of the Constitution. Who were the Federalists? Who were the Antifederalists? How did the regional and socioeconomic backgrounds of the two factions define their political views? What factors contributed to the Federalists’ success? Use this opportunity to set the stage for future battles by the common man to effect political change (e.g., the Jeffersonian revolution of 1800, the Jacksonian era, and the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century). How has agrarian political influence changed over time?

4. Discuss the importance of sectionalism as a political force in the late eighteenth century. How did sectionalism impact foreign affairs? What decisions were made by the Confederation Congress and the Constitutional Convention that would aggravate sectional tensions in the future?

5. Conduct a class discussion on whether the American Revolution was conservative or radical. Be sure students understand the meanings of these terms. Think back to Chapter 5 and have students comment on how new American political thinking regarding liberty, independence, and republicanism was at the time of the Revolution. Then, have them work with the Crevecoeur piece in the text and ask them to comment on his perceptions of American radicalism.

**Topics for Term Papers and Class Projects**

1. Structure a creative controversy focusing on the debate over ratification of the Constitution. Divide the class into an even number of small groups. Have half the groups examine the Federalist argument supporting ratification and the other half examine the Antifederalist argument against ratification. Pair the groups (one Federalist group with one Antifederalist group) and have them debate the issue. Finally, have the groups switch sides and debate again. In this way, all students must argue both sides of the issue.

2. Write a paper describing the status of free African Americans in the North after the Revolution. How did the number of free African Americans change after 1783? What did freedom mean to African Americans in the northern United States after the Revolution? Were northern supporters of emancipation necessarily supporters of racial equity? How does racism figure into these issues?

**Resources for Lectures and Research Projects**

Audio-Visual Resources

*Liberty! The American Revolution: Are We to Be a Nation?* Catherine Allan/KTCA, 1997, 60 minutes. The final episode of this six-part PBS series explores the American struggle to create a republic by examining the Articles of Confederation and the Constitutional Convention.