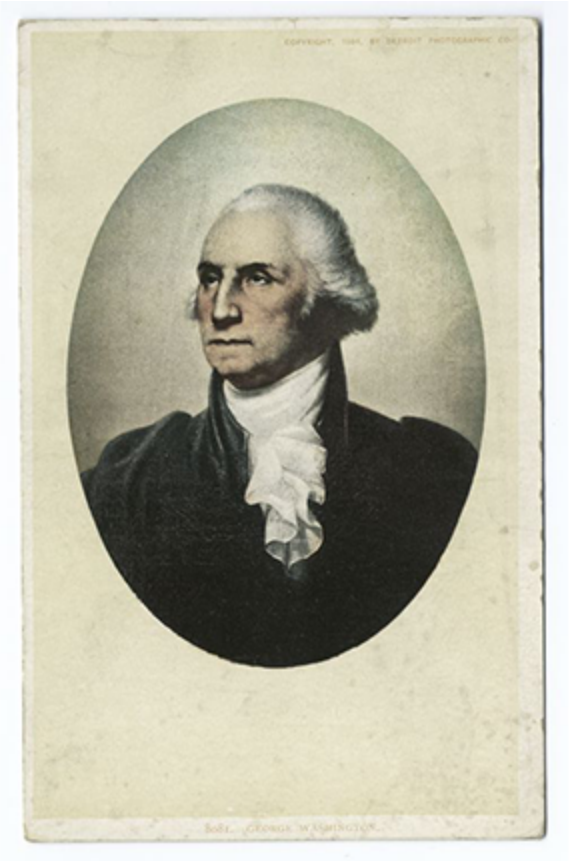
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HISTORIC DOCUMENT

Letter to Henry Knox (1786-1787)

George Washington | 1786-1787



George Washington
Detroit Publishing Company postcards, The New Public Library

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Summary

In late 1786, farmers in Western Massachusetts—facing high land taxes and growing debt—armed themselves and marched across the state. Their leader was Daniel Shays—a thirty-nine-year-old farmer who had fought in the American Revolution. This group of farmers seized control of court buildings, forced debtors' prisons to close, and attempted to commandeer the arsenal at Springfield, Massachusetts.

Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress could not raise an army to put down Shays' Rebellion. Instead, a Massachusetts militia—privately raised and with Benjamin Lincoln in command—had to step in to restore order. For many in the Founding generation—including George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison—Shays' Rebellion was proof that the Articles of Confederation was too weak to govern America. They feared that this armed uprising might be the first of many violent acts of mob violence, which might lead to disunion and civil war. As a result, these key leaders concluded that the nation should hold a convention—one that might propose a stronger national government for the new nation. In these letters, George Washington shares his thoughts on Shays' Rebellion and the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation with his friend and former chief artillery officer, Henry Knox.

Selected by



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Document Excerpt

George Washington to Henry Knox, December 26, 1786:

Lamentable as the conduct of the Insurgents of Massachusetts is, I am exceedingly obliged to you for the

advices respecting them; & pray you, most ardently, to continue the acct of their proceedings . . . .

I feel, my dear Genl Knox, infinitely more than I can express to you, for the disorders which have arisen in these states. Good God! who besides a tory could have foreseen, or a Briton predicted them! were these people wiser than others, or did they judge of us from the corruption, and depravity of their own hearts? The latter I am persuaded was the case, and that notwithstanding the boasted virtue of America, we are far gone in every thing ignoble & bad. I do assure you, that even at this moment, when I reflect on the present posture of our affairs, it seems to me to be like the vision of a dream. My mind does not know how to realize it, as a thing in actual existence, so strange—so wonderful does it appear to me! In this, as in most other matter[s], we are too slow. When this spirit first dawned, probably it migh[t] easily have been checked; but it is scarcely within the reach of human ken, at this moment, to say when—where—or how it will end. There are combustibles in every State, which a spark may set fire to. . . .

In both your letters you intimate, that the men of reflection, principle & property in New England feeling the inefficacy of their present government, are contemplating a change; but you are not explicit with respect to the nature of it. It has been supposed, that, the Constitution of the State of Massachusetts was amongst the most energetic in the Union . . . . That G.B. will be an unconcerned spectator of the present insurrections (if they continue) is not to be expected. . . . [T]hat she will improve every opportunity to foment the spirit of turbulence within the bowels of the United States, with a view of distracting our governments, & promoting divisions,

is, with me, not less certain. Her first Manœuvres will, no doubt, be covert, and may remain so till the period shall arrive when a decided line of conduct may avail her. . . .

We ought not therefore to sleep nor to slumber—vigilence in the watching, & vigour in acting, is, in my opinion, become indispensably necessary. If the powers are inadequate amend or alter them, but do not let us sink into the lowest state of humiliation & contempt, & become a byword in all the earth—I think with you that the Spring will unfold important & distressing Scenes, unless much wisdom & good management is displayed in the interim. . . .

George Washington to Henry Knox, February 3, 1787:

I . . . shall . . . be extremely anxious to know the issue of the movements of the forces that were assembling, the one to support, the other to oppose the constitutional rights of Massachusetts. The moment is, indeed, important! If government shrinks, or is unable to enforce its laws; fresh manœuvres will be displayed by the insurgents— anarchy & confusion must prevail—and every thing will be turned topsy turvey in that State; where it is not probable the mischiefs will terminate. . . .

The legallity of th[e] [Constitutional] Convention I do not mean to discuss—nor how problematical the issue of it may be. That powers are wanting, none can deny. Through what medium they are to be derived, will, like other matters, engage public attention. That which takes the shortest course to obtain them, will, in my opinion, under present circumstances, be found best. Otherwise, like a house on fire, whilst the most regular mode of extinguishing it is contending for, the building is reduced to ashes. My opinion of the

energetic wants of the federal government are well known—publickly & privately, I have declared it; and however constitutionally it may be for Congress to point out the defects of the fœderal System, I am strongly inclined to believe that it would not be found the most efficatious channel for the recommendation, more especially the alterations, to flow—for reasons too obvious to enumerate.

The System on which you seem disposed to build a national government is certainly more energetic, and I dare say, in every point of view is more desirable than the present one; which, from experience, we find is not only slow—debilitated—and liable to be thwarted by every breath, but is defective in that secrecy, which for the accomplishment of many of the most important national purposes, is indispensably necessary; and besides, having the Legislative, Executive & Judiciary departments concentered, is exceptionable. But at the same time I give this opinion, I believe that the political machine will yet be much tumbled & tossed, and possibly be wrecked altogether, before such a system as you have defined, will be adopted. The darling Sovereignties of the States individually, The Governors elected & elect. The Legislators—with a long train of etcetra whose political consequence will be lessened, if not anihilated, would give their weight of opposition to such a revolution. But I may be speaking without book, for scarcely ever going off my own farms I see few people who do not call upon me; & am very little acquainted with the Sentiments of the great world; indeed, after what I have seen, or rather after what I have heard, I shall be surprized at nothing; for if three years ago, any person had told me that at this day, I should see such a formidable rebellion against the laws & constitutions of our

own making as now appears I should have thought him a bedlamite—a fit subject for a mad house.

George Washington to Henry Knox, February 25, 1787

On the prospect of the happy termination of this insurrection I sincerely congratulate you; hoping that good may result from the cloud of evils which threatned not only the hemisphere of Massachusetts but by spreading its baneful influence, the tranquillity of the Union. Surely Shays must be either a weak man—the dupe of some characters who are yet behind the curtain—or has been deceived by his followers. Or which may yet be more likely, he did not conceive that there was energy enough in the Government to bring matters to the crisis to which they have been pushed. . . .

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