

# **Shays's Rebellion and the U.S. Constitution**

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## **Introduction**

Although not widely known, Shays's Rebellion greatly impacted the debate on sovereignty and led many to conclude that the only possible solution was the centralization of power in a national authority. Historian John Garraty notes, "The lessons became plain: Liberty must not become an excuse for license; and therefore greater authority must be vested in the central government." [1] While this effect was not the "rebels'" intended goal, Shays's Rebellion helped shape the construction of the U.S. Constitution and the American political thought that has since followed. An analysis of both the causes and the effects of Shays's Rebellion highlights its contribution to the demise of the Articles of Confederation and the ratification of the Constitution.

## **What was Shays's Rebellion?**

In the winter of 1786-1787, many farmers protesting the foreclosure of their farms took up arms and stormed county courthouses across Massachusetts. All over New England, there existed a growing frustration with the American postwar situation under the Articles of Confederation. Massachusetts farmers' disconnection from the Boston government rendered the situation more volatile than anywhere else. "Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Vermont instituted harsh laws to stem the growth of insurrection. But inland Massachusetts was so heavily agrarian that the rebellion gathered steam." [2]

Backcountry farmers banded together in mobs of up to one thousand men and marched to different cities, rioting in front of prominent shops and courthouses in order to make their frustrations heard.

The rebellion is named after Daniel Shays, a former officer in the Continental Army and one of several men who led the protests. While Shays and his men prevented the meetings of several county legislatures, they are most remembered for assembling in front of the Springfield courthouse and attempting to rob the Springfield federal arsenal on January 25, 1787. They were stopped by a 3,000-man army commissioned by Massachusetts Governor James Bowdoin. The farmers continued to express their aggravations through riotous manifestations. After a series of several threatening (but not altogether violent) interactions, Major General Benjamin Lincoln, head of the state-authorized militia, finally subdued the rebellion in late February when the harsh New England winter limited the rebels' ability to flee government forces. All in all, "The fears that were aroused by the rebellion helped to produce a stronger central government in the United States." [3] Shays's Rebellion was a major catalyst for the Constitutional Convention. Frightened by disorder in what was supposed to be the strongest state in the nation, George Washington and other important national leaders met in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787 to draft the U.S. Constitution.

### **Historical Context**

Under the Articles of Confederation ratified in 1781, each state was responsible for collecting its own revenues and alleviating its own debt. In the early 1780s, Massachusetts was burdened by a \$5 million debt composed of various expenses incurred

during the Revolutionary War. It was also subject to a call for even more money by the Continental Congress as part of its quota for paying off the national debt.[4] Governor Bowdoin “lamented the feebleness of the national Government. He exhorted the people to give it strength and called upon them to vindicate their patriotism by submitting cheerfully to heavy taxation.”[5] The Massachusetts legislature consolidated the state’s war debt and instituted heavy taxes. However, it declared government notes redeemable only at the value of the time they were issued, not at the depressed postwar level. “This was doubly disastrous for veterans. Not only were they being hit with heavy property taxes on their hill-country farms, but much of their military pay [if they had received any at all] had been in the form of state-issued notes.”[6] Revisionist historian Leonard Richards declares that taxes levied by the state reached levels much more oppressive than those that had been levied by Britain before the American Revolution.[7] When rural farmers did not have enough cash to pay their debts, the state began confiscating their property and selling their belongings.

In addition to war debt, farmers were under further financial pressure from Massachusetts merchants. After the Revolutionary War American merchants traded heavily with British companies on credit; when British creditors demanded payment for past exports, New England merchants scrambled to come up with gold or silver. “The overtrading of New England Merchants and the subsequent drain of hard money led to a credit crisis and a strangling chain of debt collection.”[8] Merchants in need of cash withdrew credit from their customers and called for the repayment of loans in hard money.[9] Farmers accustomed to trading their surplus agricultural goods for necessities did not possess enough cash to clear their accounts; many were imprisoned for being

unable to pay their debt. “Farmers... watched helplessly as their land was sold for one-tenth its value. Those who did not have enough possessions to satisfy creditors faced prison.”[10] While the Massachusetts state government was aware of farmers’ frustrations, it was under the simultaneous constraints of paying off its own debt and satisfying the interests of wealthy merchants. Feeling the legislature was not being responsive to their needs, farmers decided to take matters into their own hands by forming a cultural and political resistance.

### **What motivation did the farmers have for revolt?**

Those who joined Shays’s Rebellion initially did so out of frustration with Massachusetts's harsh taxation policy. Merchants paid little tax compared to landholders; only one-third of the taxes were levied on goods while the remaining two-thirds were levied on land. Small subsistence-based farmers were unfairly expected to pay enormous property taxes and, when they couldn’t, received no sympathy from the state. However, before forming an armed rebellion, many farmers tried to express their grievances through the existing state legislative system.

Between 1784 and 1786, farmers remained trustful that the Massachusetts political system would heed their reformist demands. They were not trying to avoid their debt, only seeking some form of payment compatible with the customs of an agricultural society. Western farmers lobbied the government to pass more favorable legislation, but coastal merchants claimed that the farmers’ desired reforms would undermine Massachusetts’ commercial and financial growth.[11] Farmers pleaded for paper money (which would allow them to pay for past purchases in inflated currency and thus pass a

portion of the economic burden on to merchant elites) and tender laws (which would allow them to pay their debts in goods, rather than cash).[12] Many farmers also conformed with traditional channels by attempting to express their discontent legitimately at county conventions; yet Boston authorities still refused to listen to the wishes of rural western peasants.

After the first armed insurgence in August 1786, government leaders passed a number of repressive laws, such as the Riot Act and Militia Act. These laws proclaimed that any citizen convicted of intransigency would have to forfeit all property and wealth and be liable to punishment by court martial.[13] More importantly, the government suspended the writ of habeas corpus. David Szatmary contends that “Agrarian anger and fear over the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, coupled with the resentment of other legislative measures, pushed farmers toward rebellion.”[14] The farmers began assembling in larger numbers. Carrying farm tools and old muskets, they charged cities and prevented legislative assemblies from meeting. Along the way, they raided stores and attacked the homes of storeowners.[15]

Interestingly, the farmers did not view themselves as “rebels” or “insurgents” but rather as “Regulators” suppressing “the tyrannical government of the Massachusetts state.”[16] Seeking to protect their traditional way of life, Shaysites fought against both impending mercantilist dominance and an oppressive government. Historian Marion Starkey proposes that “The roots of the insurrection [lay] in a clash between a traditional, agrarian way of life and an ever-encroaching commercial society.”[17] Farmers believed they were keeping the state government in order:

[T]hroughout the backcountry, “regulation” had been common for decades. It was not always successful and sometimes resulted in humiliating defeat. But there was a tradition that whenever distant authorities got out of hand... the people had an obligation to rise up and restore communal order. This way of thinking, moreover, had been strengthened by the actions and rhetoric of the American Revolution.[18]

When unsatisfied with the government’s actions, the Shaysites believed it was their right—and duty—to make a stand. Richard Brown notes that “[T]his was the method that had been vindicated by the Independence movement. Their understanding of republicanism did not include submitting to ruinous policies, though adopted by a duly constituted government.”[19] First acting upon their economic grievances and later fearing the loss of their political rights, Shaysites hoped that by preventing the sitting of state and county courts, further oppressive legislation and taxation policies could not be carried out against them.

### **How did the revolt play out?**

Very few people were actually killed during the period of Shays’s Rebellion, although a good number were wounded. Yet Shays’s Rebellion instilled great fear in many onlookers, particularly eastern merchants and government officials. Several prominent citizens feared that if the rebellion were to go on, it would inevitably lead to civil war. Massachusetts merchants and large landholders were more than happy to contribute money to the assembly of the state militia in order to put down the threatening

insurgents. “For the support of this little army the State borrowed of patriotic citizens \$20,000, the treasury being empty.”[20] State forces were eventually successful in extinguishing the mob of Shaysite rebels. After General Lincoln overtook the rebels during a harsh February blizzard, many of the “Regulators” returned to their farms or fled to other states. “With the dispersion of Shays’s followers the back of the rebellion was broken. Yet it continued to show signs of life for weeks afterwards.”[21] The last raid ended in June 1787, but national leaders feared that without more unity between the individual states the rebels would be able to regroup and strike again in the future.

The Massachusetts government arrested many Shaysites for treason, but was later forced to pardon all but two because so many people had been involved. Massachusetts’s new governor, John Hancock, realized he could not punish such a large number of citizens without instigating further restlessness. So many insurgents had been involved that the government was forced to let most of them off without penalty. Starkey reveals one of the many lessons of the rebellion: “Government was not to be amended by force of arms. The inefficacy of that kind of textual criticism had been amply proved, and there must be no more rebellions. But now that this one was over, why perpetuate its spirit by creating martyrs for an ill-conceived cause?”[22] All but two Shaysites were pardoned, including Daniel Shays. Government relief was now to be found in the ratification of a new Constitution.

### **What effect did Shays’s Rebellion have on the Constitution?**

Shays’s Rebellion played a role in several aspects of the Constitution. News of the rebellion not only persuaded George Washington to come out of retirement and lead the

Constitutional Convention, but also made state officials realize the insufficiency of the Articles of Confederation. “Before the rebellion took place, several states had placed their sovereignty over that of a federal government. But national leaders were shaken that so strong a rebellion had occurred in one of the confederation’s strongest states.”[23] Even after the Constitution was drafted, Shaysite sentiment continued to appeal to antifederalists opposing the centralization of power in a national government. Unfortunately, this sentiment was outvoted during the ratification process. As Michael Kenney asserts, “The lasting effect of Shays’s Rebellion...was the U.S. Constitution.”[24]

Although the Philadelphia Convention had been planned since the Annapolis Convention in late 1785,[25] Shays’s Rebellion exhibited and compounded the difficulties of the Articles of Confederation. States’ inability to overcome their national debt and the subsequent difficulty of putting down wild insurgency convinced many leaders that the existing system could no longer handle the affairs of the United States. “To the nationalists, Shays’s Rebellion reflected the overall inadequacy of a political system dominated by semisovereign states. Prolonged domestic conflict in Massachusetts, one of the most respected and influential states in the Confederation, disclosed the vulnerability of individual states in a close-knit union.”[26] Upon hearing of the rebellion, George Washington decided to attend the Philadelphia Convention; plans for the new Constitution were strongly underway.

During the Constitutional Convention, Shays’s Rebellion consolidated the divergent interests of the thirteen states into one resolve: investing greater authority in one body to protect the United States’ national security. Interestingly, “The fear of

anarchy brought on by Shays's Rebellion helped bring together the mercantile interests of northern ports with the slaveholding landed aristocracies of the South.”[27] Without motivation from the events of Shays's Rebellion, individual states might not have been so cooperative with one another. Instead, delegates worried that Shaysite discontent would spread throughout the U.S., thereby threatening the entire political system. Similar uprisings had, in fact, occurred in other states as well, but not on the scale of Shays's.

Much to the dismay of the Shaysites, the ratification debates only cemented the Constitution's lasting presence in American politics. Shays's Rebellion became a contentious topic during ratification debates and gave Alexander Hamilton an example by which to emphasize the necessity of a centralized government in *The Federalist Papers*. [28] Although the farmers and antifederalists remained opposed to the Constitution, they were ultimately outvoted by those who believed Shays's Rebellion reflected the inadequacy of a political system dominated by semi-sovereign states. Derrick Jackson explains that “The last grasp of agrarian interests was powerful in heated state ratification debates, but the farmers came up short. In Massachusetts, the Constitution was ratified 187-168.”[29] American political thought now commends both the drafters of the Constitution and the Constitution itself. Over two hundred years later, many forget the role that Shays's Rebellion played in leading to the Constitution's adoption.

## **Conclusion**

Thomas Jefferson, when notified of Shays's Rebellion, commented from Paris in 1787: “The spirit of resistance is so valuable on certain occasions that I wish it always to

be 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.”[30] An investigation into the observations of key eyewitnesses and the findings of numerous scholars proves that without Shays’s Rebellion, the U.S. Constitution might not have been adopted when and in the way that it was. The Rebellion marked an important turning point in U.S. social and political development in which commercial interests came to outweigh those of rural communities and the thirteen states realized the necessity of delegating more government authority to a central entity.

## Notes

\*Note: source citations listed without page numbers were found online.

[1] John A. Garraty, *A Short History of the American Nation* (New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc., 1997), 92.

[2] Derrick Jackson, “200 years of the Constitution’s history,” *Newsday*, 21 February 1987, 3.

[3] *World Book Encyclopedia*, 1966 ed., s.v. “Shays’s Rebellion,” 303.

[4] *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, “Shays’s Rebellion,” April 1862, 656-662.

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[5] *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* 657.

[6] Michael Kenney, “A revisionist’s account of Shays’s Rebellion,” *Boston Globe*, June 2002, 5.

[7] Leonard L. Richards, *Shay’s Rebellion: The American Revolution’s Final Battle*

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 88.

[8] David P. Szatmary, *Shays's Rebellion* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 26.

[9] Szatmary 16-17.

[10] Jackson.

[11] Szatmary 57.

[12] Szatmary 37, 44.

[13] Szatmary 81-83.

[14] Szatmary 94.

[15] Szatmary 103.

[16] Kenney.

[17] Marion L. Starkey, *A Little Rebellion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1955), xiv.

[18] Richards 67.

[19] Richard D. Brown, "Shays's Rebellion and Its Aftermath: A View from Springfield, Massachusetts, 1787," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1983), 598-615.

[20] *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 660.

[21] *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 661.

[22] Starkey 235.

[23] *Houston Chronicle*, "Side by side memorials tell both sides of 1787 Shays Rebellion," 6 February, 1987, 8.

[24] Kenney.

[25] Robert A. Feer, "Shays's Rebellion and the Constitution: A Study in Causation," *The New England Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (1969), 388-410.

[26] Szatmary 123.[27] *Houston Chronicle*.

[28] Starkey 242.

[29] Jackson.

[30] Jonathan Clark, "The tree of liberty refreshed," *The Times*, 28 November 1996, 1.

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