HIST 133J: The Creation of the American Politician, 1789-1820
Professor Joanne Freeman

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Veronica Zimmer

# Popular Protest in Early America: A Comparative Study of Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions

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On January 25, 1787, less than four years after the end of the American Revolutionary War, 1200 militiamen marched to Springfield, Massachusetts to quell an "insurrection."[1] For the past year, farmers across Massachusetts had been protesting a series of economic and civic policies, citing grievances of impoverishment and disenfranchisement.[2] They were angered by high taxes, high government salaries, and a pitifully unorganized local legislature.[3] After several peaceful but unsuccessful attempts at petitions and county conventions, the protestors stormed the Northampton Courthouse in August 1786. This time, they carried guns.[4] Violence continued for several months, reaching its peak when a group of rebels, led by farmer and former Revolutionary War soldier Daniel Shays, stormed the Springfield arsenal.

The resulting confrontation was swift, violent, and decisive. Governor James Bowdoin sent a privately funded militia commanded by General William Shepard to counter the attack. One witness, Reverend Bezaleel Howard, described "Such a state of anarchy & Confusion, Dispotism and Tyranny" that "succeeded the Dispersion of Shays' troops."[5] Shepard's army fired warning shots,[6] followed by artillery fire. The rebels ran for cover almost immediately. Amidst

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[1]Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates, Resolutions, and other Proceedings in Convention, on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*. (Philadelphia, printed by the editor, 1838), 158.
[2]Paul Douglas Newman, *Fries's Rebellion: The Enduring Struggle for the American Revolution*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 92.
[3]John L. Brooke. "To the Quiet of the People: Revolutionary Settlements and Civil Unrest in Western Massachusetts, 1774-1789." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1989): 426.
[4]Richard D. Brown. "Shays's Rebellion and Its Aftermath: A View from Springfield, Massachusetts, 1787." *The William and Mary Quarterly* no. 4 (1983): 602.
[5]Ibid., 610.
[6]Whether or not the militia fired warning shots is disputed. According to Rev. Howard, the militia fired no warning shots: "They came upon Shays unawars and, without firing one Gun, put him and all his troops to a total rout" (609).

the chaos, Howard recalled, "The Gun and the Bayonet was the only standard of authority."[7] By the end of the day, four rebels had been killed and twenty others were wounded. The government suffered a singular self-inflicted battle casualty; Howard noted that "One of Shepherd's artillerymen had both of his [arms] shot off by the Discharge of a Cannon."[8]

Seven years later, long after the defeat of Daniel Shays and his fellow rioters, a parallel rebellion took place in Western Pennsylvania. Once again, a group of infuriated farmers sought redress for high taxes and discriminatory legislation. The protestors attempted the same peaceful modes of dissent as the men in Massachusetts, and, as had been the case in Shays' Rebellion, these methods failed.[9] Farmers began to enact extreme violence on tax officials and distillers; the government responded once more with force. Rather than sending a state militia, President George Washington called on a federal army. The rebels had plans to storm Pennsylvania's capital, Pittsburgh, but by the time Washington's militia arrived, they had been dissuaded.[10] As the army entered the city, the rebels retreated, and their protests anticlimactically ended.

Many historians have separately examined these rebellions and their implications for taxation and the use of force by the United States government.[11] The similarities and differences between the rebellions, however, have not been subject to much study.[12] Consistencies between

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However, David Szatmary notes in his book *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* that the militia "fired two of his canons at the approaching Shaysites, humanely wishing to frighten them to lay down their arms" (102).

[7]Brown, "Shays's Rebellion and Its Aftermath" 609.

[8]Ibid., 607, 609.

[9]Steven R. Boyd, ed., *The Whiskey Rebellion: Past and Present Perspectives.* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), 4.

[10]Richard H. Kohn. "The Washington Administration's Decision to Crush the Whiskey Rebellion." *The Journal of American History* 59, no. 3 (1972): 584.

[11]Brady Crytzer, *The Whiskey Rebellion: a distilled history of an American crisis.* William Hogeland, *The Whiskey Rebellion: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the frontier rebels who challenged America's newfound sovereignty.* Leonard L. Richards: *Shays's Rebellion: The American Revolution's Final Battle.* Thomas P. Slaughter *The Whiskey Rebellion: frontier epilogue to the American Revolution.* David P. Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection.* Daniel Bullen, *Daniel Shays's Honorable Rebellion: An American Story.*

[12]That is not to say this topic has gone entirely untouched. See: George E. Connor. "The Politics of Insurrection: A Comparative Analysis of the Shays', Whiskey, and Fries' Rebellions, *The Social Science Journal* 29, no. 3 (1992): 259-281.

Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions offer much insight into how ordinary Americans viewed the government and their right to protest it. On the other hand, the contrasts between these rebellions— including both rationale and response— illustrate the impact of the Constitution, which was ratified between the two protests.

Shaysites and Whiskey Rebels shared one major grievance: poverty. As rural farmers in a postwar economy, both groups were financially unstable. They considered high taxes unfair and felt entitled to speak out against them. Their methods were initially peaceful, including petitions, county conventions, and letters of dissent in the press. This similarity between the rebellions— faith in nonviolent protest— indicates that Americans in the first decades of the United States carefully considered their role in local and national politics. Eventually, however, both groups resorted to violence, which illustrates the high-stakes, severe nature of protest in the 1780s and 1790s.

Additionally, the responses to Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions were notably alike. The press and government tended to criticize excise resistors, using arguments laced with both belittlement and hyperbole. They discredited the rebels as "insane,"[13] and "dimwitted,"[14] nullifying rebels' legitimate grievances against the government. At the same time, these writers exaggerated the violence of protestors to the point of catastrophizing. The responses from former revolutionaries Washington and Hamilton come across as particularly hypocritical, given their involvement in an insurrection against the British government less than a decade prior. Not only the content, but the tone and style of news articles, poetry, and public proclamations offer a glimpse into the tense relationship between yeomen and the political elite. The distressed and

[13]Boyd, *The Whiskey Rebellion,* 6.
[14]Ibid.

often unreasonable responses to Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions reveal how uncomfortable the early American government was with public protest.

Nevertheless, the motives behind and the responses to Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions were not identical. Shaysites were frustrated by the lack of local justices to represent them in provincial affairs. Government officials condemned Shaysites, claiming they were attempting to suffocate the American experiment before it had a chance to breathe. Contrastingly, the Whiskey Rebellion occurred after the ratification of the Constitution. This document granted the federal government new powers, including the ability to lay taxes.[15] The Whiskey Rebels protested the *presence* of government authority; Shaysites protested the *absence*. Furthermore, the government, now separated into political parties, was more divided in their response. Federalists were much harsher, since they wanted to emphasize the strength of the Constitution. Some federalists were paranoid that their opponents would use unrest as evidence of Federalist incompetency.[16] Meanwhile, newspaper articles and letters by Democratic-Republicans expressed newfound support for public protest. They questioned whether it was constitutional for the government to respond with force, and they addressed the hardships shaping the Whiskey Rebels' behavior.[17]

Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions, studied in a comparative light, reveal the traditions of American protest that persisted between the 1780s and 1790s. However, the distinctions between the rationale and responses to these two rebellions demonstrate the significant effect of the Constitution on the evolving relationship between Americans and their government.

## "The inefficacy of our present government"[18]: Rationale for Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions

[15]Newman, *Fries's Rebellion*, 45.
[16]Kohn, "The Washington Administration's Decision to Crush the Whiskey Rebellion," 568.
[17]Ibid, 574.
[18]*Essex Journal*, October 3, 1787.

The protestors involved in Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions were unhappy for two primary reasons: economic inequality and political oppression. In both cases, they felt comfortable challenging their government and advocating for better living conditions.

Shaysites in particular desired debt relief and the repeal of new tax laws. Though these farmers had been relatively prosperous during the American Revolution, they were suffering in the 1780s from extreme inflation. The demand for agricultural products had dropped, and the currency farmers accumulated during the war was worth less.[19] Some of the farmers were in debt because they had stopped working to fight in the Continental Army, and the government had not paid them back. To make matters worse, the war reduced the production of manufactured goods, which disrupted trade patterns and decreased the amount of available currency.[20] Thomas Jefferson explained the difficulty of their situation to James Madison: "They have suffered by the stoppage of the channels of their commerce, which have not found other issues. This must render money scarce, and make the people uneasy."[21] Coastal merchants, in financial woes themselves, demanded that farmers pay their loans in cash. When the yeomen failed to pay, they were dragged to court, stripped of their land, and often put in jail.

It was within this economic context that the Massachusetts government decided to impose two-thirds of taxation on land, which placed a disproportionate burden on farmers.[22] One petition in the *Massachusetts Gazette* expresses a strong resentment of taxes: "To be *tenants* to *landlords,* we know not who, and pay rents for lands, *purchased with our money,* and converted from howling *wilderness*, into fruitful fields, by the *sweat of our brow,* seems to carry with it an

[19]Brooke, "Revolutionary Settlements and Civil Unrest in Western Massachusetts, 1774-1789," 449.
[20]David P. Szatmary. *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection.* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 19.
[21]Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, January 30, 1787, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd., vol. 11 (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 92-97.
[22]Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion,* 32.

idea in it's [sic] nature truly shocking."[23] The author of this petition, a town clerk named Oliver Root, pleaded with the government to empathize with his outrage, writing, "These are matters, we think, serious and weighty. We trust you feel them equally with ourselves."[24] Farmers' anger only increased when they began to consider their treatment in comparison with elites; Rev. Howard notes, "The Governors' salary they did complain of."[25] One rebel in Pittsburgh wielding a tomahawk proclaimed, "it is not the excise law only that must go down; your districts and associate judges must go down; your high offices and salaries. A great deal more is to be done; I am but beginning yet."[26]

Whiskey Rebels shared Shaysites' indignation at economic inequality. The Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, had decided that whiskey and other distilled spirits were "a national extravagance" viable for luxury taxation.[27] What he failed to acknowledge was that the tax was on distillation, not consumption, meaning the burden fell on sellers. He also did not consider that western Pennsylvanians already faced many obstacles to selling whiskey. Blocked from the rest of the state by the Allegheny Mountains, they could only transport small amounts of liquor at a time using pack horses. With a tax on each bottle, the excise amounted to a full day's wages per gallon. Furthermore, Hamilton essentially inflicted the nation's first income tax on some of its poorest residents, since many farmers used whiskey to barter.[28] Like the yeomen of Massachusetts, Pennsylvanian farmers endured property foreclosure and the trauma of "losing

[23]*Massachusetts Gazette,* January 20, 1784.
[24]Ibid.
[25]Brown, "Shays's Rebellion and Its Aftermath," 604.
[26]Hugh Henry Brackenridge. *Incidents of the insurrection in the western parts of Pennsylvania, in the year 1794.* (Philadelphia: printed and sold by John M'Culloch, 1795), 86.
[27]Cynthia L. Krom and Stephanie Krom. "The Whiskey Tax and the Consequent Insurrection: A Wicked and Happy Tumult." *The Accounting Historians Journal* 40, no. 2 (2013): 101.
[28]Deepening farmers' anger was the fact that Hamilton had been giving merchants tax breaks and that wealthy landowners in Philadelphia had gotten away with failing to pay their taxes for six consecutive years. Robert W. T. Martin. *Government by Dissent: Protest, Resistance, and Radical Democratic Thought in the Early American Republic.* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 39.

everything one owned including mattresses, mugs and spoons as well as the items needed to make a living."[29] The farmers resented a particular tax official, General John Neville, who controlled a conglomerate of businesses in Pittsburgh and wanted to monopolize the whiskey industry.[30] The Secretary of a 1792 convention of Pennsylvanian farmers concluded, "It is the most unequal, and the most injurious to industry, of any tax that could be devised."[31]

In both Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions, finance was not the only driving factor of dissent: politics also played a major role. The protestors, fresh out of a revolution against Britain, were highly cognizant of republican principles and highly agitated when their republican liberties seemed in jeopardy.[32] Many had risked their lives to fight against the British government, and now they feared the United States government had become equally tyrannical.

Farmers in Massachusetts were specifically frustrated by the inefficiency and dearth of county authority. Isolated in upland regions of the state, they did not have much of a voice in politics before the Revolution. Afterwards, attempts to create civil institutions failed.[33] Elected officials often neglected to attend critical roll call votes in Boston, and there were not enough justices to handle local affairs.[34] In these areas of Massachusetts without clear avenues for representation, the resistance movement gained the most momentum. Historian John L. Brooke explains, "The failure of elites to accommodate popular expectations for revolutionary change brought a collapse of institutional legitimacy."[35] Robert Karson, a farmer from Richmond proclaimed he wanted "to kill a Judge or a Lawyer," condemning them as a "damned pack of

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[29]Krom,"The Whiskey Tax and the Consequent Insurrection," 101.
[30]Ibid., 104.
[31]"*National Gazette*, May 21, 1792.
[32]John R. Howe. "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s." *American Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1967): 153.
[33]Brooke, "Revolutionary Settlements and Civil Unrest in Western Massachusetts, 1774-1789," 454.
[34]Robert W. T. Martin. *Government by Dissent*, 30.
[35]Ibid., 462.

rascals."[36] Karson's extreme words originated from a widespread concern that a disorderly legal system was going to deprive farmers of their independence and economic well-being.

Along with their concerns about provincial politics, Shaysites shared in a nationwide anxiety about the ratification of the new Constitution. David Redick, for example, a member of the Supreme Executive Council for Pennsylvania, claimed that the day the United States adopts this legislation, "we may justly date the loss of American liberty."[37] He challenged the document, asking "Why will they have the power to lay direct taxes?", "Why will [they] have power to keep standing armies in times of peace?", and "Why is the trial by jury destroyed in civil cases before Congress?"[38] Eastern Massachusetts residents pondered these issues, including farmer Samuel P. Savage, who wrote to Congressman George Thatcher, "The inefficacy of our present government is fully proved by the encroachments on our commerce, the decline of national honor, and the confusion pervading *every* State."[39]

Whiskey Rebels inherited the Constitution, and many of them felt it signified the "loss of American liberty." Unlike Shaysites, who protested the lack of a government, Whiskey Rebels protested the government the Constitution created. In particular, they opposed federally prescribed punishments for failing to pay the whiskey tax. Trials for debtors took place at the federal court in Philadelphia, 300 miles from the homes of western Pennsylvanians. The expense of travel to the courthouse usually cost the value of their farms.[40] For many yeomen, the most infuriating aspect of this policy was that it mirrored the British government's command during the colonial era that Americans face trial in England. The *Declaration of Independence*

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[36]Ibid, 449.
[37]David Redick to William Irvine, September 24, 1788, in *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition,* John P. Kaminski, Gaspare J. Saladino, Richard Leffler, Charles H. Schoenleber and Margaret A. Hogan, ed*.,* vol II. (Charlottesville, University of Virginia), 135.
[38]Ibid.
[39]Samuel P. Savage to George Thatcher Weston. March 7, 1788. in *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition,* vol. VII, 1672.
[40]Krom, "The Whiskey Tax and the Consequent Insurrection," 102.

condemned the King of England "for transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences," yet the country borne of that document demanded the same of its constituents.[41] The Whiskey Rebellion was more than a trivial dispute over the price of booze; it was a protest against an unjust service of process. Historian Thomas P. Slaughter asserts, "These were not all silly, middle-aged men acting out their life crises on the sporting fields of a martial campaign."[42] Rather, they were seeking to manifest popular sovereignty. They were reliving a revolution.

"A time for action"[43]: Methods of Protest in Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions

As reenactors of an insurrection, both Shaysites and the Whiskey Rebels returned to conventions of protest from the 1770s. Just as the Continental Congress coordinated to resist British policies, Shaysites gathered to discuss policy. In February 1782, six years before the confrontation in Springfield, a group met in Hadley to examine the governor's salary and the cost of trials. At the next convention, the attendees voted for the dissolution of the Court of General Sessions, arguing it was profligate and unhelpful.[44] Like the revolutionaries of the 1770s, Shaysites threatened secession if their demands were not met.[45] They called themselves Regulators, people dedicated to regulating excessive legislation.[46] They did not see themselves as riotous rebels, but rather the embodied legacy of the independence movement.

Pennsylvanians used analogous tactics to peacefully protest the whiskey tax. They joined Democratic-Republican Societies and wrote petitions that labeled the tax unconstitutional for targeting an already marginalized group.[47] They genuinely believed that these methods,

[41]Thomas Jefferson, et al, Copy of Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776. The Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress.
[42]Boyd, *The Whiskey Rebellion,* 10.
[43]Reverend Bezaleel Howard stated in his account of Shays' Rebellion, "Conventions was now no more. It was now a time for action, not for consultation of Grievances." Brown, "Shays's Rebellion and Its Aftermath," 606.
[44]Brooke, "Revolutionary Settlements and Civil Unrest in Western Massachusetts, 1774-1789," 429.
[45]Newman, *Fries's Rebellion*, 56.
[46]Paul A. Gilje. *Rioting in America.* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 53
[47]Ibid.

vindicated by the independence movement, would encourage the federal government to remove the tax. Hamilton described a convention that took place on September 7, 1791 in Pittsburgh, where delegates from four western counties denounced "the exorbitant salaries of Officers" and "the unreasonable interest of the publick Debt."[48] Hamilton considered these issues "foreign to the object" of the tax, but the men at the convention felt that all of these injustices were intertwined.[49] Their in-depth discussions of economic policy show how much average Americans cared about their role in government and how deeply they believed they could make a difference. Notably, these meetings took place the same year that the first ten amendments to the Constitution were ratified. These amendments included the right to free speech and peaceful assembly, as well as the right to petition the government. It is possible that, as a result, farmers felt more empowered than ever to politically organize.

Outside of formal meetings, Shaysites and Pennsylvanian protestors took to the streets, using symbolic images to evoke the American Revolution. Whiskey Rebels erected liberty poles (long wooden sticks with a hat on top) to resurrect the democratic spirit of the 1770s.[50] The poles, which were ubiquitously recognizable at the time, helped farmers mark their opposition to the government, justify their outrage, and encourage onlookers to join the cause. Likewise, Shaysites wore a sprig of evergreen in their hats, a nod to the pine tree as a symbol of liberty during the American Revolution.[51]

Peaceful protest did not last long in either rebellion. Exasperated by the unresponsiveness of legislators in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, rebels relied on physical force to make their perspectives known.[52] Many of the rebels had participated in the imperial struggle as teenagers

[48]Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, August 5, 1794 in *Founders Online.*
[49]Ibid.
[50]*Norwich Packet,* September 18, 1794.
[51]Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 53.
[52]Steven R. Boyd claims in *The Whiskey Rebellion* that George Washington lowered taxes and improved collection procedures before acts of violence broke out, so the legislature was not completely unresponsive (5). However, after

and had fought in the Continental Army as young adults. They were used to violence; many even considered it a normal response to legislation they did not agree with.[53] The Boston Massacre and the Boston Tea Party were both riots, arising from competition over jobs and taxation without representation, respectively.[54] In 1773, a group of Bostonians tarred and feathered customs officer John Malcom in 1773, "carrying him about in derrision" for an hour through the streets and leaving him "terribly bruised."[55] Reverend James Carnahan, a student in Pittsburg during the Whiskey Rebellion, remarked that the protestors' tumultuous upbringing "caused those who were orderly and peaceable citizens to look with an indulgent eye at the first acts of insult and violence to the federal excise officers."[56]

At first, violence during Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions was haphazard. Whiskey Rebels shot holes in the reserves of distillers who paid the excise tax.[57] Farmers also targeted tax collectors; they broke into Benjamin Wells' home with their faces painted black and burned it to the ground,[58] tarred and feathered John Lynn, and most memorably, attacked a cognitively disabled man named Robert Wilson.[59] As Hamilton reports, Wilson had "imagined himself to be a clandestine agent sent to recover information for the Treasury Department."[60] Some farmers mistakenly assumed he was there to enforce the whiskey tax, so they took him "out of his bed

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the lowering of the tax, collectors went after 75 distillers who had not paid in 1793. Even though Washington had made state courts an option, the delinquents were tried in federal courts. Many of the arrested farmers were part of Democratic-Republican Societies, which led them to believe they were being prosecuted for their party affiliation. This idea angered farmers, giving rise to violence.

[53]Newman, *Fries's Rebellion*, 45.

[54]Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 1.

[55]Thomas Hutchinson to Lord Dartmouth, January 28, 1774. The Correspondence of Thomas Hutchinson, Colonial Society of Massachusetts.

[56]Boyd, *The Whiskey Rebellion,* 13.

[57]Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 55. Whiskey Rebels often left mysterious letters at distillers' homes with the signature "Tom the Tinker," warning distillers to stop paying the tax. If the distiller continued to pay, Whiskey Rebels would destroy their property.

[58]Proclamation on Violent Opposition to the Excise Tax, February 24, 1794, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, vol. 15, *1 January–30 April 1794*, ed. Christine Sternberg Patrick. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009, pp. 275–277.

[59]Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, August 5, 1794 in *Founders Online*.

[60]Ibid.

and marched him five miles away to a blacksmith's shop, where they stripped him naked and prodded him with the blacksmith's iron," before tarring and feathering him.[61] Newspaper sources from the region proclaimed that anyone who objected to these acts of brutality would be in "danger of assassination."[62]

Shaysites and Whiskey Rebels were not only violent in isolated incidents; they also organized themselves into makeshift armies. Massachusetts farmers modeled themselves after the Minute Men of 1775, a group of soldiers known for their strength and ability to to march within a "minute's" notice.[63] They debated which form of weaponry to use and decided that guns would show "their Determinate Resolution to have those matters and things Redresd of which they so much and ardently complained."[64] Armed, they marched to Northampton and shut down court proceedings. Similarly, 500 armed Whiskey rebels attacked General Neville's home on Bower Hill. As shots were fired between the rebels and a small detachment of federal soldiers, the rebels lit a massive bonfire of Neville's furniture using, sarcastically, his supplies of whiskey. One historian claimed that the "battle" at Bower Hill was "not a small act of mob violence but an all-out war."[65] By the end of the day, two Shaysites and an army officer lay dead,[66] and all that remained of Neville's palatial mansion was ash. The brutality of these encounters represents a persisting tradition of violence as a negotiating tactic in early American politics.

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[61]Ibid.
[62]*Philadelphia General Advertiser*, August 12, 1794. Hamilton reported an instance of intimidation by excise resistors: "A person of the name of Rosenberry underwent the humiliating punishment of tarring and feathering with some aggravations; for having in conversation hazarded the very natural and just, but unpalatable remark that the Inhabitants of that Country could not reasonably expect protection from a Government, whose laws they so strenuously opposed." Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, August 5, 1794 in *Founders Online.*
[63]Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 53.
[64]Brown, "Shays's Rebellion and Its Aftermath," 602.
[65]Krom, "The Whiskey Tax and the Consequent Insurrection," 109.
[66]Krom and other historians (Robert Hendrickson, Forrest McDonald) claim that one member of Neville's militia died in the conflict, but other historians question the validity of this report. Thomas P. Slaughter writes, "Actually, excise rioters never killed federal officials (although one soldier perhaps died defending the Neville home." *The Whiskey Rebellion: Past and Present Perspectives,* 19.

Notably, these acts of violence took place during distinct political environments, and therefore have different explanations. Shays' Rebellion was a crisis of the 1780s, a particularly vulnerable and flexible decade. Americans were acutely self-conscious of their responsibility in defining and building the republic. In these "fluid days of Post-Revolutionary political settlement when parties were only beginning to form and authority seemed so weak," some Americans saw an opportunity to make the nation more democratic.[67] They knew that if they passively waited, power and wealth would likely end up in the hands of an elite few.[68] For them, protest was urgent and time-sensitive, which likely explains why Shaysites were so ferocious at points. In contrast, the protestors in Pennsylvania challenged a somewhat firm federal government. With the introduction of the Constitution and two major parties, politics were less fluid and much more vicious. Democratic-Republicans and Federalists had vastly different visions of what was best for America, and there was no country with a track record of success that indicated who was correct. Within this atmosphere of "intolerance and fearfulness," "politics was a deadly business."[69] The Whiskey Rebels viewed legislation as an existential matter. One farmer wrote in the *National Gazette* that with the new tax, "The house is no longer sacred."[70] The time for them to help mold the government had passed; their duty shifted to fighting the existing government.

"Lawless hotheads": Rhetoric Responding to Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions

Farmers involved in Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions may have felt that they were participating in legitimate protest, but many people in the press and in the government did not feel the same. Critics argued that the rebels were unserious, ridiculous people, yet simultaneously condemned them as murderous extremists. The intense and incongruent response to both

[67]Newman, *Fries's Rebellion*, xiii.
[68]Howe, "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s," 158.
[69]Ibid., 148, 165.
[70]*National Gazette,* March 15, 1792.

rebellions shows that the government was deeply worried about the impact of public protest, sometimes to the point of irrationality.

This trend of denigration and exaggeration is present throughout responses to Shays' Rebellion. Despite Shaysites' collective attempts to resolve their grievances through civic discourse, the reigning narrative in the press was that Shaysites were fools motivated by a brutal despot, Daniel Shays.[71] A farmer and former soldier, Shays tried to petition the legislature but eventually decided he would achieve more by organizing disruptive marches. The press portrayed him as an absurdly aggressive person. Ten newspapers in the span of three months published a fictional letter from Shays to his supporters that reads, "You must *snarle* at the Convention in every company," and deceive people in the frontier counties with words such as "aristocracy, monarchy, oligarchy, and the like, none of which they will understand." Shays closes this fake letter with "sincere wishes for your success in every thing that tends to anarchy, distress, poverty, and tyranny."[72] This document portrays tax resistors as misguided citizens brainwashed by a domestic terrorist. Shays' Rebellion comes across as both idiotic and dangerous, suggesting that the press was uneasy with popular protest and still learning to articulate why.

Other sources expressed the same hysterical sentiment about Shaysites, including Henry Lee's 1788 proclamation to the Virginia Convention. Lee proclaimed, "Had Shays been possessed of abilities, he might have established that favorite system of the Gentleman— Kings, Lords, and Commons. Nothing was wanting to bring about a revolution, but a great man to head the insurgents; but fortunately he was a worthless Captain."[73] In other words, if Shays had not

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[71]Brooke, "Revolutionary Settlements and Civil Unrest in Western Massachusetts, 1774-1789," 431.
[72]*Philadelphia Independent Gazettteer,* September 25, 1787. By December, this story had been republished three times in Massachusetts, twice in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, once in Connecticut, New York, and South Carolina.
[73]"The Virginia Convention: Debates." June 9, 1788. in *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition,* vol. IX, 1050.

been so incompetent, he and other farmers would have taken over the entire country and created a monarchy. Lee was partially correct: Shaysites were trying to intimidate the government by storming the Springfield arsenal. However, they were not nearly as dangerous as Lee made them out to be. Lee claimed, "There were 30,000 stands of arms nearly in his power," but most records of the battle at Springfield indicate that Shaysites almost immediately retreated into the woods.[74] Furthermore, Lee completely fabricated the idea that Shaysites desired a "system of the Gentelman." According to their petitions, farmers in Massachusetts wanted anything but that sort of system.[75] One possible reason for Lee's flawed logic is his intense distress about the fragility of the United States. He exclaims, "I am anxious that if my country should come into the hands of tyranny…to exert my facilities to the utmost to extricate her."[76] Lee let his emotions blind him to reality, leading him to both discredit and overemphasize the threat of dissent.

Poets, whose work was widely published in newspapers, also untethered themselves from the truth when discussing Shays' Rebellion. Lemuel Hopkins described Daniel Shays in a poem as a "chief" roaming "alone, in Northern woods."[77] Hopkins commanded, "In Fields of Blood let Shays or Lincoln[78] Fall." This grandiose, hyperbolic language depicts Shays as a fantastical figure, not a participant in a measured movement for enfranchisement and economic welfare. Another poem exaggerates Shays' role in the rebellion using a nautical metaphor. A floundering ship represents the United States in the 1780s, and a nearby ship, the Constitution, offers respite. Certain citizens (Shaysites) hesitate to get on board with the Constitution, foolishly questioning

[74]Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, August 5, 1794 in *Founders Online.*
[75]A group of farmers met in Hadley to discuss their issues with the tax and very clearly expressed their devotion to the American experiment. In fact, they considered their resistance essential to maintaining the integrity of the nation: "The Constitution of this Commonwealth has vested in its members of each corporation within its jurisdiction, a right to instructing to their representatives for the removal of any grievance, or grievances they may labour under, from defects in civil government." *Massachusetts Gazette,* January 20, 1784.
[76]"The Virginia Convention: Debates." June 9, 1788, 1072.
[77]*Middlesex Gazette*, January 1, 1788.
[78]General Benjamin Lincoln led the Massachusetts militia that quelled Shays' Rebellion.

whether it is strong enough: "See if her stern Constitution wears, / If so, she'll founder in a thousand years…A ship like her, while vet upon the strand, / Made Shays, her builder, quit his native land."[79] That is, Regulators followed Shays' to the detriment of themselves and their country. In this poem and in Hopkins', caricatures of Daniel Shays as either a monster or a moron obscured the real nature of protest in Massachusetts.[80] The rebellion took on mythical proportions, a signal that some members of the American public were wildly alarmed by any challenge to the new government.

Responses to the Whiskey Rebellion included the same expression of ridicule and terror. Critics characterized Pennsylvanian farmers as a treacherous crew using all sorts of insults: "jealous,"[81] "Malcontent,"[82] "insurgents,"[83] "traitors,"[84] "beasts,"[85] "miserable Germans,"[86] and "White Indians."[87] Even the word "rebel," which ultimately became the generic term for tax resistance, implies violence. At the same time, however, writers belittled rebels with descriptors such as "Ragmuffins of the Earth,"[88] "poor Illiterate rascals,"[89] and an "unreasonable set of

[79]*Lansingburgh Northern Centinel*, December 11, 1787.
[80]Neither poem addresses the fact that Shays may have been angered by the government's failure to compensate him for his military service during the Revolutionary War.
[81]Douglas Bradburn. *The Citizenship Revolution: Politics and the Creation of the American Union, 1774-1804, Jeffersonian America.* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 131.
[82]Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, August 5, 1794 in *Founders Online*.
[83]*Norwich Packet*, September 10, 1794.
[84]Newman, *Fries's Rebellion*, xii.
[85]*Carlisle Gazette,* August 20, 1794.
[86]George Washington claimed that tax resistors preyed "on the minds of the ignorant of jealous," more specifically, recent immigrants (Newman, *Fries's Rebellion*, xii). Some members of the public also used immigrants as scapegoats, asserting that many of the rebels were deceived, "being strangers in our country." (Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Noah Webster, May 20, 1793, in Gibbs, *Memoirs*).
[87]The label of "White Indians" was attributed to 16 rebels at Pigeon Creek, who, disguised in women's clothing, captured a local excise collector, tarred and feathered him, took his horse, and cut his hair. This racist phrase associates the alleged barbarity of Pennsylvanian rebels with Native Americans. (Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 55). Negative, charged labels for Whiskey Rebels have persisted in historigraphical discourse. Forrest McDonald described the protestors in 1979 as "uncouth, drunken, lazy, brutal, wasteful, and contentious," "no better than carnivorous animals of a superior rank." Jacob E. Cooke wrote in 1964 that the leaders of the rebellion were "self-seeking politicians." (Boyd, *The Whiskey Rebellion,* 19, 23).
[88]Brown, "Shays's Rebellion and Its Aftermath," 602.
[89]Ibid.

fellows."[90] One Pennsylvania newspaper published a satirical soliloquy aimed at Whiskey Rebels that both vilifies and mocks them. The author proclaims, "When thou commandeth, they rise against all law and government, and are valiant, even unto the shedding of blood; yea, their brother's blood!"[91] According to the article, "The tears of the orphan move thee not." These inflated statements imply that the Whiskey Rebels intentionally and gleefully carried out murder, of which there is no record. Yet in this same soliloquy, the author also downplays the situation, depicting the protestors as a crowd "filled with" whiskey and falling "flat on their faces."[92] By presenting Whiskey Rebels as befuddled alcoholics, this soliloquist soothes fears about the transformative power of popular protest. Overall, this source expresses a sense of panic that carried over from Shays' Rebellion.

"'Tis time to assume a different tone": Distinct Responses to the Whiskey Rebellion

Although the response to the Whiskey Rebellion shared some qualities with the response to Shays', the stakes of protest had undeniably changed. By the 1790s, a system of authority had taken shape, guided by the Constitution and dominated by two political parties, namely Federalists and Democratic-Republicans. Federalists generally feared that protest against the government would destroy the progress America had made since the revolution. In their eyes, the Constitution permitted them to suppress local uprisings, with force if necessary. Meanwhile, Democratic-Republicans began to question the extensive power of the federal government.[93] In their eyes, protest was essential to maintaining the liberties extoled during the American Revolution. Historian John R. Howe summarizes this dynamic of disagreement: "In the eyes of Jeffersonians, Federalists became monarchists or aristocrats bent on destroying America's

[90]*National Gazette,* May 14, 1792.
[91]*Carlisle Gazette,* August 20, 1794.
[92]Ibid.
[93]Kohn, "The Washington Administration's Decision to Crush the Whiskey Rebellion," 568.

republican experiment. And Jeffersonians became in Federalist minds social levelers and anarchists, proponents of mob rule."[94] As a result of this conflict, each party interpreted the Whiskey Rebellion very differently.

Federalist leader Alexander Hamilton doubled down on opposition to tax protestors. He argued that it was necessary "to exert the full force of the Law against the Offenders," and that if the government took no action, "the spirit of disobedience will naturally extend and the Government will be prostrate. Moderation enough has been shewn: 'tis time to assume a different tone."[95] Hamilton felt that force would make the government more impressive and more permanent.[96] Washington also denounced the Whisky Rebels, blaming Democratic-Republican societies for allegedly spreading misinformation.[97] By portraying tax resistors as a violent enemy associated with Jeffersonians, Federalists encouraged the public to take their party's side.[98]

Some of the press echoed Federalist arguments and depicted the resistance in Pennsylvania as an attempt to dismember the United States. A report in Connecticut's *Norwich Packet* proclaims, "Their leaders, the more sober and influential men" support the tax. The article demands that the insurgents follow suit: "This attempt at reconciliation will UNITE the people of America in one phalanx to support the laws of the country."[99] The tone of this statement leans Federalist, as it condemns any deviation from the law and implicitly condones a forceful stifling of rebellion using a battle metaphor ("phalanx" means a body of troops). New Jersey newspapers had a similar attitude. One of them published a letter from Bedford,

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[94]Howe, "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s," 150.
[95]Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, September 1, 1792, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, vol. 11, *16 August 1792–15 January 1793*, ed. Christine Sternberg Patrick. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002, pp. 59–62.
[96]Kohn, "The Washington Administration's Decision to Crush the Whiskey Rebellion," 582.
[97]Douglas, *The Citizenship Revolution,* 219.
[98]Newman, *Fries's Rebellion*, xii.
[99]*Norwich Packet*, September 18, 1794.

Pennsylvania, which reported that the "WHISKEY BOYS"[100] must be conquered, declaring, "We shall march into the country, and their leaders and principals must suffer or abandon their homes."[101]

Meanwhile, Democratic-Republicans assumed a much different tone in support of the Whiskey Rebels. As a leader of the party, Jefferson cemented his solidarity with tax resistors. He had previously condemned Shaysites for enacting "absolutely unjustifiable" violence, but in the 1790s, he favored farmers.[102] When Washington made a proclamation against the rebels, Jefferson privately retracted his support for the administration.[103] In letters to James Madison, he disputed the government's choice to send a militia to Pennsylvania, writing, "I wish much to see the speech, & know how such an armament against people at their ploughs, will be represented, and an appeal to arms justified before that to the law had been tried & *proved* effectual."[104] Jefferson perceived protestors as an unproblematic group, admirably farming with their "ploughs," and suddenly attacked by an unnecessary "armament." While Hamilton worried that the federal government did not appear forceful enough, Jefferson suggested that the federal government had become *too* powerful. Hamilton believed the Constitution endorsed the squashing of rebellion; Jefferson questioned whether that was true.

Democratic-Republicans in the broader public were also worried about the government's use of militias, feeling they were unstable, expensive, and pointless.[105] The Republican Society of Baltimore argued that the rebels were probably people who, "setting out with the purest zeal

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[100]The term "Boys" infantilizes protestors by labeling them as younger than they actually were (most of them were middle-aged).
[101]*New Jersey State Gazette,* October 29, 1794.
[102]Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, January 30, 1787, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd., vol. 11 (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 92-97.
[103]Douglas, *The Citizenship Revolution,* 109.
[104]Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, October 30, 1794, in *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. Thomas A. Mason, Robert A. Rutland, and Jeanne K. Sisson., vol. 15 (Charlottesville: University Press), p. 366.
[105]Kohn, "The Washington Administration's Decision to Crush the Whiskey Rebellion," 574.

for the Liberties of Mankind" had unfortunately been "corrupted in their progress."[106] Unlike Hamilton and other Federalists, who perceived the Whiskey Rebels as diabolical criminals, this organization recognized their more noble intentions. These Democratic-Republicans insisted that "The persecution of the good cannot last long. Popular frenzy will blow over and real virtue, like the sun" will "set only to rise with greater glory, in a happier country!" In their opinion, there was no need to send a massive militia, since the resistance would inevitably pass over like the wind.

Some authors in the press expressed explicit support for the protestors, violence and all. A farmer wrote in the *Morning Star* that he initially considered the riot at Pittsburgh a "lawless rabble," but that he changed his mind once he learned whiskey was Pennsylvanians' "common drink."[107] "Is it not treatment that we should resort ourselves even to the grasping of the sword? Is it not I confess the Americans have not that love of equality which ought to actuate every breath?" he asked. The farmer concluded, "If they are unequally taxed with the rest of us, I wish them success." This man's change of heart speaks to a broader transformation in what Americans considered as acceptable forms of protest. With the ratification of the Constitution and the introduction of political parties, disagreement over dissent intensified. Among many competing interests, the greater good and how to achieve it became increasingly elusive.

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In many ways, the Whiskey Rebellion was a repeat of Shays' Rebellion. Impoverished farmers in both Massachusetts and Pennsylvania objected to high taxes and other policies that disadvantaged them financially and politically. Despite their geographical and temporal differences, they shared a conviction that they had the right to protest the actions of the

[106] *Aurora General Advertiser*, December 17, 1794.
[107] *Morning Star,* September 2, 1794.

government. Regulators attended meetings, signed petitions, and published letters in the press, all with the hope that their outcries would incite change. Poor and isolated as they were, farmers in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania believed they were part of a democratic society in which their concerns would be taken seriously. Unfortunately for them, the government did not substantively respond, which incited violence. Tax resistors, eager to prolong the subversive spirit of the American Revolution, attacked collectors, distillers, courthouses, mansions, arsenals— anyone and anywhere that represented oppression to them. These two comparable rebellions are a window into early American history— a period of astonishing optimism and deadly discord.

However, Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellion diverged in many ways, from their causes to their consequences. Although less than a decade passed between these rebellions, the reasons why farmers protested and the way the public perceived their actions highly differed. Eastern Massachusetts residents were concerned about the absence of an efficient, equitable government on the local, state, and federal level. Emboldened by the unstable political context of the 1780s, they inserted themselves into debates over policy. Government officials overwhelmingly condemned the rebellion, a testament to how threatened they felt by popular protest at the time. After all, the last insurrection they had witnessed (or in some cases, participated in), the American Revolution, had successfully overturned British rule. Many of these politicians hoped the Constitution would eliminate democratic disorder, but the Whiskey Rebellion showed it would not. The Constitution gave the government the power to impose taxes, but it also gave citizens the power to challenge that policy. These conflicting variables complicated the definition of rebellion in the 1790s and raised the stakes for the government officials who were deciding how to respond. Rather than doing away with civic discord, the Constitution catalyzed it.

In the years following Shays' and the Whiskey Rebellions, popular protest continued to evolve. Fries' Rebellion in 1799, for example, was in reaction to a tax on eastern Pennsylvania homes. Residents vehemently resisted the tax, especially the absurdity of charging based on the number of windows. They were also frustrated by the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts, which limited speech critical of the government. Remarkably, the same people who marched as part of the Watermelon Army[108] to quell the Whiskey Rebellion started protesting tax laws themselves. They did not employ ritualistic violence as Whiskey Rebels had; instead, they relied solely on peaceful methods. In taverns, they toasted to liberty, sipping, ironically, on whiskey.[109] Kirchenleutes' adaptation of protest demonstrates that rebellion in the United States is an open-ended action. So long as Americans continue to wrestle with the meaning of their founding documents, they will also continue to redetermine the meaning of protest.

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[108]The force called upon to quell the Whiskey Rebellion gained the name of the "Watermelon Army" because they often fed themselves with stolen produce from Western Pennsylvania farms. Barbara Rasmussen, "Whiskey Rebellion," in *e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia*, November 17, 2020.
[109]Newman, *Fries's Rebellion*, 44.

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