

The Crises Facing the United States during the Confederation Era: A Scripted Lesson

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Primary sources used to support the lesson:

Maryland Journal, 3 July 1786. *Copy of letters from a gentleman at the Falls of the Ohio, to his friend in England. Louisville, Falls of the Ohio, 4th December, 1786*

Maryland Journal, 3 July 1786

Benjamin Lincoln to George Washington, 22 February 1787

Reason, *New York Daily Advertiser*, 24 March 1787

Jedidiah Huntington Speech, *Connecticut Courant*, 12 May 1787

Harrington: To the Freemen of the United States, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 30 May 1787

West-Chester Farmer: To the Citizens of America, *New York Daily Advertiser*, 8 June 1787

Maryland Journal, 3 July 1787 Extract of a letter from Kentuckey, Fayette County, May 3, 1787

Pennsylvania Packet, 7 July 1787 (excerpt) Extract of a letter to the Honourable B. H. dated at Nashville, in Davidson County, May 1, 1787

New York Journal, 12 July 1787

Fairfield Gazette, 25 July 1787. Extract of a Letter from Philadelphia, dated June 19

Pennsylvania Gazette, 29 August 1787

David Humphreys to Alexander Hamilton, New Haven, 1 September 1787

- of the Ohio, to his friend

Objectives of the lesson:

- Students will be exposed to the various crises facing the United States during the Confederation era.
- Students will be exposed to differing points of view on how best to handle those crises.
- Students will be able to evaluate the different sides of the debate and form their own conclusions.

The Lesson:

1. A day or so before using the scripted dialogue, assign roles to the students who will play parts. Emphasize that they should read over their parts and either look up or ask for help with any difficult vocabulary.

Roles in the script - 16 (L-Large role; M-Medium role; S-Small role)

Moderator (L)
Correspondent from New York (S)
Gentleman from the Falls of the Ohio (M)
Gentleman from Nashville (S)
Gentleman from Kentuckey (S)
Gentleman from Philadelphia (M)

Davie Humphries (S)
 West-Chester Farmer (M)
 Benjamin Lincoln (M)
 Harrington (M)
 Jedidiah Huntington (M)
 Reason (S)
Pennsylvania Gazette (S)

- The day of the dialogue, distribute graphic organizers to the rest of the class. You may want to use it as an “exit ticket,” as homework, or as the basis of a discussion after the presentation. The participants of the discussion are listed, and students should use this to keep track of each one’s position or issue, whether or not they would be for or against amending the Articles of Confederation, or if they have some other proposal.

Graphic Organizer

<u>Name</u>	<u>Position or Issue</u>	<u>For AoC?</u>	<u>For Amending AoC?</u>	<u>Other?</u>
Correspondent (New York)				
Gentleman (Ohio)				
Gentleman (Nashville)				
Gentleman (Kentucky)				
Gentleman (Philadelphia)				
Davie Humphries				
West-Chester Farmer				
Benjamin Lincoln				
Harrington				
Jedidiah Huntington				
Reason				
<i>Pennsylvania Gazette</i>				

- After the dialogue, allow the class some time to process what they have heard. This can be as a whole class, individually, with a partner, or in small groups.
- After the class has discussed their reactions, perhaps by comparing graphic organizers, you could ask the following discussion questions or assign them as follow up homework:
 - Is the plan to introduce monarchy a viable one? Why or why not?
 - Is the plan to split the United States into separate, regional confederations a viable one? Why or why not?
 - With regard to the full original documents this dialogue is based upon, do they add to or detract from the arguments presented in the discussion?
- As an extension activity, with reference to the full primary documents from the CSAC website, discuss/explore other issues of the Confederation era--the ones usually emphasized in textbooks as well as any others--weaknesses of the Articles in regard to finances and taxes, foreign policy, interstate commerce, currency, etc. Have them investigate other issues that may not have been discussed in the dialogue and evaluate the seriousness of each crisis in comparison to others.

The Script

Moderator: Welcome to our panel discussion today with experts from across the 13 states, and the west, on the issues facing these United States. Thank you all for joining us.

Panelists: (Ad lib) Thank you. Happy to be here. Harumph. Etc.

Moderator: Among our panelists are gentlemen well known to the nation through their service in the past, gentlemen of the established eastern states, as well as gentlemen of an adventurous spirit who are currently settling the lands west of the Appalachians. We are here today to discuss important matters affecting the nation and hopes that they may be resolved by way of necessary amendments to the Articles of Confederation currently being debated in Philadelphia. Who would like to begin?

Correspondent from New York: When we cast our eyes around, my countrymen, what feuds, what discords do we behold from the several quarters of the United States! while those in the east only *appear* to be dying away, new, and accumulated evils seem to be gathering in the west. The treaty with Spain, relative to the navigation of the Mississippi, has set the people, on the falls of the Ohio, &c. into a political phrenzy.

Gentleman from the Falls of the Ohio: Blow ye the trumpet—sound it aloud—spare not—for wo is come upon Israel!

Moderator: Excuse me?

Gentleman from the Falls of the Ohio: There now seems a greater call for the people here to appeal to justice and to arms, for the defence of their just rights, than was ever known in America.

Moderator: That sounds alarmingly serious. What is the crisis to which you refer?

Gentleman from the Falls of the Ohio: The late commercial treaty with Spain, in shutting up (as it is said) the navigation of the Mississippi River for the term of twenty-five years, has given this western country an universal shock, and struck its inhabitants with amazement.

Moderator: I am assuming you are referring to the instructions given by Congress to John Jay to propose to the Spanish that Americans give up navigation rights to the Mississippi River?

Gentleman from the Falls of the Ohio: [Yes.] It is . . . necessary that every individual exert himself to apply a remedy. To sell us and make us vassals to the merciless Spaniards, is a grievance not to be borne.

Gentleman from Nashville: [T]he long sword, or if you please the short rifle, will presently be a conclusive argument in our favour. We shall not fail to use it.

Moderator: You are proposing that the United States should go to war over this treaty?

Gentleman from Nashville: [T]he United States will not go to war with Spain, for the sake of the

Mississippi. People who live on the sea coast have too much at stake; they are too much exposed to the insults of a Spanish fleet, and too little interested in our happiness ever to enter seriously into this dispute.

Moderator: Well if the United States will not go to war, then . . .

Gentleman from the Falls of the Ohio: The State of Franklin are ready to fly to arms—In Kentucky, Liberty or Death are in every one's mouth!—all is in confusion—and God only knows where it will end.

Moderator: Wait. You're saying that American citizens, living on the frontier, will, on their own, go to war against the Spanish?

Gentleman from Kentucky: I think I may affirm, by far the greater part of the people of this country join with you in disapproving of the sentiments of our [Gentleman] from the Falls of the Ohio . . . I rather conclude it is the language of an individual who has received injury from the rapacious commandant at the Natchez, than the voice of the people of Kentucky. They have too high a veneration for federal government to betray such disrespect.

Gentleman from the Falls of the Ohio: In case we are not countenanced and succoured by the United States (if we need it) our allegiance will be thrown off, and some other power applied to. Great-Britain stands ready, with open arms, to receive and support us.—They have already offered to open their resources for our supplies.—When once re-united to them, 'farewell—a long farewell to all your boasted greatness.'

Moderator: Are you serious? You would turn your back on these United States and rejoin Great Britain?

Gentleman from Philadelphia: Great is the uneasiness of the people here and of the southern States, with the present confusion and oppression of government; and all seem convinced that we can expect no relief but from an energetic and vigorous administration under the auspices of Royal Authority.

Moderator: I can't believe what I'm hearing. Are you suggesting that you want America to be ruled by British royalty?

Gentleman from Philadelphia: The Bishop of Osnaburg, as dear to the British nation as amiable in the eyes of the world, would find no difficulty . . . and this country would surely have great reason to felicitate itself upon an event which would place us upon a footing with the most respectable powers of the earth.

Moderator: But the Bishop of Osnaburg is Prince Frederick, the son of King George III! He's second in line to the throne of Britain!

Gentleman from Philadelphia: The King would consider our country as his proper inheritance.

David Humphries: Introducing the Bishop of Osnaburg is not a novel idea among those who were formerly termed Loyalists. Ever since the peace it has been occasionally talked of & wished for.

Yesterday, where I dined, half jest, half earnest, he was given as the first Toast.

Moderator: Whether it is a member of the British royal family or not, we have heard it said recently that monarchy would provide a stronger central government than our current Confederation. Is it even seriously under consideration at the convention in Philadelphia to appoint an American king?

West-Chester Farmer: The United States may probably have it in their power to place on the throne as good a king as ever reigned: But as history does not furnish above one good king to half a dozen bad or indifferent ones, it would be purchasing a good king at too dear a rate.

Moderator: I have heard that even John Adams has written recently admiringly of the British system of government?

Gentleman from Philadelphia: Mr. Adams's book being published at this time is extremely fortunate.

Moderator: Fortunate? It seems to me his book could be used by his enemies who want to portray him as a traitor to the principles of the American Revolution. I have a hard time believing that.

Gentleman from Philadelphia: [Yes.] That great politician and patriot, so popular both in America and Europe, appears throughout to be clear for monarchy.

Moderator: So, you are suggesting that John Adams would be in favor of this ridiculous scheme?

David Humphries: The [former] Tories have undoubtedly conceived hopes of a future union with G[reat] Britain, from the inefficacy of our Government & the tumults which prevailed in Massachusetts during the last winter.

Moderator: Speaking of the tumults of Massachusetts last winter, let us discuss briefly one of the most well-known and highly publicized issues facing the Confederation that is the recent uprising known as Shays' Rebellion. Benjamin Lincoln is with us today. You were deeply involved in these troubles.

Benjamin Lincoln: [Yes.] The command of the troops was to be given to me being the first Major General in the State.

Moderator: Indeed. Could you please give us your assessment of the incident?

Benjamin Lincoln: It will be difficult, if not impossible to put an end to such disorders, unless a Rebellion is declared to exist. Shays and his abettors must be treated as open enemies; the sooner it is done, the better.

Moderator: Do you think that such a rebellion could spread to other states?

Benjamin Lincoln: There are many parties in the neighbouring States lurking near the borders of this. They are poisoning the minds of a class among them. It is now time for those States to exert themselves in apprehending such characters, for they fan the coals, and will kindle the flame of rebellion where ever they go.

Moderator: What message do you have for the likes of Shays and other would-be rebels?

Benjamin Lincoln: I have again to warn the people in arms against Government, immediately to disband, as they would avoid the ill consequences which may ensue, should they be inattentive to this caution.

Moderator: Is there some root cause that we could address in order to prevent future unrest in the states?

Benjamin Lincoln: When a State whose Constitution is like ours, has been convulsed by intestine broils; when the bands of Government have in any part of it been thrown off, and Rebellion has for a time stalked unmolested: when the most affectionate neighbours become in consequence hereof, divided in sentiment on the question in dispute, and warmly espouse the opinions they hold; when even the Father arms against the Son, and the son against the Father, the powers of Government may be exerted; and crush the Rebellion, but to reclaim its citizens, to bring them back fully to a sense of their duty, and to establish anew those principles, which lead them to embrace the Government with affection, must require the wisdom, the patience & the address of the Legislature.

Moderator: So what is the solution?

Harrington: We have, therefore, my fellow-citizens, no choice left to us. We must either form an efficient government for ourselves, suited in every respect to our exigencies and interests, or we must submit to have one imposed upon us by accident or usurpation.

Pennsylvania Gazette: If just and free governments are favorable to morality, they must be agreeable to the will of God. It must, therefore, be the duty of good men to submit to, and support them. At the present important crisis, it is in a peculiar manner the duty of Ministers of the Gospel to inculcate submission to the powers which are to arise out of ourselves. In this way they will best check that idleness and licentiousness, which have been derived from the weakness of our governments, and which threaten, like a deluge, to wash away all the remaining religion and morality of our country.

Moderator: That brings us finally to the Philadelphia Convention. The delegates sent to Philadelphia have been instructed to amend the Articles of Confederation in hopes that the federal government can prevent or resolve the issues that caused, among other difficulties, the crisis on the Mississippi and an armed uprising in the backcountry of Massachusetts. What are your thoughts on reforming the Articles?

Jedidiah Huntington: There are some gentlemen who are of opinion that the confederation is sufficient for its purposes, and some who believe we should be better without any.

Harrington: The present constitution was formed amidst the confusions of war, and in the infancy of our political knowledge. It has been found ineffectual to support public credit—to obtain alliances—to preserve treaties—to enforce taxes—to prevent hostilities with our neighbours, and insurrections among our citizens. Hence the name of an American, which was so respectable in the year 1782, in every part of the globe, is now treated everywhere with obloquy and contempt.

David Humphries: The friends of an efficient Government are discouraged with the present

System & irritated at the popular Demagogues who are determined to keep themselves in office at the risk of every thing.

Gentleman from Kentuckey: I am far from the opinion of some, that nothing else should be attempted, but to give the federal council a power to regulate foreign commerce. I think it would be of advantage to new-moddle and modernize the whole instrument, no matter whether in thirteen or twenty articles.

Reason: No possible amendment will prevent a disunion, and being wholly separated we shall be easily broken.

Moderator: Really? You think that the Articles are beyond salvaging?

Reason: Instead of attempting to amend the present articles of confederation with a view to retain them as the form of government, or instead of attempting one general government for the whole community of the United States, would it not be preferable to distribute the States into three Republics?

Moderator: Three separate republics? That's an interesting scheme. Is there any merit in it?

West-Chester Farmer: To divide the United States into three or more independent republics, would weaken us too much against foreigners, leave us too small to be respectable, and would expose us to continual quarrels, which could only be decided by the sword as sovereigns do not acknowledge any other arbiter.

Reason: There are objections to the scheme of one general government. The national concerns of a people so numerous, with a Territory so extensive will be proportionably difficult and important. This will require proportionate powers in the administration, especially in the chief executive; greater perhaps than will consist with the principles of a democratic form. For these reasons the plan of three republics as a substitute, is proposed for public consideration.

David Humphries: Reflect how ripe we are for the most mad & ruinous projects that can be suggested!

Jedidiah Huntington: The importance of a general government, a superintending power, that shall extend to all parts of our extensive territory, to secure peace and the administration of justice between one state and another, and between these states and foreign nations, must be obvious to the least reflection.

Moderator: You seem to be quite at odds over the best plan of government. What are your views on the current convention then?

Reason: Our fate, as far as it can depend on human means, is committed to the convention; as they decide, so will our lot be.

Harrington: Perhaps no age or country ever saw more wisdom, patriotism and probity united in a single assembly, than we now behold in the convention of the states.

West-Chester Farmer: One consolidated republic of the United States, if formed on the best possible plan, would probably be the most happy government.

Moderator: If the convention should propose a stronger government under the Articles or some other plan, will this settle the issues currently vexing the states and the frontier?

Benjamin Lincoln: The people who have been in Arms against Government . . . do now complain that grievances do exist, and that they ought to have redress While they are in this situation, they never will be reconciled to Government, nor will they submit to the terms of it, from any other Motive than fear excited by a constant military armed force extended over them Those who have been opposers to Government will view with a jealous eye, those who have been supporters of it.

Harrington: The present relaxed state of government in America is no common temptation to ambition. A federal, [national] Shays may be more successful than the Shays of Massachusetts Bay, or a body of men may arise, who may form themselves into an order of hereditary nobility, and, by surprise or stratagem, prostrate our liberties at their feet.

Moderator: So it would be better, perhaps, to have a stronger federal government to prevent usurpation by rebels such as Shays? What about the treaty with Spain and the unrest on the Mississippi frontier?

Gentleman from the Falls of the Ohio: Except Congress immediately rescind their [instructions to Jay], and do something to make this country form a better opinion of them, America is ruined!

Moderator: Wouldn't any new government proposed, or a revision of the Articles, still consider itself bound by the existing treaty? Then you might face opposition from both Spain and the United States. Maybe there is some justification to fear a stronger central government.

Pennsylvania Gazette: It must not surprise us . . . if a few ignorant people, headed by interested and designing men, should oppose the new federal [national] government.

Gentleman from the Falls of the Ohio: You are as ignorant of this country as Great-Britain was of America. These hints, if rightly improved, may be of some service; if not, blame your selves for the neglect.

Moderator: It sounds like the Gentleman from the Falls of the Ohio won't be satisfied with anything other than immediate action to rescind the treaty with Spain. By provoking a crisis, he, like Shays, is actually helping to demonstrate the weaknesses of the government.

Harrington: This view of our situation is indeed truly alarming. We are upon the brink of a precipice. Heavens! shall the citizens of America—shall the depositors of the power of George the third, and the conquerors of Britain in America—submit to receive law from a bold and successful demagogue, or a confederated body of usurpers?

Moderator: How alarmed should we be about these issues? Are we actually close to instituting a monarchy, being overthrown by rebels, or seeing the secession of the west to Britain?

Correspondent from New York: [I]f any *grievances* exist, what they are, and their tendencies, ought doubtless, coolly, and impartially to be discussed, by some adequate pen, in the public papers; but, to suffer *pieces*, which are studiously calculated to alarm the community (and which perhaps originate with our internal enemies) to circulate unanswered and undetected, is *criminal* negligence, and the height of *impolicy*.

Harrington: Under the present weak, imperfect and distracted government of Congress, anarchy, poverty, infamy, and slavery, await the United States. Under such a government as will probably be formed by the present convention, America may yet enjoy peace, safety, liberty and glory.

Moderator: And with that, we must conclude our panel discussion. Let us hope that the convention in Philadelphia will provide a plan for government of these United States which shall prove more effective in combating the crises which face the nation in these troubled times than the current one.