Chapter 8
New Beginnings: The 1780s

Learning Objectives:

After reading Chapter 8, you should be able to:

1. Explain the problems facing the young nation after the Revolutionary War that had to be solved immediately.
2. Discuss the value of George Washington’s leadership.
3. Detail the evolution of the Constitution of the United States.
4. Understand the conflicts in the Mississippi Valley.
5. Analyze the army’s role in the government after the war.
6. Discuss who had the right to vote in America during the 1780s and why.
7. Explain the continued presence of the European powers in America after the war.
8. Understand the difficulty involved in ratifying the Constitution.

Time Line

1780
Revolution Army officers are promised half-pay for life by Congress

1781
Articles of Confederation ratified

1783
Treaty of Paris finalized
Society of the Cincinnati founded
Webster’s American Spelling Book
Americans granted generous southern boundary by British at 31st parallel

1784
Columbia College (later University) chartered in New York
America established trade relations with Russia

1785
Society for the Promotion of the Manumission of Slaves founded
Land Ordinance of 1785
1786
Columbia, South Carolina founded
Ohio Company founded to purchase western lands

1787
Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia
Northwest Ordinance of 1787

1788
*The Federalist* was released to the public

1790
Cincinnati, Ohio founded
Constitution finally ratified by all states

1791
Vermont became fourteenth state

1792
State of Kentucky founded
Columbia River discovered

1796
State of Tennessee founded

**Chapter Overview**

Greater than the destruction of the Revolutionary War, smallpox left a path of death throughout the continent from Mexico City to New Orleans to the Canadian interior. Losses were greatest among Native Americans, although few groups remained unaffected. In its eight-year course, the virus killed more than 130,000 North Americans.

As the epidemic subsided, immediate problems surfaced that needed the attention of the government. Still undecided was the nebulous question of what to do about lingering traces of the European powers. Britain still controlled much of Canada, and Spain controlled the western reaches of the continent. Russians were intruding on the coastline of Alaska, and some thought the French might reinsert themselves into American affairs.
I. Beating Swords into Plowshares

Victory over the British did nothing to eliminate the many internal conflicts afflicting the new nation. Foreign policy concerns, debtor/creditor conflicts, and trade wars brought the confederated states to the brink of ruin. In the face of all this, delegates from the states met in Philadelphia to craft a new plan of government.

A. Will the Army Seize Control?

After triumph at Yorktown and a quick march to repel lingering British troops from New York City, Washington’s army encamped near the Hudson River. Because the war had depleted the American treasury, most of them had not been paid in some time. It occurred to many that disbanding the army’s strength might not be a good idea until the government settled their back pay. In 1780, they received a promise from Congress that money was coming. Two years later, the disgruntled officers sent a delegation to Philadelphia to argue their claim.

At that time, Congress was working on a plan to impose a five percent duty on imported goods to generate revenue for the fledgling country to pay off war debts. Veiled threats of military takeovers and coups circulated in the New York camp. Congress finally found the revenue and offered assurances to the army. In April 1783, word came that articles of peace had been signed in France. By June, most of the Continental Army had disbanded.

B. The Society of the Cincinnati

A military coup had been averted. George Washington had pleaded with the army to respect the necessity of civilian control of the military in a democratic society. Thomas Jefferson later praised Washington’s words of liberty but still harbored fears that officers of the army might yet dabble in politics. These fears were seemingly realized when General Knox announced the formation of the Society of the Cincinnati. The new association bore the name of the famous Roman statesman and was open only to officers of the Continental Army serving at the end of the war, former officers, and honorary initiates.

Considered no more than a social club by many onlookers, the society lent itself to suspicion through its rites, secrecy, and sizable bank account. Most disturbing was the society’s policy of hereditary membership, so that eldest sons could perpetuate the society for years to come. Washington, an automatic member, was persuaded by members of Congress not to take over leadership of the society, which eventually changed some of its more disturbing policies.
C. Renaming the Landscape

To celebrate the new nation, towns and cities were renamed to wipe away the memories of the hated British and begin anew. Parents began giving their newborns the names of honored individual war heroes and foreign supporters of the American struggle.

D. An Independent Culture

New plays and poetry celebrated America’s virtues, extolling the heroic contest of war. A new country needed a unique approach to its language. In his *American Spelling Book* (1783), Webster endorsed a simple, straightforward approach to written English that avoided the stilted conventions of the British. The New England schoolteacher and war veteran followed this success with *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828) that listed some 5,000 new words, many reflecting Native American or Dutch origin. Webster also lobbied Congress to establish copyright legislature for the safeguarding of intellectual property.

The new land of America itself inspired many artists and intellectuals. Topography, botany, geography, and social theory became major fields of study. A desire to rebuild and improve society led to improvements in jails, assistance to debtors, and establishment of libraries. Some New Yorkers voiced early abolition opinions and Connecticut citizens protested the abuse of liquor. Regardless of the weakness or stability of the government, it was clear that American citizens knew they were no longer part of a European empire but instead lived in a new nation.

II. Competing for Control of the Mississippi Valley

A. Disputed Territory: The Old Southwest

American settlers moved across the mountains into the rich southern lands of Kentucky and Tennessee and to the northern Ohio River drainage. The Spanish government continued to develop its northern frontier of East and West Florida, New Mexico, and the Louisiana territory gained from France. It also debated about how to deal with the American settlers. Should they be encouraged and urged to become valued trading partners and/or Spanish citizens, or should they be driven out of Spanish territory?

B. American Claims and Indian Resistance

Since the United States was little more than a weak confederation of states, it had no effective control of citizens moving westward and did not try to prevent the expansion. State governments, with little money to pay off returning veterans from the war, issued vouchers for the distribution of frontier farmland. Populations west of the Appalachian Mountains grew so quickly that new states like Tennessee and Kentucky soon entered the union.
Strong southern confederacies of Native Americans like the Creek, Cherokee, and Chickamauga soon found themselves under continued pressure from land-hungry settlers and the competing claims of the Spanish. Damaged by the smallpox epidemic and the trials of war, these tribes tried a number of plans to coexist with the thieves of their land. Some tribes responded by naming new leaders with firm European-American ties. Other tribes followed a different approach and practiced guerrilla warfare against the frontier settlers. Strength, however, was in the vast number of Americans that kept coming from the east.

C. “We Are Now Masters”: The Old Northwest

Like their brethren in the South, the Native Americans of the American North had made a gamble and chosen sides with the British during the Revolutionary War. With the ousting of the British and the Treaty of Paris, American settlers lost no time in claiming northern territories that had traditionally belonged to the Indians. Although the English still occupied a few lonely forts on the Canadian border, they were ill-equipped and hardly able to support the Indians of the region who felt betrayed by the results of the war.

American “negotiators” used leverage and downright terrorism to force tribes to enter into treaties. The former colonies began to cede their claims west of the Appalachians to the Confederation government. However, Connecticut and Virginia held onto several million acres of western land earmarked for compensation of war veterans.

With a growing reserve of land, the Confederation government became more than a figurehead; it became a sovereign ruling body. Thomas Jefferson was tasked with the administration of the new western lands and, before leaving for France to replace an ailing Benjamin Franklin as the American ambassador, he formulated a plan for efficient western land distribution.

This statute became the Land Ordinance of 1785. To avoid the complications inherent in private surveys and the resulting overlap of claims, the Ordinance called for a grid of contiguous townships beginning where the Ohio River crossed out of Pennsylvania. Hoping to populate the West with yeoman farmers, Jefferson endorsed selling the western lands in small blocks rather than large spreads that only wealthy land speculators could afford. Jefferson also included provisions and parameters for these yeoman farmers to eventually join together regionally for self-government and statehood. Congress, however, dismissed some of Jefferson’s more idealistic proposals and modified the Ordinance greatly.
D. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787

The task of officially surveying the lands of the West would take years to complete. Almost immediately, a new law issued from Congress—the Northwest Ordinance of 1787—went further in changing Jefferson’s original plans regarding government and administration of the Northwest.

The new Ordinance opened up debate on the acceptability of slavery in the new territory and made arrangements to deport fugitive slaves back to the South. It increased property requirements for voting or holding office and also complicated the process of admitting new states to the union. Many members of Congress were also eastern land speculators and it was in their best interests to create a scenario in which the land could be controlled for profit.

III. Debtor and Creditor, Taxpayer and Bondholder

The end of the Revolutionary War ushered in a period of economic slowdown. The split with England had disrupted habitual modes of trade. Merchants were desperate to find new markets for their goods as the money supply shrunk. Violent demonstrations across the new country prompted the Congress to hold closed-door sessions to plan a recovery scheme.

A. New Sources of Wealth

Throughout the 1780s, the overall economic theme of America was a desperate search for trade and new markets. Britain had imposed trade restrictions for the Americans with the lucrative British West Indies in the Treaty of Paris. American merchants sent feelers out to the world, establishing trade with Russia and China in 1784, while searching for profit in the African slave trade. Many New England ships took the middle passage to Africa for a cargo of slaves to replace those who had escaped from the southern rice plantations during the war.

Trade with China increased with time. The soft furs and ginseng roots of the American interior were highly prized by the Chinese who, in return, exported silks, teas, and chinaware. Expeditions up the western coast of the continent established later American claims in the Oregon region.

B. “Tumults in New England”

One of the schemes manufactured by the wealthy involved the buying of state loan certificates for a fraction of their face value. By 1790, relatively few people in the country controlled the debt of the combined states, and eventually these lien holders wanted hard currency in exchange for their certificates. The average citizen was loath to pay more taxes for the loan payoffs, so a national debate began about the wisdom of the individual states printing more money for the relief of farmers and the payment of state debt.
Local skirmishes over debt, credit, and currency had their biggest impact in the Northeast where a generation of merchants had made a lucrative living trading with the British West Indies and supplying visiting Europeans with a vast array of merchandise. Sudden exclusion from the British markets sent New England’s economy into a depression. Many citizens declared bankruptcy and watched as their land and livestock were sold at auction.

C. The Massachusetts Regulation

Wealthy merchants controlled the legislature in Massachusetts and had the power to resist the arbitrary printing of additional money to relieve debt (as some states had done, with disastrous results). As in other states, a small minority of the wealthy had bought up most of the securities and public certificates issued during the war at bargain prices. They expected huge profits when their government was solvent enough to pay off these securities in hard currency.

In 1786, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts had levied a heavy tax on its citizens, demanding that it be paid in hard currency. As most of the farmers in the state lacked any such currency, they were forced to resist this tax and take matters into their own hands, “regulating” events as the North Carolina Regulators had done 20 years before. The farmers focused on closing the courts that instigated foreclosures on farms. This Massachusetts Regulation became known as Shays’s Rebellion, named for the movement’s leader, Daniel Shays. Squashed by a private militia, Shays’s Rebellion underscored the argument that many had put forward for a stronger central government.

IV. Drafting a New Constitution

A. Philadelphia: A Gathering of Like-Minded Men

The road to a national constitution began at the plantation of George Washington in 1785, when commissioners from Maryland and Virginia met there to resolve disputed state boundaries along the Potomac River. Encouraged by the progress made to clarify political issues quickly, the commissioners slated a trade meeting for delegates from all states in the hopes of creating healthy dialogue. Although only five states sent delegates to this trade meeting the next year, news of the unrest in the New England states persuaded those attending to call for an extended convention in Philadelphia the following May. This time, Congress lent its approval and authority, making the Philadelphia meeting a full-fledged Constitutional Convention, a closed-door meeting designed to retool the governmental structure of the United States.

James Madison arrived in Philadelphia in 1787 and began composing drafts and lobbying delegates, some of whom came early to attend a secret meeting of the Society of the Cincinnati. On May 25, delegates from seven states had arrived and the convention was called to order by
Washington, the delegates’ chosen president. After some debate, members agreed the convention should operate behind closed doors with one vote per state. No public discussions or written records of the proceedings were permitted.

Soon, delegates from 12 additional states had joined; only Rhode Island elected not to send representation. All delegates were white males with above-average education and professional occupations. Most of the delegates favored a government empowered to keep revenue flowing through taxation and creditor-friendly fiscal policy. Many from large states believed governmental representation should be allotted in proportional accordance to population rather than by one vote per state.

Also, most believed that the single-house (unicameral) legislature of the Articles of Confederation should be replaced by a two-house (bicameral) system. John Adams had incorporated many of these forward-looking ideas into the Massachusetts constitution, including a system of checks and balances designed to restrict power from any one facet of government. It was to Adams and Madison that many of the delegates looked for a working blueprint of government.

B. Compromise and Consensus

The Philadelphia meeting, which was later dubbed the Constitutional Convention of 1787, lasted the entire summer and highlighted the myriad differences—personal, practical, and philosophical—amongst the delegates. Ultimately, the members were realists who were concerned above all else with producing a government that their respective constituents would approve.

Many times during the 16-week convention, the process of debate and compromise continued to lead these men to a practical consensus that would benefit everyone a little but give absolute power to no one. Governmental structure, voting rights and requirements, and a method for electing the chief executive were some of the issues concerning the group. The resulting system of electoral college nomination was unusual and seemingly too complicated, but it served to compromise all the varied concerns of the delegates and won prompt approval.

C. Questions of Representation

Two hot-button issues threatened to stifle the convention’s progress: political representation of citizens and slavery. Specifically, the question of proportionate representation versus the one-state-one-vote viewpoint caused much friction, pitting large states against smaller ones. The plan conceived by Madison outlining a government with three distinct branches came to be known at the Virginia Plan. This plan called for a bicameral legislature with proportional representation in each body. The House of Representatives would be chosen by popular election, the Senate by individual bodies of state legislators.
As Madison’s plan obviously favored populous states, small-state delegates proposed an alternative New Jersey Plan built on the existing framework of the Articles of Confederation. The plan called for a continuation of the unicameral system with one vote for each state. To compromise these two plans, the idea of a Senate was retained and fixed at membership of two delegates per state. Membership in the House of Representatives would be determined proportionately by state size to be determined by a national census that would be repeated every ten years. European countries had never tried a census, so a tricky question emerged: should slaves be counted along with free persons in the headcount?

Slaveholding states wanted the counts to be inclusive because that would give their states more representation. The convention finally considered an agreement on a “three-fifths” compromise, which equated every five slaves to three free people in the census.

D. Slavery: The Deepest Dilemma

In late August, the question regarding slavery was still undecided. Planter delegates from the Southern states refused to accept any document that made any attempt to curtail the slave trade, and most delegates refused to challenge these pro-slavery positions, fearful of losing their other compromises. Ultimately, the framers approved a clause that protected the importation of slaves for 20 years and dictated the methods of handling fugitives. The word *slave* never appears in the Constitution.

In September, members finalized the new Constitution and prepared to introduce it to the public. The majority of delegates had objected to the inclusion of the listing of specific freedoms (Bill of Rights) in the document. Although there were a few dissenting votes, the framers used a state roll call for final approval, not a member-based roster. This allowed them to debut the Constitution as a unanimous agreement on September 17, 1787.

V. Ratification and the Bill of Rights

Having created a blueprint for a new form of government, the framers faced the biggest hurdle of winning public acceptance for a document that would change many aspects of their lives.

A. The Campaign for Ratification

The Confederation Congress was taken aback by the results of the Constitutional Convention. Most of its members supposed the delegates would issue recommendations to improve the existing government, not discard it altogether. Not surprisingly, the sitting Congress refused to endorse it but did pass the document along to the states on September 28. In each state assembly, the various convention delegates used any persuasive technique at their disposals to convince their fellow statesmen to vote for ratification. Calling themselves “Federalists,” the framers and supporters of the Constitution created the name “Anti-Federalists” for any
dissenters. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison published collected essays in *The Federalist*, where Madison argued the value of diversification in a large country to preserve the opinions and rights of all.

**B. Dividing and Conquering the Anti-Federalists**

Opponents of the new Constitution found themselves labeled Anti-Federalists and had to argue defensively from the start of the ratification debate. They painted the framers as privileged elites, with few real ties to the needs of the common man. They bemoaned the fate of local political power and truly believed that a state government could be more responsive and supportive to the needs of its citizens compared to a distant national government. A number of indebted people worried that a national government would favor their creditors over their own well-being. These Anti-Federalist supporters were numerous in the countryside.

The Federalists, however, populated the coastal cities near the seats of government and used tactics of persuasion to leverage control of the state ratification assemblies. Approval of the Constitution came in Massachusetts in February 1788, Maryland in April, South Carolina in May, and New Hampshire in June. Other states followed, but several of them prefaced their approval by demanding the addition of a Bill of Rights.

**C. Adding a Bill of Rights**

James Madison had two distinct motives for agreeing to pen the Bill of Rights. He wanted to ensure his election by Virginia to the House of Representatives and he also wanted to avoid the possibility of discontented states calling for a second Constitutional Convention to reconsider the whole new government.

In compiling the Bill of Rights, Madison tried to reach a compromise between the need to pass a Federalist-dominated Congress without reducing any of the primary rights of citizens. He pushed 12 statements of political rights through Congress as constitutional amendments. In two years, three-fourths of the states ratified ten of these pronouncements and they became the first amendments to the Constitution.

**Identification**

*Explain the significance of each of the following:*

1. The Society of the Cincinnati:

2. *Columbia:*
3. Noah Webster:

4. Jedidiah Morse:

5. *Notes on the State of Virginia*:

6. Society for the Promotion of the Manumission of Slaves:

7. John Adams:

8. Cumberland Gap:

9. The 31st parallel:

10. Yazoo Claim:

11. Daniel Boone:

12. Dragging Canoe:

13. Land Ordinance of 1785:

14. Northwest Ordinance of 1787:

15. The Ohio Company:

16. Scioto Company:
17. “Rogue Island”:

18. Shays’s Rebellion:

19. Constitutional Convention of 1787:

20. bicameral:

21. “checks and balances”:

22. Electoral College:

23. The Virginia Plan:

24. The New Jersey Plan:

25. the “three-fifths” clause:

26. The Bill of Rights:

27. ratification:

28. Anti-Federalists:

29. The First Amendment:

30. The Articles of Confederation:
Multiple Choice Questions:

1. The renegade Cherokee warrior, ______________, led a band of guerrilla fighters called the Chicamaugas.
   A. Pontiac
   B. George Walton
   C. Squanto
   D. Alexander McGillivray
   E. Dragging Canoe

2. The Indian tribes of the Old Southwest included
   A. Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creeks, and Natchez.
   B. Chickasaw, Creeks, Choctaws, and Wisconsin.
   C. Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creeks and Sioux.
   D. Cherokees, Choctaw, Creeks and Chickasaws.
   E. Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creeks, and Blackfoot.

3. In the Old Northwest, the states of Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut, and Virginia ceded lands to
   A. Britain.
   B. the Confederation Congress.
   C. Canada.
   D. Spain.
   E. Portugal.

4. The plan for the orderly distribution of land in the Northwest Territory was codified by the
   A. Judiciary Act of 1789.
   B. Constitution of 1789.
   C. Land Ordinance of 1785.
   D. Township Act of 1783.
   E. Proclamation of 1763.

5. The Land Ordinance of 1785
   A. criticized the continued British presence in the West.
   B. gave free land to soldiers who fought in the Revolution.
   C. forbade slavery in the Northwest Territory.
   D. granted lands to various native tribes.
   E. was rejected by the French government.
6. The economic travails of the postwar period led to increased American interest in
A. the West African slave trade.
B. land along the Mississippi River.
C. Canadian farm land.
D. whaling.
E. trade with Cuba.

7. Debt pressures touched off ______________ in western Massachusetts.
A. the Leveler crisis
B. the Whisky Rebellion
C. Shay's Rebellion
D. the Great Uprising
E. Bacon's Rebellion

8. The only state that rejected sending delegates to the Constitutional Convention was
A. New Hampshire.
B. Massachusetts.
C. Pennsylvania.
D. Ohio.
E. Rhode Island.

9. The constitutional plan that called for the creation of a bicameral national legislature with
proportional representation in both houses was called
A. the Connecticut Plan.
B. the Virginia Plan.
C. the Pennsylvania Plan.
D. the New Jersey Plan.
E. the New Hampshire Plan.

10. Those who feared the centralization of power in the new national government demanded
that a(n) __________ be included with the final document.
A. Bill of Rights.
B. Petition of Duties.
C. Anti-Federalist petition.
D. antislavery statute.
E. section establishing a federal court system.

MAP QUESTION:

After studying Map 8.4, discuss how the grid system of survey was successful in populating the
Old Northwest. Who were the big winners?
CONNECTING HISTORY

Discuss why the article calls the Electoral College a “ticking time bomb.” What steps could be taken to make the electoral process more reflective of the people’s wishes?

INTERPRETING HISTORY

Why were the Confederation Congress and General Washington afraid of a military coup after the Treaty of Paris ended the Revolutionary War?

Answers to Multiple Choice Questions

1. E
2. D
3. B
4. C
5. B
6. A
7. C
8. E
9. B
10. A