

Guiding Questions

Directions: In pairs answer the following questions in complete sentences after reading Jefferson's Letter. Be sure to restate the question in your answers.

1. What are the pros and cons of a strong central government?
2. Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. Do you think he wanted to see America form a strong central government? Why or why not?
3. According to Jefferson, have the colonies been peaceful or chaotic? Support your answer with evidence from the document.
4. Jefferson thinks the people at the Constitutional Convention are overreacting to Shays' Rebellion. What does he worry they might do as they write the new Constitution? (*Note: this answer is not in the document; you need to think*).
5. What does Jefferson mean when he says, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants?"

Shays' Rebellion Textbook Excerpt: The American Vision

The property owners' fears seemed justified when a full-scale rebellion, known as Shays' Rebellion, erupted in Massachusetts in 1786. The rebellion started when the government of Massachusetts decided to raise taxes instead of issuing paper money to pay off its debts. The taxes fell most heavily on farmers, particularly poor farmers in the western part of the state. As the recession grew worse, many found it impossible to pay their taxes as well as their mortgages and other debts. Those who could not pay often faced the loss of their farms.

Angry at the legislature's indifference to their plight, in late August 1786, farmers in western Massachusetts rebelled. They closed down several county courthouses to prevent farm foreclosures, and then marched on the state supreme court. At this point, Daniel Shays, a former captain in the Continental Army who was now a bankrupt farmer, emerged as one of the rebellion's leaders.

In January 1787, Shays and about 1,200 farmers headed to a state arsenal intending to seize weapons before marching on Boston. In response, the governor sent more than 4,000 volunteers under the command of General Benjamin Lincoln to defend the arsenal. Before they arrived, Shays attacked, and the militia defending the arsenal opened fire. Four farmers died in the fighting. The rest scattered. The next day Lincoln's troops arrived and ended the rebellion. The fears the rebellion had raised, however, were harder to disperse.

A Call for Change

People with greater income and social status tended to see the rebellion, as well as inflation and an unstable currency, as signs that the republic itself was at risk. They feared that as state legislatures became more democratic and responsive to poor people, they would weaken property rights and vote to take property from the wealthy. As General Henry Knox, a close aide to George Washington, concluded: “What is to afford our security against the violence of lawless men? Our government must be braced, changed, or altered to secure our lives and property.”

These concerns were an important reason why many people, including merchants, artisans, and creditors, began to argue for a stronger central government, and several members of the Confederation Congress called on the states to correct “such defects as may be discovered to exist” in the present government. The confederation’s failure to deal with conditions that might lead to rebellion, as well as the problems with trade and diplomacy, only added fuel to their argument.

Thomas Jefferson on Shays' Rebellion

Paris, November 13, 1787

The British have so long hired their newspapers to repeat every form of lies about our being in anarchy, that the world has at length believed them, and we have believed them ourselves. Yet where does this anarchy exist? Where did it ever exist, except in the single instance of Shays' rebellion? God forbid we should ever be 20 years without such a rebellion.

What country before ever existed without a rebellion? And what country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let the people take arms. The remedy is to present them with the facts, pardon and pacify them.

The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure. Our Constitutional Convention has [made too much of Shays' rebellion]: and in the spur of the moment [I worry they will over-react].

Vocabulary

Anarchy: chaos; confusion and disorder

Remedy: cure

Pardon: forgive

Pacify: calm down

Manure: fertilizer

Source: *Thomas Jefferson was in France during Shays' Rebellion, but he wrote a letter to a friend about it.*