

Name: _____

Calls for a Constitutional Convention

The Articles of Confederation had governed the United States for over six years by the time the Philadelphia Convention began in 1787. Many leading members of the revolutionary generation had expressed their concerns that the federal government was insufficient to continue guiding the growing nation and issued calls for a new convention to address its inadequacies.



Analyze each of the documents to determine what fears prompted the authors to organize the meeting at Philadelphia. Next, categorize your findings and write a short essay outlining what you believe were the three most significant concerns of the Founders on the eve of the Constitutional Convention.

Note: Documents appear as originally written; differences in spelling/grammar reflect contemporary practice.

Document A

Report of the Commissioners at the Annapolis Convention September 14, 1786

That there are important defects in the system of the Foederal Government is acknowledged by the Acts of all those States, which have concurred in the present Meeting; That the defects, upon a closer examination, may be found greater and more numerous, than even these acts imply, is at least so far probable, from the embarrassments which characterise the present State of our national affairs-foreign and domestic, as may reasonably be supposed to merit a deliberate and candid discussion, in some mode, which will unite the Sentiments and Councils of all the States.

- What can be inferred about attendance at the Annapolis Convention from the last line of the quote?
- According to the document, why is a new meeting so necessary?

Document B

Virginia Act Authorizing the Election of Delegates November 23, 1786

...to meet in Convention in the City of Philadelphia, on the second day of May next; a provision which seems preferable to a discussion of the subject in Congress, where it might be too much interrupted by the ordinary business before them, and where it would besides be deprived of the valuable counsels of sundry individuals, who are disqualified by the Constitution or Laws of particular States, or restrained by peculiar circumstances from a seat in that Assembly: ... can no longer doubt that the crisis is arrived at which the good people of America are to decide the solemn question, whether they will by wise and magnanimous efforts reap the just fruits of that Independence, which they have so gloriously acquired, and of that Union which they have cemented with so much of their common blood; or whether by giving way to unmanly jealousies and prejudices, or to partial and transitory interests, they will renounce the auspicious blessings prepared for them by the Revolution, and furnish to its enemies an eventual triumph over those by whose virtue and valour it has been accomplished...

- For what two reasons do the authors believe a convention separate from Congress is necessary?

- Why do you believe the document references the Revolution to support a new convention?

Document C

**Letter to Henry Knox from George Washington about Shay's Rebellion
December 26, 1786**

There are combustibles in every State, which a spark might set fire to. In this State, a perfect calm prevails at present, and a prompt disposition to support, and give energy to the federal System is discovered, if the unlucky stirring of the dispute respecting the navigation of the Mississippi [with Spain] does not become a leaven that will ferment, and sour the mind of it...

That G[reat] B[ritain] will be an unconcerned Spectator of the present insurrections (if they continue) is not to be expected. That she is at this moment sowing the Seeds of jealousy and discontent among the various tribes of Indians on our frontier admits of no doubt, in my mind. And that she will improve every opportunity to foment the spirit of turbulence within the bowels of the United States, with a view of distracting our governments, and promoting divisions, is, with me, not less certain. ... If the powers are inadequate amend or alter them, but do not let us sink into the lowest state of humiliation and contempt, and become a byword in all the earth.

- What is the meaning of the word *insurrection* as used in the second paragraph?
- What dangers does Henry Knox believe will arise if a more stable government is not enacted?

Document D

**Massachusetts Resolution Authorizing the Appointment of Delegates
and Providing Instructions for Them
February 22, 1787**

Resolved that five Commissioners be appointed, by the General Assembly, who, or any three of whom, are hereby empowered, to meet such Commissioners, as are or may be appointed by the Legislatures of the other States in the Union, at Philadelphia, on the second day of may next, & with them to consider the trade & commerce of the United States; & how far an uniform system in their commercial intercourse & regulation, may be necessary for their common interest & permanent harmony;

And also to consider, how far it may be necessary to alter any of the articles of the present Confederation, so as to render the Constitution of the federal Government, more adequate to the exigences of the Union; & what further powers may be necessary to be vested in Congress for the common welfare & security, & with them to form a report for that purpose;—Such alterations & additions as may be made, to be however consistent with the true republican spirit & genius of the present articles of Confederation.

- What is the main reason for which Massachusetts commissioners were to be sent to Philadelphia?
- What is a secondary reason for their commission?

- What is the meaning of the word *exigences* as used in the second paragraph?

Document E

**James Madison on the Constitutional Convention
February 24, 1787**

Upon the whole therefore it seems probable that a meeting will take place, and that it will be a pretty full one. What the issue of it will be is among the other arcana of futurity and nearly as inscrutable as any of them. In general I find men of reflection much less sanguine as to the new than despondent as to the present System. Indeed the Present System neither has nor deserves advocates; and if some very strong props are not applied, will quickly tumble to the ground. No money is paid into the public Treasury; no respect is paid to the federal authority. Not a single State complies with the requisitions; several pass them over in silence, and some positively reject them. The payments ever since the peace have been decreasing, and of late fall short even of the pittance necessary for the Civil list of the Confederacy. It is not possible that a government can last long under these circumstances. If the approaching convention should not agree on some remedy, I am persuaded that some very different arrangement will ensue. The late turbulent scenes in Mass[achuset]ts & infamous ones in Rhode Island, have done inexpressible injury to the republic character in that part of the U. States; and a propensity towards Monarchy is said to have been produced by it in some leading minds.

- Summarize Madison’s concerns about the Articles of Confederation.
- What does he believe will happen at the Philadelphia convention?

Document F

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

The present fœderal 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 every where with obloquy and contempt.

... I see no reason why a republic, composed of a legislature properly compounded and balanced, where representation is equal, and elections annual, should not continue to be the vehicle of liberty to the end of time. 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. A bramble will exercise dominion over us, if we neglect any longer to choose a vine or a fig-tree for that purpose. The present relaxed state of government in America is no common temptation to ambition. A fœderal 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 surprize or stratagem, prostrate our liberties at their feet.

- What argument is Harrington making in the last sentence of paragraph one (“Hence the name...)?

- What is his fear for the United States if a new government is not formed?

Document G

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

Let the public creditor, who lent his money to his country, and the soldier and citizen, who yielded her their services, come forward next, and contribute their aid to establish an effective federal government. It is from the united power and resources of America, only, that they can expect permanent and substantial justice.

Let the lovers of peace add their efforts to those that have been mentioned, in increasing the energy of a federal government. An assembly of the states alone, by the terror of its power and the fidelity of its engagements, can preserve a perpetual peace with the nations of Europe.

Let the citizens of America who inhabit the western counties of our states fly to a federal power for protection. The Indians know too well the dreadful consequences of confederacy in arms, ever to disturb the peaceful husbandman, who is under the cover of the arsenals of thirteen states.

Let the farmer who groans beneath the weight of direct taxation seek relief from a government, whose extensive jurisdiction will enable it to extract the resources of our country by means of imposts and customs.

Let the merchant, who complains of the restrictions and exclusions imposed upon his vessels by foreign nations, unite his influence in establishing a power that shall retaliate these injuries, and insure him success in his honest pursuits, by a general system of commercial regulations.

Let the manufacturer and mechanic, who are every where languishing for want of employment, direct their eyes to an assembly of the states. It will be in their power, only, to encourage such arts and manufactures as are essential to the prosperity of our country.

- Why does Harrington insist that creditors, farmers, merchants and manufacturers should support a stronger central government?

- What argument does he make for the support of “lovers of peace” and western inhabitants?

Constitutional Convention Essay Construction

Step 1 – Categorize Evidence

Use information gleaned from the seven excerpts, to identify the three most significant concerns many Americans had that encouraged the formation of the Constitutional Convention in 1787.

List all the fears that you inferred from the documents (you may not need all the lines)		
	Doc.	Fear
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		

Categorize the fears into one of three major categories and list the numbers.	

Step 2 – Construct a Thesis

Prompt: *For what reasons did American fears in the post-Revolutionary Era prompt the writing of the U.S. Constitution?*

Address the prompt by writing a thesis statement identifying your argument and three main points.

Thesis:

STEP 3 -- Outline Your Essay

Fill in the outline below. Write your thesis and the topics of each paragraph. Then, identify specific pieces of evidence you will be using to make your argument. Don't just write down the document number, identify specifically how you will use the document to prove your point.

1. **INTRODUCTION.** In this paragraph, you will introduce your thesis.
THESIS:

2. **BODY PARAGRAPH 1.** TOPIC OF THIS PARAGRAPH: _____

EVIDENCE:

EVIDENCE:

EVIDENCE:

3. **BODY PARAGRAPH 2.** TOPIC OF THIS PARAGRAPH: _____

EVIDENCE:

EVIDENCE:

EVIDENCE:

4. **BODY PARAGRAPH 3.** TOPIC OF THIS PARAGRAPH: _____

EVIDENCE:

EVIDENCE:

EVIDENCE:

5. **CONCLUSION**

Sources:

*Center for the Study of the American Constitution, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Docs. A, B, D, F, G
Digital History: Docs. C and E
Complete citations available upon request.*