

Should the states reject this excellent Constitution, the probability is that an opportunity will never again offer to make another in peace—the next will be drawn in blood.

George Washington, on signing the Constitution, 1787

Prologue: The nation's first written constitution—the Articles of Confederation (in force 1781–1789)—provided a toothless central government. Disorders inevitably erupted, notably in Massachusetts, though they were exaggerated by those who hoped to substitute a potent federal government. Such pressures eventually bore fruit in the new Constitution framed in Philadelphia during the humid summer of 1787. A century and a quarter later, Charles A. Beard advanced the sensational thesis that propertied men had foisted the Constitution upon the less privileged classes. He underscored the fact that many of the fifty-five framers owned depreciated government securities that would rise in value with the establishment of a powerful central regime. But recent scholarship has indicated Beard overemphasized economic motivation. The crucial struggle was between the big states, which had reluctantly accepted an equal vote in the Senate, and the small states, which rather promptly approved the Constitution. Several of the stronger and more self-sufficient commonwealths, notably Virginia and New York, were among the last to ratify.

A. The Shock of Shays's Rebellion

1. Daniel Gray Explains the Shaysites' Grievances (1786)

When debt-ridden farmers in Massachusetts failed in 1786 to persuade the state legislature to issue cheap paper money and take measures to halt farm foreclosures, violence erupted. One of the Shaysites, Daniel Gray, issued the following statement of the farmers' grievances. What was their principal complaint? Were they justified in taking up arms?

An Address to the People of the several towns in the county of Hampshire, now at arms.

GENTLEMEN,

We have thought proper to inform you of some of the principal causes of the late risings of the people, and also of their present movement, viz.

1st. The present expensive mode of collecting debts, which, by reason of the great scarcity of cash, will of necessity fill our goals with unhappy debtors, and thereby a reputable body of people rendered incapable of being serviceable either to themselves or the community.

2d. The monies raised by impost and excise being appropriated to discharge the interest of governmental securities, and not the foreign debt, when these securities are not subject to taxation.

3d. A suspension of the writ of *Habeas corpus*, by which those persons who have stepped forth to assert and maintain the rights of the people, are liable to be taken and conveyed even to the most distant part of the Commonwealth, and thereby subjected to an unjust punishment.

4th. The unlimited power granted to Justices of the Peace and Sheriffs, Deputy Sheriffs, and Constables, by the Riot Act, indemnifying them to the prosecution thereof; when perhaps, wholly actuated from a principle of revenge, hatred and envy.

Furthermore, Be assured, that this body, now at arms, despise the idea of being instigated by British emissaries, which is so strenuously propagated by the enemies of our liberties: And also wish the most proper and speedy measures may be taken, to discharge both our foreign and domestic debt.

Per Order,
Daniel Gray, *Chairman of the*

GENERALS WILLIAM SHEPARD AND BENJAMIN LINCOLN V. THE SHAYSITES

Reports in *The Boston Gazette & Country Journal* (1787)

The resistance that was first marked by sharp word exchanges punctuated by court closings escalated into armed rebellion. Governor Bowdoin called out an army to restore order to the commonwealth and gave General Benjamin Lincoln overall command of the campaign. In late January 1787, Lincoln marched over 3,000 men out to the western counties to reinforce General William Shepard's troops. Before the two generals could join forces, Shays, with approximately 1,200 to 2,000 men, attacked Shepard's 1,200 on 25 January. Shays's force lost and retreated. Shays then tried to buy time and concessions by offering to negotiate as he moved his forces to what he hoped would be a more secure area. Lincoln followed and on 4 February caught the Shaysites unaware at Petersham: most of the rebels scattered. The major military thrust of the rebellion was thus thwarted. The Massachusetts General Court followed this up with anti-Shaysite legislation and prosecution of some of the captured leaders. While some of the insurgents continued to conduct raids through the spring, others, including Shays, fled the state to settle elsewhere.

From 26 January Report in 5 February edition; 20 January Shaysite Petition and 31 January letters between Shaysites and Lincoln in 12 February edition, *The Boston Gazette & The Country Journal*, 1787. [Editorial insertions appear in square brackets—Ed.]

The Boston Gazette & Country Journal 5 February 1787

Copy of a letter from the Hon.
General SHEPARD to his Excellency
the GOVERNOUR, dated

Springfield, January 26, 1787

SIR,

THE unhappy time is come in which we have been obliged to shed blood. Shays, who was at the head of about twelve hundred men, marched yesterday afternoon about four o'clock towards the publick buildings, in battle array—He marched his men in an open column by platoons. I sent several times by one of my Aids, and two other gentlemen, Captains Buffington and Woodbridge, to him to know what he was after, or what he wanted. His reply was, He wanted barracks and barracks he would have, and stores. The answer rejoined was, He must purchase them dear, if he had them. He still proceeded on his march, until he approached within two hundred and fifty yards of the arsenal. He then made a halt. I immediately sent Major Lyman, one of my Aids, and Capt. Buffington, to inform him [not to] march his troops any nearer the arsenal on the peril [as I] was stationed here by order of your Excellency and Secretary at War for the defence of the publick property; in case he did, I should surely fire on him and his men. A Mr. Wheeler who appeared

tory?] manner, and made answer that that was all he wanted. Mr. Lyman returned with his answer.

Shays immediately put his troops in motion and marched on rapidly near one hundred yards. I then ordered Major Stephens, who commanded the artillery, to fire upon them, he accordingly did. The two first shot he endeavoured to overshoot them, in hopes they would have taken warning without firing among them, but it had no effect on them. Major Stephens then directed his shot through the centre of his column. The fourth or fifth shot put the whole column into the utmost confusion. Shays made an attempt to display the column, but in vain. We had one howi[tzer] which was loaded with grape shot, which, when fired, gave them great uneasiness. Had I been disposed to destroy them, I might have charged upon their rear and ranks with my infantry and the two field-pieces and could have killed the greater part of his whole army within twenty-five minutes. There was not a single musket fired on either side.

I found three men dead on the spot, and one wounded who is since dead. One of our artillery men, by inattention, was badly wounded.

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The Boston Gazette & Country Journal

12 February 1787

Commonwealth of Massachusetts

To the Honourable the Senate, and the Honourable House of Representatives, in General Court assembled, at their next session.

A PETITION [from] the Officers of the Counties of Worcester, Hampshire, Middlesex and Berkshire, now at arms, humbly sheweth—

THAT your petitioners being sensible that we have been in an error in having recourse to arms, and not seeking redress in a constitutional way; we therefore heartily pray your Honours to overlook our failing in respect to our risings in arms, as your Honours must be sensible we had great cause of uneasiness, as will appear by your redressing

many grievances the last session; yet we declare, that it is our hearts desire that good government may be kept up in a constitutional way; and as it appears to us that the time is near approaching when much human blood will be spilt, unless a reconciliation can immediately take place; which scene strikes us with horror, let the foundation cause be where it may:—

We therefore solemnly promise that we will lay down our arms, and repair to our respective homes in a peaceable and quiet manner, and so remain, provided your Honours will grant to your petitioners, and all those of our brethren who have had recourse to arms, or other ways, aided or assisted in our cause, a general pardon for their past offences.—All which we humbly submit to the wisdom, candour and benevolence of your Honours—As we in duty bound shall ever pray.

FRANCIS STONE, Chariman of the Committee from the above Counties

Read and accepted by the Officers

[] Jan. 30th 1787

The Boston Gazette & Country Journal

2 February 1787

On Wednesday the 31st Jan. at 4 o'clock, P.M. Billings, Parsons and Stone, with a flag, arrived at Head-Quarters, at Hadley, with the following letter. The Honourable General LINCOLN
SIR,

As the officers of the people, now convened in defence of their rights and privileges, have sent a petition to the General Court, for the sole purpose of accomodation of our present unhappy affairs, we justly expect that hostilities may cease on both sides until we have a return from our Legislature.

Your Honour will therefore be pleased to give us an answer.

PELHAM, Jan. 31, 1787.

Per order of the Committee for Reconciliation.

FRANCIS STONE, Chairman,
DANIEL SHAYS, Captain,
ADAM WHEELER,

General LINCOLN's Answer to the foregoing

Gentlemen, Hadley, Jan. 31, 1787

YOUR request is totally inadmissible, as no powers are delegated to me which would justify a delay of my operation. Hostilities I have not commenced.

I have again to warn the people in arms against government immediately to disband, as they would avoid the ill consequences which may ensue, should they be inattentive to this caution.

B. LINCOLN

2. George Washington Expresses Alarm (1786)

The retired war hero Washington, struggling to repair his damaged fortunes at Mount Vernon, was alarmed by the inability of the Congress under the Articles of Confederation to collect taxes and regulate interstate commerce. The states, racked by the depression of 1784–1788, seemed to be going their thirteen separate ways. The worthy farmers of western Massachusetts were especially hard hit, burdened as they were with inequitable and delinquent taxes, mortgage foreclosures, and the prospect of imprisonment for debt. Hundreds of them, under the Revolutionary Captain Daniel Shays, formed armed mobs in an effort to close the courts and to force the issuance of paper money. "Good God!" burst out Washington on hearing of these disorders; "who, besides a Tory, could have foreseen, or a Briton have predicted them?"

He wrote despairingly as follows to John Jay, the prominent New York statesman and diplomat. What single fear seems to disturb Washington most, and why?

Your sentiments, that our affairs are drawing rapidly to a crisis, accord with my own. What the event will be is also beyond the reach of my foresight. We have errors to correct; we have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our Confederation. Experience has taught us that men will not adopt, and carry into execution, measures the best calculated for their own good, without the intervention of coercive power. I do not conceive we can exist long as a nation without lodging, somewhere, a power which will pervade the whole Union in as energetic a manner as the authority of the state governments extends over the several states.

To be fearful of investing Congress, constituted as that body is, with ample authorities for national purposes, appears to me the very climax of popular absurdity and madness. Could Congress exert them for the detriment of the people without injuring themselves in an equal or greater proportion? Are not their interests inseparably connected with those of their constituents? By the rotation of appointments [annual elections], must they not mingle frequently with the mass of citizens? . . .

What then is to be done? Things cannot go on in the same train forever. It is much to be feared, as you observe, that the better kind of people, being disgusted with these circumstances, will have their minds prepared for any revolution whatever. We are apt to run from one extreme to another. To anticipate and prevent disastrous contingencies would be the part of wisdom and patriotism.

What astonishing changes a few years are capable of producing! I am told that even respectable characters speak of a monarchical form of government without horror. From thinking proceeds speaking; thence to acting is often but a single step. But how irrevocable and tremendous! What a triumph for our enemies to verify their predictions! What a triumph for the advocates of despotism to find that we are incapable of governing ourselves, and that systems founded on the basis of equal liberty are merely ideal and fallacious. Would to God that wise measures may be taken in time to avert the consequences we have but too much reason to apprehend.

3. Thomas Jefferson Favors Rebellion (1787)

Thomas Jefferson was the successor to Dr. Benjamin Franklin as American minister to France, 1785 to 1789. ("I do not replace him, sir, I am only his successor," he remarked with both wit and modesty.) As an ultraliberal and a specialist in revolution, this author of the Declaration of Independence wrote as follows about Shays's Rebellion to his Virginia neighbor, James Madison. The complete crushing of the uprising had not yet occurred. What did Jefferson regard as the most important cause of the disturbance, and what was most extreme about his judgment?

. . . I am impatient to learn your sentiments on the late troubles in the Eastern [New England] states. So far as I have yet seen, they do not appear to threaten seri-

ous consequences. Those states have suffered by the stoppage of the channels of their commerce, which have not yet found other issues. This must render money scarce, and make the people uneasy. This uneasiness has produced acts absolutely unjustifiable; but I hope they will provoke no severities from their governments. A consciousness of those in power that their administration of the public affairs has been honest may perhaps produce too great a degree of indignation; and those characters wherein fear predominates over hope may apprehend too much from these instances of irregularity. They may conclude too hastily that nature has formed man insusceptible of any other government but that of force, a conclusion not founded in truth, nor experience. . . .

Even this evil is productive of good. It prevents the degeneracy of government, and nourishes a general attention to the public affairs. I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical. Unsuccessful rebellions indeed generally establish the encroachments on the rights of the people which have produced them. An observation of this truth should render honest republican governors so mild in their punishment of rebellions as not to discourage them too much. It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government.

Shay's Rebellion

1. What was the principal complaint of the farmers who followed Daniel Shays?
2. What rumor did Chairman Gray wish to refute?
3. According to Washington himself, in what way did the Founders overestimate most Americans?
4. What were his worst fears?
5. What did Washington propose to solve some of the chaos brought about by a weak national government?
6. According to General Benjamin Lincoln, what actually happened when Shays's men met the militia under Lincoln's command?
7. Summarize briefly the letter of Francis Stone of the Shays movement.
8. What was Jefferson's opinion of Shays Rebellion?
9. What did he mean by the phrase, "a little rebellion now and then is a good thing"?
10. What punishment did he recommend for Shays and his followers and why?

