In Module 2, we will compare British America’s colonial experience with self-government and imperial powers, the American Revolution, the post-Revolutionary state governments, and the U.S. Articles of Confederation in the 1780s.

The U.S. Federal government today is very different from the one that emerged during America’s revolutionary experience and the first political debates on independence and the country’s constitutional government.

Under Prime Minister William Pitt the Elder, Great Britain conquered North America in the French and Indian War. A more assertive crown under authoritarian King George III Hanover, backed by the Imperial Parliament in London, toughened political controls over all American colonies in an effort to increase revenue and offset bankruptcy from the previous war.

By the late 1760s, dissenting voices emerged in North America when colonial grievances by American “Patriots”—actually, rebels—protested rising British taxes, permanent British garrisons, and stricter controls under authoritarian King George III and the Imperial Parliament in London.

Do you know that the American Revolution was fought only by 30% of British-Americans as “Patriots” or rebels against 30% Loyalists (or “Tories”), while the remaining 40% of the population and Indian tribes were uncommitted?

If King George III had relented on taxes, would the Revolution have been won? Could the American rebel colonies have won independence if General George Washington had been captured instead by the British in New York, or if France and Spain had not helped against their old British foe?

The American rebels’ Continental Congress and Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia could not muster a unified strong government and was penniless to aid Washington’s rag-tag army. The United States became independent due to the superior political organization of the American rebels, the generalship of George Washington, the incompetence of the British military and government, and Franco-Spanish military aid to the Americans.

The political leadership by Thomas Jefferson, John Madison, Benjamin Franklin, George Mason, and Patrick Henry secured both national independence from Great Britain and complete domestic autonomy for each rebel ex-colony within a weak, loose U.S. Confederation that preserved the institution of slavery.

Looking at the 1781 U.S. Articles of Confederation you can appreciate the difficult compromise among the rebel colonies to create a weak U.S. Confederation to avoid the dangers of centralization along the British Imperial model they had fought. Why?

The new United States in the 1780s was fragile and crumbling under the rivalries among the independent-minded 14 ex-Colonies (including Vermont) with micro-nationalistic interests. The strongest states—Virginia, Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania—competed to annex Indian lands in the Ohio and Kentucky Territories.

The 1787 U.S. Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia under George Washington was divided between competing “small Republic” and “large Republic” visions for the new country. Sentiment was swayed by the Federalist papers, written anonymously by Alexander Hamilton, John Madison, and John Jay, resulting in the creation of a new stronger national Federal government with control over Indian lands (to be made into new states) and an elected presidency.

This new U.S. Constitution forged a Federal-state-local system of politics, while disenfranchising Native Americans, Black slaves, and women. Why do think this occurred?
In a cruel historical irony, the new U.S. Federal Constitution was opposed mostly by White agrarian Southerners supporting “states’ rights” against centralizing U.S. Federal powers, just as their Revolutionary fathers rejected Great Britain’s centralized colonial empire.

The famous image of General Washington presiding over the 1787 U.S. Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia cemented his secret political plan to become the popularly accepted first president of the country.

This famous image shows General Washington being inaugurated as the first U.S. President in New York City, the second temporary capital (after Philadelphia) of the new country, while later the real capital was founded as Washington D.C.!

In the 1780s through the 1890s the U.S. remained a weak country with a tiny military, though it experienced enormous economic growth due to European immigration and Western settlement after constant Indian wars and their removal into reservations.

A weak U.S. followed a policy of isolationism and neutrality abroad to avoid wars with European great powers. The country’s moralistic nationalism, however, brought about war (and as a result, improved relations with) Great Britain in 1812-14, the 1823 Monroe Doctrine to support Latin American independence, and the 1819 annexing of Spanish Florida.

Since its origins, American democracy has promoted popular involvement in politics (but no role for Black slaves), and kept dictatorships away. The Constitution supports limiting the power of the government through a system of checks and balances of its three branches: the Executive or President, Legislative or U.S. Congress (U.S. House of Representatives and Senate), and Judiciary. Is this still true today, or has the Presidency become stronger than the other branches of government?

Another question to ponder is why women and Black slaves were denied political rights for so long? Black emancipation came with the Civil War in the 1860s and women’s suffrage only by 1920.