

George Washington: Letters about Shays's Rebellion (1786)

Shays' rebellion in Massachusetts ignited public and private outbursts within and well beyond the state. Newspaper publishers filled column upon column with reports of the insurgents' as well as the government's actions, while correspondents penned their opinions of the legality, morality, and repercussions of the rebellion. Some Americans supported the rebellion, but many others feared, deplored, and condemned it. The strong reactions showed how sensitive many Americans, including George Washington, were to both the image as well as the implementation of their republican experiment. Washington, who had resigned his commission and returned to private life as a planter after the war, was still vitally concerned about the security and interests of the new nation. To that end he encouraged attendance at the Annapolis Convention in September 1786, and when that failed to draw enough delegates, he supported the call for a convention to take place the following year in Philadelphia. In almost constant communication with other leading revolutionaries, he continued to influence events as he offered his opinions and advice.

From John C. Fitzpatrick, *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 29 (Washington, DC, GPO, 1939), pp. 50-52, 121-124.

To James Madison

Mount Vernon, November 5, 1786

My dear Sir: . . .

Fain would I hope, that the great, and most important of all objects, the federal governmt, may be considered with that calm and deliberate attention which the magnitude of it so loudly calls for at this critical moment. Let prejudices, unreasonable jealousies, and local interest yield to reason and liberality. Let us look to our National character, and to things beyond the present period. No morn ever dawned more favourably than ours did; and no day was ever more clouded than the present! Wisdom, and good examples are necessary at this time to rescue the political machine from the impending storm. Virginia has now an opportunity to set the latter, and has enough of the former, I hope, to take the lead in promoting this great and arduous work. Without some alteration in our political creed, the superstructure we have been seven years raising at the expence of so much blood and treasure, must fall. We are fast verging to anarchy and confusion!

A letter which I have just received from Genl Knox, who had just returned from Massachusetts (whither he had been sent by Congress consequent of the commotion in that State) is replete with melancholy information of the temper, and designs of a considerable part of that people. Among other things he says,

their creed is, that the property of the United States, has been protected from confiscation of Britain by the joint exertions of all, and therefore ought to be the common property of all. And he that attempts opposition to this creed is an enemy to equity and justice, and ought to be swept from off the face of the Earth.

again

They are determined to annihilate all debts public and

private, and have Agrarian Laws, which are easily effected by the means of unfunded paper money which shall be a tender in all cases whatever.

He adds

The numbers of these people amount in Massachusetts to about one fifth part of several populous Counties, and to them may be collected, people of similar sentiments from the States of Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire, so as to constitute a body of twelve or fifteen thousand desperate, and unprincipled men. They are chiefly of the young and active part of the Community.

How melancholy is the reflection, that in so short a space, we should have made such large strides towards fulfilling the prediction of our transatlantic foe! "leave them to themselves, and their government will soon dissolve." Will not the wise and good strive hard to avert this evil? Or will their supineness suffer ignorance, and the arts of self-interested designing disaffected and desperate characters, to involve this rising empire in wretchedness and contempt? What stronger evidence can be given of the want of energy in our governments than these disorders? If there exists not a power to check them, what security has a man for life, liberty, or property? To you, I am sure I need not add aught on this subject, the consequences of a lax, or inefficient government, are too obvious to be dwelt on. Thirteen Sovereignties pulling against each other, and all tugging at the federal head will soon bring ruin on the whole; whereas a liberal, and energetic Constitution, well-guarded and closely watched, to prevent encroachments, might restore us to that degree of respectability and consequence, to which we had a fair claim, and the brightest prospect of attaining. With sentiments of the sincerest esteem etc.

To Henry Knox

Mount Vernon, December 26, 1786

My dear Sir: . . .

Lamentable as the conduct of the Insurgents of Massachusetts is, I am exceedingly obliged to you for the advices respecting them; and pray you, most ardently, to continue the acct. of their proceedings; because I can depend upon them from you without having my mind bewildered with those vague and contradictory reports which are handed to us in Newspapers, and which please one hour, only to make the moments of the next more bitter. I feel, my dear Genl. Knox, infinitely more than I can express to you, for the disorders which have arisen in these States. Good God! Who besides a tory could have foreseen, or a Briton predicted them! Were these people wiser than others, or did they judge of us from the corruption, and depravity of their own hearts? The latter I am persuaded was the case, and that notwithstanding the boasted virtue of America, we are far gone in everything ignoble and bad.

I do assure you, that even at this moment, when I reflect on the present posture of our affairs, it seems to me to be like the vision of a dream. My mind does not know how to realize it, as a thing in actual existence, so strange, so wonderful does it appear to me! In this, as in most other matter, we are too slow. When this spirit first dawned, probably it might easily have been checked; but it is scarcely within the reach of human ken, at this moment, to say when, where, or how it will end. There are combustibles in every State, which a spark might set fire to. In this State, a perfect calm prevails at present, and a prompt disposition to support, and give energy to the federal System is discovered, if the unlucky stirring of the dispute respecting the navigation of the Mississippi does not become a leaven that will ferment, and sour the mind of it.

The resolutions of the prest. Session respecting a paper emission, military certificates, &c., have stamped justice and liberality on the proceedings of the Assembly, and By a late act, it seems very desirous of a General Convention to revise and amend the federal Constitution. Apropos, what prevented the Eastern States from attending the September meeting at Annapolis? Of all the States in the Union it should

have seemed to me, that a measure of this sort (distracted as they were with internal commotions, and experiencing the want of energy in the government) would have been most pleasing to them. What are the prevailing sentiments of the one now proposed to be held at Philadelphia, in May next? and how will it be attended?...

* * *

In both your letters you intimate, that the men of reflection, principle and property in New England, feeling the inefficacy of their present government, are contemplating a change; but you are not explicit with respect to the nature of it. It has been supposed, that, the Constitution of the State of Massachusetts was amongst the most energetic in the Union; May not these disorders then be ascribed to an indulgent exercise of the powers of Administration? If your laws authorized, and your powers were adequate to the suppression of these tumults, in the first appearances of them, delay and temporizing expedients were, in my opinion improper; these are rarely well applied, and the same causes would produce similar effects in any form of government, if the powers of it are not enforced. I ask this question for information, I know nothing of the facts.

That G. B will be an unconcerned Spectator of the present insurrections (if they continue) is not to be expected. That she is at this moment sowing the Seeds of jealousy and discontent among the various tribes of Indians on our frontier admits of no doubt, in my mind. And that she will improve every opportunity to foment the spirit of turbulence within the bowels of the United States, with a view of distracting our governments, and promoting divisions, is, with me, not less certain. Her first Manoeuvres will, no doubt, be covert, and may remain so till the period shall arrive when a decided line of conduct may avail her. . . . We ought not therefore to sleep nor to slumber. Vigilance in watching, and vigour in acting, is, in my opinion, become indispensably necessary. If the powers are inadequate amend or alter them, but do not let us sink into the lowest state of humiliation and contempt, and become a by-word in all the earth. I think with you that the Spring will unfold important and distressing Scenes, unless much wisdom and good management is displayed in the interim...

Review Questions

1. Compare Washington's summary of Henry Knox's account of the rebels' grievances to the "Shaysite proclamation". Do the two support one another?
2. Does the Knox account as accepted and echoed by Washington show any interpretative biases? If so, what does it reveal about their shared attitude to the rebellion?
3. Did Washington believe the insurgents to be a small faction found only in Massachusetts? Did he believe their attitude and actions to be a threat not only to their state but others? Why or why not?
4. What does Washington say caused the problem? What did he believe to be the solution?
5. How did Washington use the rebellion to support his argument for governmental reform?