A Fragile Union

Weigh what the Articles of Confederation made possible and what they made difficult

9-12.GOV.3 "Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two details that show strengths of the Articles, circle two details that show weaknesses, and put a star beside one sentence that shows both a strength and a weakness.

What Could the Confederation Congress Do?

1 After the Revolutionary War, the thirteen states faced a question: how could they act together without creating another distant ruler? Under the Articles of Confederation, each state kept much of its power and had one vote in the Confederation Congress, regardless of its size. That arrangement protected smaller states from being outvoted by larger states solely because of population. Congress could conduct diplomacy and make treaties. Its representatives negotiated the 1783 peace treaty with Britain, which recognized American independence. Yet Congress had no separate executive branch to carry out its decisions, so it depended heavily on state cooperation.

2 West of the Appalachian Mountains, Congress faced a different challenge: deciding what would happen to lands claimed by the new nation. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 set rules for governing territory north of the Ohio River and outlined a path to statehood. It also prohibited slavery in that territory. These decisions offered an orderly way to admit new states rather than leaving each settlement to invent its own system. Still, Congress could not levy national taxes. It had to ask states for money, and states sometimes paid less than requested, making it difficult to cover national debts.

3 Trade revealed another weakness. Congress lacked general power to regulate commerce, so states could set different rules and impose duties on goods crossing state lines. Merchants traveling between states faced a patchwork of policies, while Congress could not create one uniform approach to trade. Changing the Articles was difficult too: all thirteen state legislatures had to agree to an amendment. That rule guarded each state's voice, but a single state could block a widely supported change. The Articles helped independent states cooperate, especially in diplomacy and western settlement, but their limits made shared financial and trade problems harder to solve.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Identify one strength of the Articles shown by the peace treaty with Britain. What did Congress help the states accomplish?

2. How did the Northwest Ordinance show a strength of the Articles?

3. Identify a weakness in how Congress obtained money. What problem could it cause?

4. Why could the rule for amending the Articles be seen as both a strength and a weakness?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine you are advising the states in 1787. In four or five sentences, propose one change that addresses a weakness of the Articles, name one strength you would preserve, and explain how your plan balances state independence with effective national action.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · 9-12.GOV.3

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two details that show strengths of the Articles, circle two details that show weaknesses, and put a star beside one sentence that shows both a strength and a weakness. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Identify one strength of the Articles shown by the peace treaty with Britain. What did Congress help the states accomplish?	**Congress could conduct diplomacy and make treaties. Its representatives negotiated a peace treaty in which Britain recognized American independence.**
2	How did the Northwest Ordinance show a strength of the Articles?	**Congress established rules for governing the Northwest Territory and a path for admitting new states.**
3	Identify a weakness in how Congress obtained money. What problem could it cause?	**Congress could not levy national taxes and had to request money from states. When states paid less than requested, covering national debts became difficult.**
4	Why could the rule for amending the Articles be seen as both a strength and a weakness?	**Requiring all thirteen state legislatures to agree protected each state's voice, but one state could block a widely supported change.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Give Congress power to set rules for trade between states so merchants face the same rules across state borders. Keep each state's equal vote in Congress to protect smaller states. Congress could use the new power only for trade that crosses state lines, leaving trade within a state to that state. This plan would solve a shared problem without giving Congress control over every local business decision.

Accept other passage-supported strengths and weaknesses. For Part 3, look for a specific proposed change, a strength to preserve, and an explanation of how both could work together.