



## After Shays' Rebellion

Advisor: Timothy H. Breen, William Smith Mason Professor of American History  
Northwestern University, National Humanities Center Fellow  
Copyright National Humanities Center, 2015

### Framing Question

How did the aftermath of Shays' Rebellion reflect the republican nature of the American government, especially the right to vote?

### Understanding

Shays' Rebellion (1786–1787) and its aftermath reflected more than just problems within the Articles of Confederation government. Reaction to Massachusetts' treatment of the rebels following the insurrection served as a reminder to those in power of the republican nature of the American government. It emphasized the importance of the right to vote as a key element of the reciprocal duties between the government and its citizens.

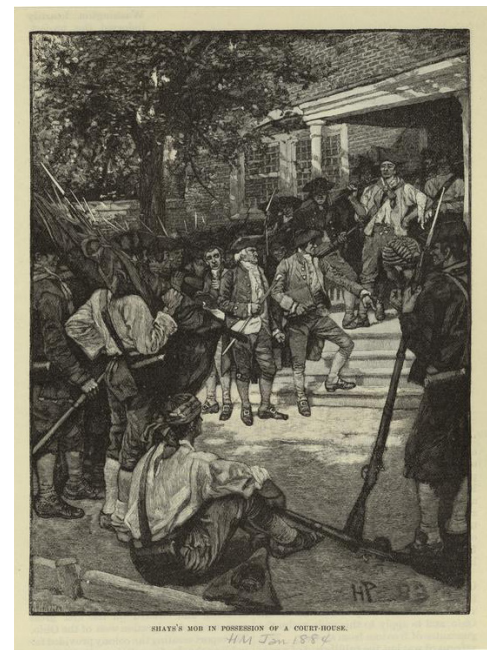
### Text

[Letter from General Benjamin Lincoln to General George Washington, 1787.](#)

### Background

In 1786 the United States was only three years old, and the economies of the new states were in turmoil. Although many states were able to recover from the Depression of 1784, Massachusetts, whose state economy was based on maritime trade focused around her eastern ports, was especially hard hit. After the Revolution, Britain restricted trade with the US, and countries were skeptical about the strength of American paper currency. Foreign nations demanded economic exchange in hard currency (gold and silver coin), and the eastern merchants of Massachusetts scrambled to comply. In addition, Massachusetts charged high taxes, payable only in coin, to its citizens to help pay its large Revolutionary War debt. Farmers in central and western Massachusetts resisted, as many were in debt, having borrowed to purchase their farms. Since these farmers rarely saw coin, generally using barter for economic exchange, many lost their farms or faced jail time for failure to pay their taxes.

Under threat of foreclosures and debtor's prison, farmers fought back through special meetings, protests, closing courts that were jailing debtors, and freeing prisoners already jailed for non-payment. The rebels called themselves Regulators, committed to regulating the excesses of the government, and to give the movement validity they used many of the same strategies the colonists had used against the British 13 years earlier. Daniel Shays (1747–1825),



Pyle & Hayman, "Shays's mob in possession of a court-house"

farmer and former Continental Army captain, rose as the leader of the rebels. The Shaysites (the name given to Shays' followers) included veterans, landholders, officeholders, militiamen, and Moses Sash, a free African American who became one of Shays' captains. Even though the Shaysites saw themselves as reformers representing the voice of the people and with a direct connection to the patriots of the Revolution, the Governor and others saw them as dangerous radicals, challenging the new and still fragile government.

### Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

As resistance continued, many members of the state militia sent to stop the Shaysites ended up joining them, raising the question of whether the militia was an arm of the government or an expression of the will of the people. The Massachusetts legislature responded, passing an amnesty law in November, 1786, for those who had interfered with the courts. But they also passed the Militia Act, threatening death to anyone who took up arms against Massachusetts and suspending the writ of habeas corpus until July, 1787. Massachusetts governor James Bowdoin ordered the arrest of rebel leaders and organized an army (funded by wealthy Boston merchants) to put down the Rebellion. Nonetheless, resistance continued until the rebels were finally defeated in February, 1787, by a force under the command of General Benjamin Lincoln, author of this letter.

In this lesson General Lincoln comments on the punishment given to the rebels. He speaks of the Disqualification Act, passed by the Massachusetts Legislature in February, 1787, that outlined the conditions under which most men could obtain a pardon. Men were required to surrender their guns and take an oath of allegiance, at which time their names would be sent to the clerks in their home towns. They lost their rights of citizenship — they could not serve as jurors, become a member of the town or state government, or enter certain professions (school master, inn-keeper, or tavern keeper) for three years. They also lost the right to vote in town elections, and if they broke any of these rules, they would forfeit their pardons.

What happened to the Shaysites? Most of them were pardoned; eighteen men were condemned to hang, but only two were actually executed. Shays himself escaped to Vermont, was later pardoned, and died in New York in 1825. Governor Bowdoin was defeated in the election of 1787, and the new legislature cut taxes and stopped foreclosures. While Shays' Rebellion never seriously threatened to overthrow the government of Massachusetts, in the context of the Annapolis Convention, which occurred during the Rebellion, and calls for the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 that were already in motion, it reminded political leaders of the importance of the relationship between citizens and their government.

In this passage, divided into four excerpts, you will hear General Lincoln speak of the role of government in times of unrest and argue that the strict punishments by Massachusetts — especially the loss of the right to vote — will have unintended negative consequences. In excerpt one Lincoln explores his thoughts on the responsibilities of government in times of popular unrest, and in excerpt two he explains the critical importance of justice tempered with mercy. In excerpt three he investigates why denying the former rebels the right to vote is not in the government's best interests, and in the final excerpt Lincoln puts forth reasons why the former rebels should retain the franchise. As you analyze the text, pay attention to Lincoln's reasoning and why he believes that even the rebels should be allowed to vote.



*Benjamin Lincoln, 1733–1810*

### Activity: Vocabulary

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



# Text Analysis

## Excerpt 1

*What does Lincoln believe are the responsibilities of the government in times of unrest? What should be the relationship between government and citizens?*

When a State whose Constitution is like ours, has been convulsed by intestine broils; when the bands of Government have in any part of it been thrown off, and Rebellion has for a time stalked unmolested: when the most affectionate neighbours become in consequence hereof, divided in sentiment on the question in dispute, and warmly espouse the opinions they hold; when even the Father arms against the Son, and the son against the Father, the powers of Government may be exerted; and crush the Rebellion, but to reclaim its citizens, to bring them back fully to a sense of their duty, and to establish anew those principles, which lead them to embrace the Government with affection, must require the wisdom, the patience & the address of the Legislature.

Love and Fear are the bonds of civil Society. Love is the noblest incentive to obedience; a Government supported hereon is certainly the most desirable, and ensures the first degrees of happiness which can be derived from civil compact. Such a Government as this is always wounded, when any thing shall exist which makes it necessary to apply to the fears of the governed. This never will be done by a wise administration, unless the General Good renders it indispensable, and it will be removed the first moment it can be, consistently with the common safety.

1. Benjamin Lincoln begins this excerpt by describing current times. What has occurred in the recent past which has disturbed the community?

2. Who was involved in this event? How closely did it affect individuals?

3. In this type of uprising, what does Lincoln say the government may do?

4. According to Lincoln, the government has two responsibilities. What are they?

5. What branch of government is responsible to make sure that the rebels “embrace the Government with affection”?

6. What two bonds of civil society does Lincoln believe exist, and how do these bonds relate to each other?

7. Which of the two bonds is most desirable within a government? Why?

8. When and how does Lincoln believe government should use fear?

## Excerpt 2

The spirit of Rebellion is now nearly crushed in this State, and the opposition to Government is hourly decreasing. This therefore is the most critical moment yet seen. Punishment must be such, and be so far extended as thereby others shall be deterred from repeating such acts of outrage in future, and care must be taken that they do not extend beyond a certain degree the necessity of which must be acknowledged by all. In her right hand Government must hold out such terms of mercy in the hour of success, with such evident marks of a disposition to forgive as shall apply to the feelings of the delinquents, beget in them such sentiments of gratitude and love by which they will be led to embrace with the highest cordiality that Government which they have attempted to trample under foot. This example in Government will have its influence upon Individuals, and be productive of the best Effects among contending Neighbours & divided Families.

These are sentiments which I suppose have their foundation in truth; and in the belief of them, I have been led to examine with some attention the late Act of the General Court, by which certain Characters are for a time disfranchised. Although I think the conduct of the Legislature will make a rich page in History, yet I cannot but suppose, that if the number of the disfranchised had been less, the public peace would have been equally safe, and the general good promoted.

9. Why does Lincoln consider the period immediately after the Rebellion “the most critical”?

10. How does he describe appropriate punishment for the rebels?

11. Why should the government show mercy to the rebels at this time?



12. How will a governmental show of mercy affect individuals?

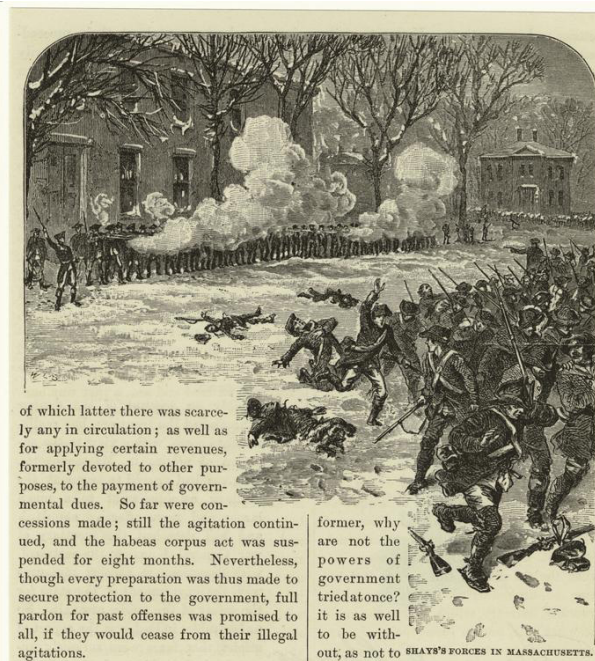
13. In the last paragraph of this excerpt Lincoln refers to a Massachusetts law that had recently denied the rebels their right to vote (The Disqualification Act, described in the Lesson Background). What is his opinion of this law?

### Excerpt 3

The Act includes so great a description of persons that in its operation many Towns will be disfranchised. This will injure the whole, for multiplied disorders must be experienced under such circumstances.

The people who have been in Arms against Government and their Abettors, have complained, and do now complain that grievances do exist, and that they ought to have redress. We have invariably said to them, you are wrong in flying to Arms; you should seek redress in a Constitutional way, & wait the decision of the Legislature. These observations were undoubtedly just, but will they not now complain, and say, that we have cut them off from all hope of redress, from that quarter, for we have denied them a representation in that Legislative body, by whose Laws they must be governed.

While they are in this situation, they never will be reconciled to Government, nor will they submit to the terms of it, from any other Motive than fear excited by a constant military armed force extended over them. While these distinctions are made, the subjects of them will remain invidious, and their will be no affection existing among Inhabitants of the same Neighbourhood, or Families, where they have thought and acted differently. Those who have been opposers to Government will view with a jealous eye, those who have been supporters of it, and consider them as the cause which produced the disqualifying act, and who are now keeping it alive. Many never will submit to it, they will rather leave the State than do it. If we could reconcile ourselves to this loss, and on this account make no objection, yet these people will leave behind them near and dear connections who will feel themselves wounded through their Friends.



William Sheppard, "Shays's forces in Massachusetts"

14. What does Lincoln see as the results of The Disqualification Act in denying rebels the right to vote?

15. Why did citizens protest against the government?

16. How did the government suggest that citizens deal with their complaints?

17. If citizens are denied their right to vote as punishment for taking up arms, how will this prevent them from “seek(ing) redress in a Constitutional way”?

18. How does Lincoln predict the rebels will respond as long as they are denied the vote?

19. How would this disfranchisement affect communities?

#### **Excerpt 4**

*Lincoln explains why the former rebels should retain their rights to vote.*

The influence of these people is so fully checked that we have nothing to apprehend from them now, but their Individual Votes. When this is the case, to express fears from that quarter is impolitic. Admit that some of these very people should obtain a seat in the Assembly the next year, we have nothing to fear from the measure: so far from that I think it would produce the most salutary Effects.

For my own part I wish, that those Insurgents who should secure a pardon, were at liberty to exercise all the rights of good Citizens; for I believe it to be the only way which can be adopted to make them good Members of Society, and to reconcile them to that Government under which we wish them to live. If we are now afraid of their weight and they are for a given time deprived of certain privileges, they will come forth hereafter with redoubled vigour. I think we have much more to fear from a certain supineness which has seized on a great proportion of our Citizens, who have been totally inattentive to the exercise of those rights conveyed to them by the Constitution of this Commonwealth. If the good people of the State will not exert themselves in the appointment of proper Characters for the Executive and Legislative branches of Government, no disfranchising acts will ever make us a happy & a well governed people.

20. Why does Lincoln believe “we have nothing to apprehend from them now, but their Individual Votes”?

21. What does Lincoln believe should happen to the rebels? Why?

22. What does Lincoln believe may happen if the rebels are treated too strictly?

23. From what group of citizens does Lincoln believe comes the most danger, even more than the rebels?

24. Describe the relationship Lincoln wants to see between citizens of a republic and their government.

**Activity: Review**

Review the central points of the textual analysis.



# Glossary

**convulsed:** violently disturbed  
**intestine broils:** internal upheavals  
**espouse:** fully support  
**indispensable:** absolutely necessary  
**deterred:** prevented  
**disposition:** tendency  
**delinquents:** rebels  
**beget:** generate  
**disfranchised:** denied the vote  
**rich:** strong, vivid  
**abettors:** supporters  
**redress:** compensation  
**reconciled:** reunited  
**invidious:** envious  
**checked:** stopped  
**apprehend:** to fear  
**impolitic:** unwise  
**salutary:** beneficial  
**insurgents:** rebels  
**redoubled:** renewed  
**supiness:** passivity  
**exert:** make efforts

## Text

“To George Washington from Benjamin Lincoln,” Founders Online, National Archives (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-04-02-0374-0002> [last update: 2015-02-20]). Source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Confederation Series, vol. 4, 2 April 1786–31 January 1787, ed. W. W. Abbot. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995, pp. 418–436.

## Images

- Pyle, Howard, & Hayman, A. *Shays's mob in possession of a court-house*. 1884–01 From the New York State Education Department. Internet. Mid-Manhattan Picture Collection. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-f64e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> (accessed November 19, 2014).
- Benjamin Lincoln 1733-1810 Charles Willson Peale, from life, c. 1781–1783. Independence NHP. INDE 14097. [http://www.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/revwar/image\\_gal/indeimg/lincoln.html](http://www.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/revwar/image_gal/indeimg/lincoln.html) (accessed March, 2015).
- Sheppard, William L. *Shays's forces in Massachusetts*. 1882 From the New York State Education Department. Internet. Mid-Manhattan Picture Collection. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-f61f-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> (accessed November 19, 2014).