

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Letter to Henry Lee in Congress on Shays' Rebellion

GEORGE WASHINGTON

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As noted briefly in the last selection, George Washington's thoughts about the need for prompt constitutional reform may have been strengthened by the outbreak, in western Massachusetts, of Shays' Rebellion in the early autumn of 1786. Against a background of economic depression, newly imposed high state taxes, tight credit, no paper currency, and widespread judicial proceedings for tax and debt collection, groups of farmers—some of them veterans of the Revolutionary War who were missing back pay for their service—petitioned and protested, then seized confiscated property, later shut down several county courts, and, in January of 1787, took up arms and mounted an attack on the federal armory at Springfield, an attack that was put down by a specially recruited and privately funded militia. On October 31, 1786, George Washington offered his views of the rebellion in a letter, written from Mount Vernon, to Revolutionary War general Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee (1756–1818), then serving in the Continental Congress. Although brief, the letter reveals some of Washington's general ideas about human nature, government, and the rule of law.

Why is Washington distressed by Shays' Rebellion? Does he finally believe that "mankind, when left to themselves, are unfit for their own [self-]government"? What, according to the letter, is Washington's view of the purpose of government? How should grievances against, and defects in, the government be handled? Can you connect Washington's thoughts in this letter to his view of the Constitution, and in particular, its fifth article, the provision for Amendment?

My dear Sir,

I am indebted to you for your several favors of the 1st, 11th, and 17th of this instant, and shall reply to them in the order of their dates; but first let me thank you for the interesting communications imparted by them.

The picture which you have exhibited, and the accounts which are published of the commotions and temper of numerous bodies in the Eastern States, are equally to be lamented and deprecated. They exhibit a melancholy proof of what our trans-Atlantic foe has predicted; and of another thing perhaps, which is still more to be regretted, and is yet

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more unaccountable, that mankind when left to themselves are unfit for their own Government. I am mortified beyond expression when I view the clouds that have spread over the brightest morn that ever dawned upon any Country. In a word, I am lost in amazement when I behold what intrigue, the interested views of desperate characters, ignorance and jealousy of the minor part, are capable of effecting, as a scourge on the major part of our fellow Citizens of the Union; for it is hardly to be supposed that the great body of the people, though they will not act, can be so shortsighted, or enveloped in darkness, as not to see rays of a distant sun through all this mist of intoxication and folly.

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You talk, my good Sir, of employing influence to appease the present tumults in Massachusetts. I know not where that influence is to be found; and if attainable, that it would be a proper remedy for the disorders. Influence is no Government. Let us have one by which our lives, liberties and properties will be secured; or let us know the worst at once. Under these impressions, my humble opinion is, that there is a call for decision. Know precisely what the insurgents aim at. If they have *real* grievances, redress them if possible; or acknowledge the justice of them, and your inability to do it in the present moment. If they have not, employ the force of government against them at once. If this is inadequate, *all* will be convinced, that the superstructure is bad, or wants support. To be more exposed in the eyes of the world, and more contemptible than we already are, is hardly possible. To delay one or the other of these, is to exasperate on the one hand, or to give confidence on the other, and will add to their numbers; for, like snow-balls, such bodies increase by every movement, unless there is something in the way to obstruct and crumble them before the weight is too great and irresistible.

These are my sentiments. Precedents are dangerous things; let the reins of government then be braced and held with a steady hand, and every violation of the Constitution be reprehended: if defective, let it be amended, but not suffered to be trampled upon whilst it has an existence.

With respect to the navigation of the Mississippi, you already know my sentiments thereon: they have been uniformly the same, and, as I have observed to you in a former letter, are controverted by one consideration *only* of weight, and that is the operation which the conclusion of it may have on the minds of the western settlers, who will not consider the subject in a relative point of view or on a comprehensive scale, and may be influenced by the demagogues of the country to acts of extravagance and desperation, under a popular declamation, that their interests are sacrificed. Colonel Mason, at present, is in a fit of the gout; what [his] sentiments on the subject are, I know not, nor whether he

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will be able to attend the Assembly during the present Session. For some reasons, however, (which need not be mentioned,) I am inclined to believe he will advocate the navigation of that river. But in all matters of great national moment, the only true line of conduct, in my opinion, is, dispassionately to compare the advantages and disadvantages of the measure proposed, and decide from the balance. The lesser evil, where there is a choice of them, should always yield to the greater. What benefits (more than we now enjoy) are to be obtained by such a Treaty as you have delineated with Spain, I am not enough of a commercial man to give any opinion on. The China came to hand without much damage and I thank you for your attention in the procuring & forwarding it to me. Mrs. Washington joins me in best wishes for Mrs. Lee and yourself.

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