A Nation Tested

Reading the Articles of Confederation through a national crisis

SS24.US1.2a "Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, and describe how Shays' Rebellion generated sentiment favoring a strong central government."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two powers Congress had under the Articles, circle two limits on its power, and box the sentence that connects Shays' Rebellion to calls for a stronger national government.

What Could the New Government Do?

1. In 1783, the United States won independence, but victory did not answer a difficult question: how could thirteen states act together without giving up too much power? The Articles of Confederation created a national Congress in which each state had one vote. Congress could conduct foreign affairs, make treaties, and declare war. It also organized western lands for settlement and future statehood through the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. These powers helped the new country negotiate with other nations and plan its growth. The Articles deliberately kept most power with the states, reflecting fears of another distant, powerful ruler.

2. That design had costs. Congress could request money from states, but it could not collect national taxes. If states did not pay, Congress struggled to meet debts from the Revolutionary War. Congress also could not regulate trade between states, even when their policies clashed. It had no reliable way to force states to follow its decisions. Changing the Articles required every state's approval, so repairs were difficult. The same limits that protected state independence made it hard for the country to respond to shared economic trouble or to pay for a national force when a crisis came.

3. A crisis erupted in Massachusetts in 1786. Farmers facing heavy state taxes and debts feared losing their farms when courts ordered property seized. Protesters, including men led by Daniel Shays, closed courts to stop debt cases. In early 1787, some marched toward a federal arsenal at Springfield; a Massachusetts force stopped them. The national Congress could not raise tax money to fund a dependable response, while Massachusetts relied on a state force supported in part by private money. Many observers saw the unrest as evidence that the national government needed stronger powers to raise revenue and maintain order. Others blamed unfair state tax policies, not just a weak Congress.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Identify one power Congress had under the Articles. How could that power help the states act together?

2. Why did Congress struggle to pay debts from the Revolutionary War?

3. How did Shays' Rebellion expose a weakness in the national government?

4. Why might someone who blamed Massachusetts's tax policies disagree that a stronger national government was the main solution to the rebellion?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine you are a delegate in 1787. Write a 90 to 110 word speech that names one strength of the Articles to preserve, two weaknesses to change, and how Shays' Rebellion supports one specific new national power; also address a concern about state independence.

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PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two powers Congress had under the Articles, circle two limits on its power, and box the sentence that connects Shays' Rebellion to calls for a stronger national government. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Identify one power Congress had under the Articles. How could that power help the states act together?	**Congress could make treaties, which gave the states a way to negotiate with other nations together.**
2	Why did Congress struggle to pay debts from the Revolutionary War?	**Congress could request money from states but could not collect national taxes. If states did not pay, it lacked the money to meet its debts.**
3	How did Shays' Rebellion expose a weakness in the national government?	**As protesters closed courts and marched toward the arsenal, Congress could not raise tax money to fund a dependable response.**
4	Why might someone who blamed Massachusetts's tax policies disagree that a stronger national government was the main solution to the rebellion?	**They might argue that changing the state taxes that burdened farmers would address the cause of the unrest more directly.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Fellow delegates, the Articles let Congress make treaties and helped the states act together after independence. We should keep a national voice in foreign affairs. Yet Congress cannot collect taxes to pay national debts, and it cannot reliably carry out its decisions. Shays' Rebellion showed the danger: while armed protesters shut Massachusetts courts, Congress could not raise tax money for a dependable response. Give the national government power to collect taxes so it can fund shared needs and respond to crises. States should still control many local matters, and any new national power should have clear limits.

Accept other powers and limits stated in the passage when the explanation is accurate. For the speech, look for a clear connection between the rebellion and the proposed national power, not a claim that Congress itself put down the rebellion.