When Debt Sparked Debate

Trace how hardship and unrest fueled calls for national change.

8.C.3.1.C "Describe how severe economic conditions and civil unrest, typified by Shays' Rebellion, contributed to a call for revision of the Articles of Confederation."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two economic pressures and circle two actions taken by protesters. Then write 1, 2, and 3 beside sentences showing hardship, unrest, and the call to change the Articles, in that order.

From Farm Debt to Philadelphia

(1) In the mid-1780s, a Massachusetts farmer might sell crops yet still struggle to pay debts. After the Revolutionary War, trade was weak, money was scarce, and the state demanded heavy taxes to pay its debts. Some creditors sued farmers who could not pay. Courts could order property taken, and debtors faced jail. Losing a farm could mean losing a family's livelihood. Many rural residents believed the state listened to wealthy creditors more than to them. Their anger grew from both hard times and decisions made by their government.

(2) In 1786, groups of protesters, including farmers and former soldiers, began blocking Massachusetts courts. If courts could not meet, they could not order more farms seized for unpaid debts. Daniel Shays became a well-known leader, so the unrest is called Shays' Rebellion. In January 1787, rebels tried to seize weapons at the federal arsenal in Springfield, but a state force stopped them. Massachusetts eventually put down the rebellion. Still, armed crowds had disrupted government business for months. Leaders elsewhere feared that similar clashes might spread to other states.

(3) The unrest exposed a problem with the Articles of Confederation, the nation's first plan of government. Congress could ask states for money, but it could not tax people directly, so it struggled to pay for national needs, including a force to respond to unrest. The rebellion did not create every weakness in the Articles, and some leaders disagreed about how dangerous it was. Yet it made the risks of a weak national government harder to ignore. In 1787, delegates met in Philadelphia to consider changes to the Articles and instead wrote a new Constitution.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did taxes and debt problems help turn farmers' hardship into anger at the Massachusetts government?

2. Why did blocking courts give protesters a way to resist the loss of farms?

3. How might the attempt to seize weapons at Springfield have increased other leaders' concern about the unrest?

4. Why did the rebellion strengthen calls to change the Articles even after Massachusetts put it down?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine you are a delegate writing to another state in early 1787. In four sentences, connect farmers' hardships, the unrest, and a weakness in Congress to your call for a meeting to change the Articles; include one specific fact from the passage and one change you recommend.

ANSWER KEY

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GRADE 8 · 8.C.3.1.C

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two economic pressures and circle two actions taken by protesters. Then write 1, 2, and 3 beside sentences showing hardship, unrest, and the call to change the Articles, in that order. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did taxes and debt problems help turn farmers' hardship into anger at the Massachusetts government?	**Heavy state taxes added to farmers' debts, and courts could take their property or jail them. Many farmers felt the state favored wealthy creditors.**
2	Why did blocking courts give protesters a way to resist the loss of farms?	**Courts ordered property taken for unpaid debts. When protesters blocked the courts, those orders could not be made.**
3	How might the attempt to seize weapons at Springfield have increased other leaders' concern about the unrest?	**It showed that the unrest involved armed action, not only complaints about debt. Leaders feared similar clashes could spread to other states.**
4	Why did the rebellion strengthen calls to change the Articles even after Massachusetts put it down?	**The unrest made the risks of a weak national government harder to ignore. Congress could not tax people directly and struggled to fund national needs, including a response to unrest.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Fellow delegates, Massachusetts farmers faced heavy taxes and court cases when they could not pay their debts. When protesters blocked the courts, their anger disrupted government business. Because Congress could not tax people directly to fund national needs, this crisis showed why our current plan needs another look. I urge you to meet with us and consider giving Congress a limited power to collect taxes, with elected representatives approving them.

Accept responses that connect economic hardship to unrest and explain how the unrest drew attention to a weakness of the Articles. Recommendations may differ, but they should address a problem identified in the passage.