

“Letter from Benjamin Lincoln to George Washington,” (1786)

Annotation:

Historians once characterized the 1780s as the "critical period" in American history, when the new nation, saddled with an inadequate system of government, suffered crippling economic, political, and foreign policy problems that threatened its independence. Although it is possible to exaggerate the country's difficulties during the first years of independence, there can be no doubt that the country did face severe challenges.

One problem was the threat of government bankruptcy. The nation owed \$160 million in war debts and the Congress had no power to tax and the states rarely sent in more than half of Congress's requisitions. The national currency was worthless. To help pay the government's debt, several members of Congress proposed the imposition of a five percent duty on imports. But because the Articles of Confederation required unanimous approval of legislation, a single state, Rhode Island, was able to block the measure.

The country also faced grave foreign policy problems. Spain closed the Mississippi River to American commerce in 1784 and secretly conspired with Westerners (including the famous frontiersman Daniel Boone) to acquire the area that would eventually become Kentucky and Tennessee. Britain retained military posts in the Northwest, in violation of the peace treaty ending the Revolution, and tried to persuade Vermont to become a Canadian province.

The economy also posed serious problems. The Revolution had a disruptive impact especially on the South's economy. Planters lost about 60,000 slaves (including about 25,000 slaves in South Carolina and 5,000 in Georgia). New British trade regulations--the Orders in Council of 1783--prohibited the sale of many American agricultural products in the British West Indies, one of the country's leading markets, and required commodities to be shipped on British vessels. Massachusetts shipbuilders, who had constructed about 125 ships a year before the war, built only 25 ships a year after the war. Merchants, who had purchased large quantities of British goods after the war, found it difficult to sell these commodities to hard-pressed Americans. States protected local interests by imposing tariffs on interstate commerce.

Yet for all these problems, it seems clear in retrospect that the 1780s marked a crucial period in the development of the American economy. Output by farmers increased sharply during the 1780s--a remarkable development given the absence of any new farm machinery. Farmers also significantly shifted their investment away from cattle and farm implements to more liquid forms of wealth, such as bonds and mortgages. Meanwhile, a growing number of farm households began to produce goods previously imported from Britain. At the same time, merchants, freed of British trade restrictions, had opened commerce with Asia. But to many Americans, the signs of economic recovery remained faint.

Economic conditions were particularly troubled in Massachusetts. The British Orders in Council of 1783 dealt a severe blow to the state's agricultural, shipping, and shipbuilding trades. Making matters worse, the state legislature had voted to pay off the state's revolutionary war debt in three years. Between 1783 and 1786, taxes on land rose more than 60 percent between.

Desperate farmers in western Massachusetts demanded cuts in property taxes and adoption of stay laws to postpone farm foreclosures. The lower house of the Massachusetts legislature passed relief measures in 1786, but eastern creditors persuaded the upper house to reject the package.

Local courts started to seize the property, farm implements, and even the furniture and clothing of farmers like Daniel Shays (1747-1825), a Revolutionary war veteran. In late August 1786, a thousand farmers in Northampton County shut down the country court. Frightened state leaders in Boston appealed for public support. Easterners raised 5000 pounds sterling to send an army led by the former Continental general Benjamin Lincoln to suppress the rebellion.

In January 1787, Shays and his followers attacked the federal arsenal at Springfield, but were driven off. In early February the army routed the rebels. These setbacks, along with tax relief from the assembly and amnesty for the

rebellion's leaders, ended the uprising. Shays' Rebellion, however, held broader significance. It convinced national leaders that only a strong central government could save the republic from chaos. Benjamin Lincoln (1733-1810), who would soon lead an army into the western parts of Massachusetts to put down Shays' Rebellion, assesses the causes and significance of upheaval to his former comrade-in-arms, George Washington.

In his letter, Lincoln refers to Washington's decision to resign his membership in the Society of Cincinnati. Many people condemned this organization as "un-republican" because membership was limited to former Revolutionary War officers and their sons, which made it appear to be both hereditary and elitist.

Full Text:

I wish your Excellency had not in so decided a manner expressed your determination to retire from the head of the order of Cincinnati. I shall communicate your address to our delegates to the next general meeting and to our State Society.

I have made three trips into the eastern country this year, partly on public & partly on private business.... It is a country which abounds with fish of almost every kind and the waters are covered with fowls. The land, will be friendly to the growth of wheat, rye, barley, oats, hemp & flax, but not much so to Indian corn. Indeed I am so pleased with the country that I frequently wish my self there where I might be free from the present noise and tumult but I cannot leave this part of the state at present, for notwithstanding the resolutions I had formed ever to decline entering again into public life I was persuaded by my friend to take the command of the first division of militia in this state. I am now busily employed in organizing it &c. This business which would at all times be a duty especially so now, when the state is convulsed and the hands of government, in some parts of it, are cast off.

I cannot be surprised therefore to hear our Excellency inquire "are your people getting mad? Are we to have the goodly fabric that eight years were spent in rearing pulled over our heads? What is the cause of all the high commotions? When and how will they end?" Although I cannot pretend to give a full and complete answer to them yet I will make some observations which shall involve in them the best answers to the several questions in my power to give.

"Are your people getting mad?" Many of them appear to be absolutely so if an attempt to annihilate our present constitution and dissolved the present government can be considered as evidence of insanity.

"Are we to have the goodly fabric that eight years were spent in rearing pulled over our heads?" There is I think great danger that it will be unless the tottering system shall be supported by arms and even then a government which has no basis than the point of the bayonet, should one be suspended thereon, is so totally different from ye one established at least in ideal, by the different States that if we might have recourse to the sad experiment of arms it can hardly be said that we have supported "the goodly fabric," in this view of the matter it may be "pulled over our heads" this probably will be the case for there doth not appear to be virtue enough among the people to preserve a perfect republican government.

"What is the cause of this commotion?" The causes are too many and too various for me to pretend to trace...them out. I therefore shall only mention of them which appear to be the principal ones among those I may rank the case with which property was acquired, with which credit was obtained, and debts were discharged in the time of the war. Hence people were diverted from their usual industry and economy a luxurious mode of living crept into vogue and soon that income, by which the expenses of all should as much as possible be limited was no longer considered as having anything to do with the question at what expense families ought to live, or rather which they ought not to have exceeded. The moment the day arrived when all discovered that things were fast returning back into their original channel, that the industrious were to reap the fruits of his own industry, and that the indolent and improvident would soon experience the evils of their own idleness & sloth, very many startled at the idea and instead of attempting to subject themselves to such a line of conduct, which duty to the public, and a regard to their own happiness evidently pointed out, they contemplated how they should evade the necessity of reforming their system and of changing their exorbitant present mode of life. They just complained of commutation, of the weight of the public taxes, of the insupportable debt of the union, of the scarcity of money, and of the cruelty of suffering the private creditors to call for their just dues. This catalogue of complaints was listened to by many. County

conventions were formed and the cry for paper money, subject to a depreciation as was declared by some of their public resolves, was the clamour of the day. But notwithstanding instructions to members of the General Court and petitions from different quarters the majority of that body were opposed to the measures. Failing of their point the disaffected attempted, and in many instances succeeded, to stop the courts of law and to suspect the operation of government until they could, by force, sap the foundations of our constitution and bring into the legislature creatures of their own by which they would make a government at pleasure and make it subservient to all their purposes and when an end should be put thereby to public & private debts the agrarian law might follow with ease. In short the want of industry, economy, & common honesty seem to be the causes of the present commotions. It is impossible for me to determine "when and how they will and end" as I see little possibility that they will be brought to a period and the dignity of government supported without bloodshed. When a single drop is drawn the most prophetic Spirit will not, in my opinion, be able to determine when it will cease flowing.

The proportion of debtors run high in this State. Too many of them are against the government. The men of property, and the holders of the public securities are generally abettors of our present constitution, but a few of them have been in the field, and it remains quite problematical whether they will in time fully discover their own interests as they shall be induced thereby to lend for a season out of their property for the security of the remainder. If these classes of men should not turn out on a broad scale with spirit and the insurgents should be the field & keep it our constitutions overturned and the federal government broken upon by lopping off one branch essential to the well being of the whole. This cannot be submitted to by the United States with impunity. They must send force to our aid, when this shall be shall be collected they will be equal to all purposes.

The insurgents have now every advantage if we move in force against them[.] We move under the direction of the civil authority and we cannot act but by the direction of it, after the riot act has been read & one hour has elapsed. They may disperse if they think proper, the next day they assemble again in another place and so they may conduct themselves with perfect security from day to day until a favorable moment should offer, those well affected to government are worn out, for the insurgents to commence their attack. Had the last general court declared the disaffected counties in a state of rebellion they would have placed the conflict upon a different footing and the rebels might have been soon crushed. They did not do it, what they will do at their next session, which will be in February next, is quite uncertain. And must remain at present, with the time when & manner how these commotions are to end, concealed from me in the unturned pages of...futuraity.

P.S., January 21, 1787

The above observations were made some time since as will appear by the date of them and would have been forwarded at the time had there not then appeared some disposition in the executive to call into example the power delegated for the support of the authority of the government. They have just determined upon the measure and have ordered out four thousand militia and have appointed me to command them and have given me powers to call for such future aid as I may think necessary to effect the objects of my commission. I am thus far on my march toward the disaffected counties, viz. Worcester, Hampshire & Berkshire. It has been given out that Shays would stop the court to be holden at Worcester on the 23rd. I think he will not be there tho it is said that he is assembling his troops at different places. If he should not be at Worcester I expect to march the troops to the county of Berkshire to take up the insurgents to give confidence to the well affected and to convince those of an other character how much they have been imposed on when they have been made to believe that no troops would turn out in favor of government.

The gentlemen of property and men of influence have come forth fully on this occasion and have loaned a considerable sum of money to government. I cannot but hope that we shall be able to crush the opposition & that the people will be disposed to submit to government and enjoy undisturbed in [the] future the blessings of it. When ever I mention military matters I feel a responsibility to your excellency and shall when any thing turns up of importance do my self the pleasure to communicate it.

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