

Shays' Rebellion Background Information

Shays' Rebellion

Most soldiers of the American Revolution were not paid for their wartime service, and they returned to their homes and farms penniless. Many Massachusetts farmers, in particular, were unable to pay the high taxes placed upon their properties. They lost their farms and were sent to debtors' prison. Farmers sought to lawfully address these problems. Little was accomplished, however, and more and more farmers were stripped of their property and freedom. Soon, many of these farmers began to feel that revolt was their only option.

A full-scale rebellion began when Massachusetts farmers began barring entrance to courthouses to prevent the trials that sent their fellow farmers to debtors' prison. In 1787, Daniel Shays, a veteran of the American Revolution and a farmer from Massachusetts, led an army of farmers in an attack on the U.S. arsenal in Springfield, Massachusetts. The farmers were defeated, but Shays' Rebellion nevertheless helped to bring about change. Many political leaders who had led the revolt against England, including George Washington, Samuel Adams, and John Hancock, now realized that the Articles of Confederation did not grant the federal government enough power to address local or regional difficulties like those that led to Shays' Rebellion.

Washington Letter Excerpts

Excerpt 1

To David Humphreys, October 22, 1786

...commotions [disturbances] of this sort, like snow-balls, gather strength as they roll, if there is no opposition [obstacle] in the way to divide and crumble them... I am mortified [embarrassed] beyond expression that in the moment of our acknowledged [accepted] independence we should by our conduct [behavior] verify [prove correct] the predictions of our transatlantic foe [England], and render [make] ourselves ridiculous and contemptible [disgraceful] in the eyes of all Europe.

Excerpt 2

To Henry Lee, October 31, 1786

The accounts which are published of the commotions [disturbances]... exhibit a melancholy [sad] proof of what our trans-Atlantic foe [England] has predicted; and of another thing perhaps, which is still more to be regretted [sorry about], and is yet more unaccountable [strange], that mankind when left to themselves are unfit [incapable] for their own Government. I am mortified [embarrassed] beyond expression when I view the clouds that have spread over the brightest morn [morning] that ever dawned upon any Country... To be more exposed [visible in a bad way] in the eyes of the world, and more contemptible [disgraceful] than we already are, is hardly possible.

Excerpt 3

To Henry Knox, February 3, 1787

The moment is, indeed, important!—If government shrinks [backs away], or is unable to enforce [carry out] its laws; fresh maneuvers [movements] will be displayed by the insurgents [protestors]—anarchy [lawlessness] & confusion must prevail [win out]—and every thing will be turned topsy turvey in that State; where it is not probable [likely] the mischiefs [troubles] will terminate [end].

If three years ago any person had told me that at this day, I should see such a formidable [dreadful] rebellion against the laws & constitutions of our own making as now appears I should have thought him a bedlamite—a fit subject for a mad house.

Jefferson Letter Excerpts

Excerpt 1

To James Madison, Paris, January 30, 1787

I am impatient to learn your sentiments [opinions] on the late troubles in the Eastern states... I hold it that a little rebellion [revolution] now and then is a good thing, & as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical... It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government.

Excerpt 2

To Abigail Adams, Paris, February 22, 1787

The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions, that I wish it to be always kept alive. It will often be exercised when wrong, but better so than not to be exercised at all. I like a little rebellion now and then. It is like a storm in the Atmosphere.

Excerpt 3

To William S. Smith, Paris, November 13, 1787

What country can preserve [protect] its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance [opposition]? Let them take arms [weapons]... the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants [dictators].

Excerpt 4

To James Madison, Paris, December 20, 1787

The late rebellion in Massachusetts has given more alarm than I think it should have done. Calculate that one rebellion in 13 states in the course of 11 years, is but one for each state in a century & a half. No country should be so long without one. Nor will any degree of power in the hands of government prevent insurrections [revolutions]. France, with all its despotism [dictatorship], and two or three hundred thousand men always in arms has had three insurrections in the three years I have been here in every one of which greater numbers were engaged than in Massachusetts & a great deal more blood was spilt.

Washington/Jefferson

Name: _____ C: _____

	What was his opinion of Shays' Rebellion?	Provide evidence from the text.
Washington		
Jefferson		