

The Whiskey Rebellion, 1794

Introduction

In 1791, the federal government imposed a tax on distilled spirits to pay off the nation's debts from the American Revolution. The tax, which was payable only in cash, was particularly hard on small frontier farmers, who bartered and did not have access to hard currency.

Protests occurred in every state south of New York. By 1794, western Pennsylvanians had had enough. Some 7,000 frontiersmen marched on Pittsburgh to stop collection of the tax. In July, rebels near Pittsburgh set fire to the home of John Neville, the regional tax collection supervisor. Determined to set a precedent for the federal government's authority, President George Washington gathered an army of 12,000 militiamen to disperse the rebels. The uprising collapsed, and the new government demonstrated that it would enforce laws enacted by Congress. This was the first use of the Militia Acts of 1792, which allowed the president to call the state militia into federal service "whenever the laws of the United States shall be opposed or the execution thereof obstructed, in any state, by combinations too powerful to be suppressed by the ordinary course of judicial proceedings."

In this letter, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, who had been given command of the army by Washington, reports to Governor Thomas Mifflin of Pennsylvania that it is

indispensable and urgent to press forward the forces destined to act against the Insurgents with all possible activity and Energy. The advanced season leaves no time to spare, and it is extremely important to afford speedy protection to the well disposed, and to prevent the preparation and accumulation of greater means of Resistance, and the extension of Combinations to abet the Insurrection

and orders Mifflin "to act against the insurgents with all possible activity and Energy."

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and the transcript and view the Image. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

- Define the following terms used in the introduction: distilled spirits, barter(ed), and precedent.
- Explain Alexander Hamilton's directions to Governor Thomas Mifflin.
- Why did Hamilton use the word "insurgent" and "insurrection" to describe the events in Pennsylvania?
- Why did President Washington consider the protests to be extremely serious?

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Transcript

War Department
Sept. 20th 1794

Sir

The Intelligence received from the Western Counties of Pennsylvania, which comes down to the 13th Ins^t., and announces as far as it was then known, the result of the meetings of the People in the several Townships, and districts to express their sense on the Question of submission or resistance to the Laws. - while it shews a great proportion of the Inhabitants of those Counties disposed to pursue the path of Duty, shews also, that there is a large and violent Party which can only be controuled by the application of Force – This being the result, it is become the more indispensable and urgent to press forward the forces destined to act against the Insurgents with all possible activity and Energy. The advanced season leaves no time to spare, and it is extremely important to afford speedy protection to the well disposed, and to prevent the preparation and accumulation of greater means of Resistance, and the extension of Combinations to abet the Insurrection—The President counts upon every exertion on your part, which so serious and eventful an emergency demands.

With perfect respect,

I have the honor to be

Sir

Your obed^t. Serv^t.

Alexander Hamilton

His Excellency Thomas Mifflin

Governor of Pennsylvania

[Docket]

War Department

His Excellency Thomas Mifflin
Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

copied for the Legislature of

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1794 September 20

From the Secretary of War on the necessity of an immediate March of the Militia against the Western Insurgents

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Image

Mark Hartman
 Sept 20 1794

The Intelligence received from the Western Counties of Pennsylvania, which comes down to the 10th Inst, and announces as far as it was then known, the result of the meetings of the People in the several Townships, and Districts to express their sense on the Question of submission or resistance to the Laws - while it shews a great proportion of the Inhabitants of those Counties disposed to pursue the path of Duty, shews also, that there is a rising and violent Party which can only be controuled by the application of Force - This being the result, it is become the more indispensable and urgent to press forward the forces destined to act against the Insurgents with all possible activity and Energy. The advanced season leaves no time to spare, and it is extremely important to afford speedy protection to the Well disposed, and to prevent the preparation and accumulation of greater means of Resistance, and the extension of combinations to abet

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Alexander Hamilton to Thomas Mifflin, September 20, 1794, p1. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC07920)

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Alexander Hamilton to Thomas Mifflin, September 20, 1794, p. 2. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC07920)