

The USA under the Articles of Confederation

Perspectives on Shay's Rebellion

Consider: *Was the new nation in danger?*

Jefferson questions whether the disorders (rebellions) are really serious in a letter written to James Madison.

I am impatient to learn your sentiments on the late troubles [Shay's Rebellion] in the Eastern states [Massachusetts]. So far as I have seen, they do not appear to threaten serious consequences. Those states have suffered by the stoppage of the channels of their commerce [trade]... this must render money scarce and make the people uneasy. This uneasiness has produced acts absolutely unjustifiable; but I hope they will provoke no severities from their governments... [Those in power] may conclude too hastily that nature has formed man insusceptible [immune] of any other government but that of force, a conclusion not founded in truth, nor experience... *Malo periculosam libertatem quam quietam servitutem. [I prefer perilous liberty to quiet servitude.]* Even this evil is productive of good. It prevents a degeneracy [corruption] of government and nourishes a general attention to the public affairs. I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical... It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government.

Source: *Viewpoints: USA*, pg. 45. Letter to Madison, January 30, 1787. Jefferson, *Papers*, XI, 92-93.

Question: **What does Jefferson consider the major cause of the rebellion? What does Jefferson imply is the major concern of government? Then, Compare with Abigail Adams view (below).**

Abigail Adams, writing to Thomas Jefferson, is alarmed at the "mad cry of the mob."

With regard to the tumults in my native state [Massachusetts] which you inquire about, I wish I could say that report had exaggerated them. It is too true Sir, that they have been carried to so alarming a height as to stop the courts of justice in several counties. Ignorant, restless desperados, without conscience or principles, have led a deluded multitude to follow their standard, under pretense of grievances which have no existence but in their imaginations. Some of them were crying out for a paper currency, some for an equal distribution of property. Some were for annihilating [eliminating] all debts, others complaining that the Senate [Congress] was a useless branch of government, and that the sitting of the General Court in Boston was a grievance. By this list you will see the materials which compose this rebellion, and the necessity there is of the wisest and most vigorous measures to quell and suppress it. Instead of that laudable spirit which you approve, which makes a people watchful over their liberties and alert in the defense of them, these mobish insurgents are for sapping the foundation, and destroying the whole fabric at once.

But as these people make up only a small part of the state, when compared to the more sensible and judicious... I cannot help flattering myself that they will prove salutary to the state at large, by leading to an investigation of the causes which have produced these commotions. Luxury and extravagance both in furniture and dress had pervaded all order... and was hastening fast to sap their independence by involving every class of citizens in distress, and accumulating debts upon them which they were unable to discharge [pay off]...

Source: *Viewpoints: USA*, pg. 44-45. Thomas Jefferson, *Papers* (Julian P. Boyd, ed.). Princeton Univ., 1955, XI, 86-87. (Spelling modernized.)

Question: **According to Abigail Adams, what did the rebels want? What faults does she admit need correcting?**