Chapter 7 Lesson 2

The Need for Change

Concern over the weakness of the Articles of Confederation were growing, among these concerns were serious economic difficulties.

The US went through a depression, a period when economic activity slows and unemployment increases. Damages from the war hurt Southern plantations leading to a drop in rice exports and trade declined from the British closing the West Indies markets to the US. What little money the US had went to pay foreign debts. The US was seriously short on money.

Shay’s Rebellion

These economic difficulties hit farmers hard. They were unable to sell their goods which meant they could not pay their taxes and debts leading to state officials seizing their land and jailing the farmers. The government was angering farmers and being viewed as tyrannous. Farmers wanted the government to issue paper money and institute new policies to help those in debt.

Resentment grew in Massachusetts and in 1786 former Continental Captain Daniel Shays, leading a group of farmers, forced courts to close in the western part of the state. The hoped to stop judges from legally taking away farmer’s lands.

This revolt continued to grow, January 1787, Shays led a force of about 1,200 supporters toward the federal arsenal in Springfield, Massachusetts. The farmers wanted the guns and ammunition. The state militia intervened, killing 4 farmers. Shays and his followers fled and the uprising was over. George Washington wondered whether “mankind, when left to themselves, are unfit for their own government.” Confidence in the government decreased as people worried about unrest and the government’s inability to prevent violence.

Slavery in the New Republic

Revolutionary War called attention to the American belief in liberty and the harsh practice of slavery. Between 1776 and 1786, 11 states, excluding Georgia and South Carolina outlawed OR taxed the importation of enslaved people. Slavery existed and was legal in every state, in the North however, it was not a major source of labor. In 1774 Quakers in Pennsylvania founded the first American antislavery society. 6 years later Pennsylvania passed a law that provided for the gradual freeing of slaves. Between 1783 and 1804, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York and New Jersey passed laws that gradually ended slavery there.

Free African Americans faced discrimination, they were barred from many public places and only a few states gave them the right to vote. Most of their children were forced to attend separate schools from white children. Free African Americans set up their own churches, schools and aid groups.

Slavery continued to spread south of Pennsylvania where the plantation system depended on slave labor, and many white Southerners feared their economy could not survive without it. Virginia passed a law that encouraged manumission, the freeing of individual slaves. Around this time American leaders were deciding that the Articles needed to be strengthened.

The Constitutional Convention

The American Revolution led to a UNION of 13 states it had not yet created a unified country. Some leaders were satisfied yet others wanted a stronger central government and were demanding a change in the Articles. Leading Americans supporting a stronger central government included: James Madison, a Virginia planter and Alexander Hamilton, a New York lawyer.

The Convention Begins

September 1786, Hamilton called for a convention in Philadelphia to discuss trade issues, he also suggested what possible changes were needed to make “the Constitution of the Federal Government adequate to the exigencies [needs] of the Union.

George Washington was not originally enthusiastic about the meeting, but Shay’s Rebellion changed his mind. His attendance brought greater importance to the meeting.

The Convention began in May 1787 and continued through the hottest summer on record. The 55 delegates included, planters, merchants, lawyers, physicians, generals, governors and a college president. 3 of the delegates were under 30 and Benjamin Franklin was over 80, many were well educated at a time when few people went to college 26 of the delegates had college degrees. Native Americans, African Americans and women were not represented at the Convention. Having Washington and Franklin at the Convention guaranteed public trust.

The Convention did not just amend (make changes to) the Articles it produced an entirely new constitution. Some questioned whether the Convention held such authority yet the work continued. James Wilson did important work on the Constitution and Gouverneur Morris polished the final draft both from Philadelphia. James Madison, a supporter of a stronger national government, kept a record of the Convention’s work, he is often referred to as the “Father of the Constitution”. He is the author of the basic plan of government that the convention adopted.

The Convention Organizes

George Washington was chosen as the leader of the Convention, delegates decided each state would have one vote on all questions. Decisions would be based on a majority vote of the states present. Sessions were closed to the public, the windows were even closed to keep anyone from listening in, that way the delegates could speak freely with each other.

The Virginia Plan

Edmund Randolph opened the Convention with a surprise, he proposed the Virginia Plan calling for a strong national government. The plan was mostly the work of James Madison and created a government with three separate branches: a 2 house legislature, a chief executive chosen by the legislature, and a court system. The legislature would have the power to tax, regulate trade, and veto state laws, voters would elect members of the lower house; members of the lower house would then choose members of the upper house. In both houses the number of representatives would be proportional, having the proper size in relation to other objects or items, to the population of each state. Thus giving larger states more delegates than smaller states.

Delegates from the small states objected, they preferred a system in which all states had equal representation, these delegates rallied around William Paterson of New Jersey. On June 15th he proposed a different plan that amended the Articles, which was all the power the Convention had.

The New Jersey Plan

The legislature would have a single house with each state having one vote. Paterson argued that the Convention should not deprive smaller states of the equality they had under the Articles. It gave the power to set taxes, regulate trade, and elect an executive branch made up of more than one person. It favored a more powerful government but less powerful than the Virginia Plan

Agreeing to Compromise

Delegates had to decide whether to revise the Articles or write a new constitution. On June 19th the states voted to work towards a new constitution based on the Virginia Plan.

The Great Compromise

The Convention appointed a committee to settle the disagreement, Roger Sherman of Connecticut suggested the Great Compromise, a settlement of a dispute by each party giving up some demands. Sherman’s plan proposed different representation in the two-house legislature. The Senate (upper house) would be equal in representation and the House of Representatives would be based on the state’s population.

The Three Fifths Compromise

There was disagreement on how to count each state’s enslaved population, including the enslaved population would increase each Southern seats in Congress. The South liked this the North did not. At the same time, larger populations would increase each Southern state’s taxes, the South was not happy about that. Delegates agreed that every 5 enslaved people would count as three person’s in the state’s total. This would be used for taxation purposes and representation.

The Question of the Slave Trade

Northern states had banned the slave trade, they wanted to prohibit it nation wide, Southern states considered slavery key to their economy. Northerners agreed to not to interfere with the slave trade until 1808.

Debating a Bill of Rights

Virginia and Massachusetts state constitutions had a listing of key rights, or a bill of rights. Some worried that without a bill of rights the new national government might abuse its power. The delegates defeated the idea of a bill of rights put forth by George Mason of Virginia, most delegates believed that the Constitution carefully defined government powers and provided enough protection of individual rights.

Approving the Constitutio

September 17, 1787, the delegates gathered to sign the Constitution they had created. 3 delegates refused to sign it: Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, and Edmund Randolph and George Mason of Virginia. Gerry and Mason did not sign because there was no bill of rights and Randolph felt the final document strayed too far from his beliefs.

The new Constitution would need to be ratified by 9 of the 13 states to go into effect.