

George Washington's Proclamation Calling Out The Militia To Occupy the Western Counties of Pennsylvania

As It Appears In the August 11, 1794 issue of Claypoole's Daily Advertiser

Angered by an **excise tax imposed on whiskey** in 1791 by the federal government, farmers in the western counties of Pennsylvania engaged in a series of **attacks on excise agents**.

The tariff effectively eliminated any profit by the farmers from the sale or barter of an important cash crop, and became the lightning rod for a **wide variety of grievances** by the settlers of the region against the federal government.

While citizens in the east did not find it difficult to abide by the concept that individual states were "subservient to the country," people west of the mountains were less accepting of decisions made by the central government.

The rebel farmers continued their attacks, **rioting in river towns** and **roughing up tax collectors** until the so-called "insurrection" flared into the open in July of 1794 when a **federal marshal was attacked** in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. Almost at the same time several hundred men attacked the residence of the regional inspector, burning his home, barn and several outbuildings. Pittsburgh was another scene of disorder by enraged mobs.

On August 7, 1794, President Washington issued a proclamation, **calling out the militia** and ordering the disaffected westerners to return to their homes. Washington's order mobilized an army of approximately 13,000 — as large as the one that had defeated the British — under the command of General Harry Lee, the then-Governor of Virginia and father of Robert E. Lee. Washington himself, in a show of presidential authority, set out at the head of the troops to suppress the uprising.

This was the **first use of the Militia Law of 1792** setting a precedent for the use of the militia to "execute the laws of the union, (and) suppress insurrections," asserting the right of the national government to enforce order in one state with troops raised in other states. Even more importantly, it was the **first test of power of the new federal government**, establishing its primacy in disputes with individual states. In the end, a dozen or so men were arrested, sent to Philadelphia to trial and released after pardons by Washington.

<http://www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/milestones/whiskey/>

[Letter from George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, September 7, 1792]

The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799. John C. Fitzpatrick, Editor.--vol. 32

Mount Vernon, September 7, 1792.

Sir: The last post brought me your letter of the 1st instant, with the enclosures respecting the disorderly conduct of the Inhabitants of the Western Survey of the District of Pennsylvania, in opposing the execution of what is called the Excise Law; and of the insults which have been offered by some of them to the Officers who have been appointed to collect the duties on distilled spirits agreeably thereto.

Such conduct in any of the Citizens of the United States, under any circumstances that can well be conceived, would be exceedingly reprehensible; but when it comes from a part of the Community for whose protection the money arising from the Tax was principally designed, it is truly unaccountable, and the spirit of it much to be regretted.

The preliminary steps taken by you in ordering the Supervisor of the District to repair to the Survey where these disorders prevail, with a view to ascertain in person "the true state of the Survey; to collect evidences respecting the violences that have been committed, in order to a prosecution of the offenders; to ascertain the particulars as to the Meeting which appears to have been held at Pittsburg; to encourage the perseverance of the officers in their duty, and the well disposed inhabitants in discountenancing such violent proceedings &c. &c."⁴⁶ are prudent and proper, and I earnestly wish they may have the desired effect. But if, notwithstanding, opposition is still given to the due execution of the Law, I have no hesitation in declaring, if the evidence of it is clear and unequivocal, that I shall, however reluctantly I exercise them, exert all the legal powers with which the Executive is invested, to check so daring and unwarrantable a spirit. It is my duty to see the Laws executed: to permit them to be trampled upon with impunity would be repugnant to it; nor can the Government longer remain a passive spectator of the contempt with which they are treated. Forbearance, under a hope that the Inhabitants of that Survey would recover from the delirium and folly into which they were plunged, seems to have had no other effect than to increase the disorder.

Read Washington's letter to Alexander Hamilton and answer the questions below.

1. Why does Washington believe it is important for the government to act?
2. Why is Washington so surprised that the uprising came from Pennsylvanian farmers?
3. According to Washington, what are the consequences of taking no action?
4. When referring to the Whiskey Rebellion Washington said, "we may bid adieu to all government in this Country, except Mob and Club Govt." What do you think he meant by this statement?
5. In Washington's view, once a law is passed by the Congress what is the responsibility of citizens?