Imagine a city built of wooden blocks. Do you see it in your mind? Make sure it has houses and bridges and walls. Knock it down. Now build it again.
Which takes longer, destroying or building?
Which is harder?
It's the same way with governments.

Revolutions are difficult—overthrowing Britain wasn't easy at all for the American colonists—but building a strong nation was much harder.
The American Revolution was unusual; it produced people who were good at nation building. When you study other revolutions, like the ones in France and Russia, you'll see how lucky we were.

At first, though, it looked like it might not happen. It seemed as if the 13 states would never get along. They certainly weren't "united." Each state was printing its own money and making its own rules. Eleven states had their own navies. Virginia's navy had 72 ships. The Continental Congress was trying to run a national government, and it had a navy, too—but it was smaller than Virginia's. The Congress was also printing money. As you can guess, soon none of the money was worth anything, and that was terrible for most citizens.

Besides all that, each state got into the taxing business: New York was taxing goods from New Jersey, and New Jersey was taxing goods from New York. Virginia and Maryland

In 1782, Colonel Lewis Nicola wrote a letter to General Washington suggesting he use his army to seize power and proclaim himself king. Washington replied, "You could not have found a person to whom your schemes were more disagreeable."

**Supply & Demand**

There is an economic law called the law of supply and demand. If there is a big supply of something, the price—and the demand for it—usually goes down. Gold is expensive because it is beautiful and rare. If there were gold nuggets all over the place, the price of gold would go way down. Money works in roughly the same way. If a government prints lots of money, the value of its money goes down. That means it costs many dollars to buy something that once took only a few dollars. That is called inflation.
Everyone who could make a claim to the lands west of the Appalachians and east of the Mississippi was doing it. Some areas were claimed by three or four states at once. (See key to the right of map.)

were squabbling over boundary lines. Little states were jealous of big states—and vice versa. In Massachusetts some farmers rebelled against the government in Boston. In Philadelphia and New York newspapers reported a movement to create three separate nations out of the 13 former colonies. In England people were saying that the Americans would soon be begging to be taken back.

As you can see, the United States got off to a rocky start. We didn’t have a good working plan for a government. We didn’t begin with the Constitution we now have. The first constitution of the United States was called the Articles of Confederation. It didn’t work well at all. That was because the American citizens were afraid of political power. They had had a bad experience with kings and parliament. They were afraid of a strong congress and of a strong president. So they went to the other extreme. They didn’t give Congress the power to do much of anything. There was no president except the president of the Congress. And there wasn’t much he could do either.

Ask anyone, “Who was the first president of our country?” The answer will be “George Washington.” But you can say that the first president was John Hanson. Very few people will believe you. It’s true, though. Hanson became president under the Articles of Con-
federation, on November 5, 1781. President Hanson didn’t make himself remembered, because he had no power.

In 1781 Americans were facing one of the toughest problems there can be in designing a government. How do you provide freedom for each person and still have a government powerful enough to accomplish things?

You have to give up some freedom when you are part of a society that is ruled by laws. The question is, how much do you have to give up? The Americans, at the end of the 18th century, had just fought hard for liberty. They weren’t about to give up much at all. They went too far—but they learned.

The national government, under the Articles of Confederation, was just too weak. Everyone seemed to know it. Most of the time the states wouldn’t even send representatives to Philadelphia to vote at meetings of the Congress. A lot of people felt the voting wasn’t fair anyway. Each state had an equal vote in Congress. That meant that 68,000 Rhode Islanders had one vote, and so did 538,000 Virginians.

Then something really insulting happened. In 1783 Congress got chased out of Philadelphia by its own army, because it hadn’t paid the soldiers their salaries. But Congress had no money to pay the salaries and no power to collect taxes. (It is tax money that governments use to pay their bills.)

It would take six years for the people living in this land to create a workable kind of government.

At first the former colonists didn’t even know what to call themselves. We began as a nation without a name. Some called us the American Commonwealth; others said the American Confederation. Some talked of “united states”; a few said the United States.

But most people still thought of themselves first as citizens of the state they lived in. They were having a hard time accepting the idea of a nation that might be more important and powerful.
England's Indian Ally

Mohawk Joseph Brant (you remember, William Johnson's brother-in-law) was now fighting settlers in western New York and Pennsylvania. Easterners were ignoring Indian treaties and moving into those regions. The English were secretly helping Brant, who was a skilled warrior. They didn't think the new nation would last long. In 1785 Brant went to England and met George III. He made a big hit in England. Brant was highly educated and had translated the Bible into Mohawk.

In this British cartoon, a triumphant America has laid down bow and arrow and is offering the olive branch of peace to a weeping Britannia.

than their separate and beloved states. They didn't even like the word "nation." They called it a "union" of states.

People in the territories felt the same way. You already know about independent Vermont. Well, some people tried to make Kentucky into a nation, too. (In 1792 the Commonwealth of Kentucky became the first state west of the Appalachian mountains.) There was even a state that called itself Franklin, off to the west of North Carolina. It was territory where Mound Builders had once flourished. Before long Franklin became a state with an Indian name: Tennessee.

Settlers were filling up the Ohio River Valley, and that was causing problems. Much of that western land was claimed by Virginia, but other big states were claiming some of it, too. The states without western lands were jealous. How could arguments between the states be settled unless a central government had more power than any one state?

There was one good thing about the Articles of Confederation: they were so weak they made a strong constitution possible.
Maryland was being difficult, and so was Rhode Island. They just weren’t going to let big Virginia hog everything. They certainly weren’t going to cooperate as long as the large states had western land and they didn’t. So they finally got Virginia and Georgia and some other big states to cede—or give up—all claims to western lands. It was agreed that those western lands—if they ever had enough people—would also become states.

Then, in 1787, the Confederation Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance. (An ordinance is a law passed by a government.) If you got the impression that the Congress under the Articles of Confederation was a total washout, that isn’t quite true. That congress did a few things right, and the Northwest Ordinance was one of them. It provided a fair way for new territories to become states. It was another American “first” in world history.

Virginia gave up enough land in the Northwest Territory to make the future states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota. Without Virginia to claim it, that land was like a colony belonging to the 13 states. Now colonies throughout history had always existed for the benefit of the mother country. The Americans certainly knew all about that! Because of their own bad experience with Great Britain, they didn’t want to take advantage of others. So the Northwest Ordinance was based on equal rights for the territories. It was based on fairness.
A system was devised for dividing the land into areas called townships. Groups of townships could become states. That system worked so well it was used again and again as the nation grew.

Great Britain had tried to keep settlers out of the western territories. It had tried to keep those lands for the Indians. It was easier to rule that way. Now, with Great Britain out of the picture, settlers were heading west. Once again, the Native Americans were going to be pushed from their lands. Disease and guns killed many; some joined white society; most fled farther west.

No one knew how many settlers were moving over the Appalachians—the first census did not come until 1790—but thousands and thousands were on their way west. Many piled their families and their belongings into big wooden-wheeled wagons and hitched them to oxen. They were called covered wagons because they had canvas tops that were stretched over curved wooden rods; that made each wagon into a big room on wheels.

The people who moved into the Northwest Territory were guaranteed freedom of religion, *habeas corpus*, and trial by jury because the Northwest Ordinance had a bill of rights. That ordinance provided another very important guarantee. Here it is—"pay attention to this one—"there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory."

The Northwest Ordinance also said, "Religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

If people were to govern themselves—as Americans were doing—then they had to be educated. How can you govern yourself if you can’t read or write? How can you take part in government if you don’t know about current events—and history, too? What should schools be like? What should they teach? And should they be for everyone?

These were questions that Americans were asking at the end of the 18th century. The old-style rulers had tried to make sure that

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This 1783 map recorded the boundaries of the new United States. Most of the western territory was still Indian land—but the Indians were soon pushed farther and farther back.

*For a definition of *habeas corpus*, see chapter 10.*

*Involuntary servitude* means having to work for someone whether you like it or not. That was what slaves did, and indentured servants too. The Northwest Ordinance outlawed both.
most of their subjects were not educated. They knew that reading gives you power. If people can’t read, then they don’t know what is going on, and that makes them depend on a ruler. Thomas Jefferson believed that you couldn’t have a people’s government if the people were ignorant. This is what he wrote in a letter to a friend: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

The Northwest Ordinance required that each township set aside land for public schools—and that was Thomas Jefferson’s idea. Finally, the ordinance said, “The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians.” What do you think of that statement? Do you think it was followed?

**In the 17th century,**
Virginia’s governor William Berkeley thanked God there were no free schools in Virginia, because, he said, “learning has brought disobedience and heresy and sects into the world.”