

# Overview of the Early National Period

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### Introduction:

The United States was the first modern nation to win independence through a successful revolution against colonial rule. It set a precedent that was followed in the 19th century by nations across Latin America and in the 20th century by nations in Asia and Africa. Like those other countries, the United States faced severe political, economic, and foreign policy problems after achieving independence.

In this section you will learn about how the United States addressed those problems and established a stable political and economic system. You will learn about the creation of new state governments and a new federal government based on the principles of popular sovereignty, rule of law, and legislation by elected representatives. You will also learn about the internal difficulties besetting the new republic, such as financing the war, the threat of a military coup, a hard-hitting economic depression, and popular demands for tax relief. In addition, you will read about efforts to expand freedom of religion, to increase women's educational opportunities, and to address the problem of slavery.

Other important topics include the drafting and ratification of the Constitution; the adoption of a bill of rights protecting the rights of the individual against the power of the central government; the enactment of a financial program that secured the government's credit and stimulated the economy; and the creation of the first political parties to involve the voting population in national politics.

In addition, you will learn about the purchase of Louisiana Territory from France; British and French interference with American shipping; the causes, fighting, and consequences of the War of 1812.

### Summary:

The United States faced severe economic and foreign policy problems. A huge debt remained from the Revolution; paper money issued during and after the war was worthless; and Britain and Spain occupied territory claimed by the United States.

The new nation lacked the machinery of government. It consisted of nothing more than 75 post offices, a large debt, a small number of unpaid clerks, and an army consisting of just 672 soldiers. There was no federal court system, no navy, and no system for collecting taxes. Congress enacted a tariff to raise revenue; created departments of state, treasury and war; and organized a federal judicial system.

To strengthen popular support for the new government, Congress approved a Bill of Rights in the form of ten amendments to the Constitution protecting the rights of the individual against the power of the central government.

The Constitution provided only a broad outline of the office and powers of the president, and it was up to the first president, George Washington, to establish many precedents. He modeled the executive branch along the lines of a general's staff. He asserted the power to dismiss presidential appointees without the Senate's permission. He negotiated treaties and then sent them to the Senate for ratification.

To secure the nation's credit, the first Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton, had the federal government assume the entire indebtedness of the federal government and the states. To issue currency, collect taxes, hold government funds, regulate private banks, and make loans, he recommended that the federal government establish a Bank of the United States. His other proposals to stimulate manufacturing through high tariffs, bounties, encouragement of immigration, and federal aid for roads were defeated.

By 1796, the United States had produced the world's first modern political parties. Opposition to Hamilton's plans intensified during the closing years of Washington's first term. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison feared that Hamilton wanted to model American society along the lines of monarchical England. Partisan divisions deepened in response to the French Revolution and the wars between France and Britain. The Jeffersonians supported the French; the Hamiltonians, the British. President Washington supported a policy of neutrality.

During 1793 and 1794, Washington's administration confronted a French effort to entangle America in its war with England (the Genet Affair), armed rebellion in western Pennsylvania (the Whiskey Rebellion), conflicts with Indians, and the threat of war with Britain. In 1796, Washington was able to retire gracefully. He had suppressed the Whiskey Rebellion, defeated an Indian confederacy in the Ohio country, and negotiated Britain out of its western forts. In a Farewell Address, he called on Americans to avoid political partisanship and entangling alliances with foreign nations.

Deteriorating relations with France during the presidency of John Adams resulted in an undeclared naval war and prompted Federalists in Congress to enact the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798. These acts were designed to silence dissent and weaken support for the Jeffersonian Republicans, prompting Jefferson and Madison to draft the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions that advanced the idea that states had the power to declare acts of Congress null and void.

Thomas Jefferson was convinced that the Federalists had threatened republican government by levying oppressive taxes, stretching the provisions of the Constitution, and subverting civil liberties. As president, he slashed army and navy expenditures and eliminated most federal taxes. To encourage land ownership, he persuaded Congress to cut the price of public lands. He also moved Congress to reduce the residence requirement for citizenship, and freed all people imprisoned under the Sedition Act and refunded their fines.

It was during Jefferson's presidency that the Supreme Court asserted the power of judicial supremacy and judicial review and became a vigorous and equal third branch of government. The acquisition of Louisiana Territory from France in 1803 doubled the country's size.

During Jefferson's second term the United States became embroiled in the Napoleonic wars, as Britain and France interfered with American shipping. To assert America's neutral rights, Congress adopted an embargo prohibiting American trade with foreign countries. An unpopular and costly failure, the embargo provoked widespread smuggling.

By 1812, many Americans believed that only war with Britain could preserve Americans neutral rights and national honor. American grievances included interference with American trade, impressment of thousands of American sailors, and incitement of Indian attacks.

The War of 1812 was crucial to the future of the United States. It effectively destroyed Indians' ability to resist American expansion. It allowed the United States to solidify its control over the lower Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. It encouraged New England merchants to invest in textile factories. It also ended America's brief experiment with a two party political system, as the Federalists were branded as traitors for failing to support the war.

Following the War of 1812, a spirit of nationalism pervaded the nation, evident in the creation of a second Bank of the United States; enactment of a tariff to protect industry, and a series of Supreme Court decisions strengthening the power of the central government. The United States acquired Florida from Spain, convinced Russia and Spain to relinquish their claims to the Oregon country, and delivered a strong warning, in the Monroe Doctrine, that European powers were not to interfere in the Western Hemisphere.

A severe economic depression, the Panic of 1819, and a bitter controversy over slavery in Missouri in 1819 and 1820, provoked growing political divisions and a deepening sectional split between North and South.