Shays' Rebellion: Crisis in the Infant U.S. Republic

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A debtor fights with a tax collector in the 1780s in the young United States. Photo from: Wikimedia Commons

When the fighting in the American Revolution came to an end in 1781, the economy was in a shambles. Exports to Britain were restricted. On the high seas, the British navy had destroyed most American ships, crippling the flow of trade. On land, where both armies regularly stole from local farms in order to find food, farmers suffered tremendously. On top of that, the United States owed a lot of money from waging the war. From 1781 until 1789, the U.S. was governed by a union of states under an agreement called the Articles of Confederation. The states were forced to pay money to this weak government. In turn, the states began to tax people, including farmers, many of whom had fought in the Revolution.

The crisis of the 1780s was most intense in the rural and newly settled areas of central and western Massachusetts. After the American Revolution, many farmers faced financial hardships. They had borrowed money from the government to start farms. Some farmers could not pay the money back. Facing prison time for unpaid debt, farmers revolted against their government leaders. This was Shays' Rebellion. The rebellion signaled a need for a stronger central government to take care of its citizens and a president for local government officials to seek leadership.
Farmers in Massachusetts suffered

Many farmers in this area suffered as they tried to start new farms. To start the farms, they had to take on debt. In the 1780s, many state governments passed laws that were favorable to debtors — that is, people who took on debt. Sometimes, these governments did not force debtors to pay back the money they owed. This is known as debt forgiveness.

However, the Massachusetts government didn’t respond to the economic crisis by passing pro-debtor laws. Instead, local sheriffs seized many farms and some farmers who couldn’t pay their debts were put in prison.

These conditions led to the first major armed rebellion in the post-Revolutionary United States.

Organized resistance to an unresponsive government

Just like the American Revolution, Americans resisted high taxes and an unresponsive government that was far away. But this time it was Massachusetts’ settlers who were angry with a republican government in Boston, rather than with the British government across the Atlantic.

The farmers in western Massachusetts organized their resistance in ways similar to the American Revolution. They called special meetings of the people to protest conditions and agree on a coordinated protest. This led the rebels to close courts by force in the fall of 1786 and to liberate imprisoned debtors from jail.

Soon events flared into a full-scale revolt. The resisters came under the leadership of Daniel Shays, a former captain in the Continental Army, and his followers were called Shaysites. Some thought of the Shaysites as heroes in the direct tradition of the American Revolution, while many others saw them as dangerous rebels whose actions might topple the young republican government. This was the most extreme example of what could happen in the tough times brought on by the economic crisis.

James Bowdoin, the governor of Massachusetts, saw the Shaysites as dangerous. Using money from eastern merchants, Bowdoin organized a military force to confront the rebels. This armed force crushed the movement in the winter of 1786-1787, and the Shaysites quickly fell apart when faced with a strong army organized by the state.

Discontent leads to change

While the rebellion disintegrated quickly, the social unrest didn’t just go away. The debtors’ discontent was widespread, and similar uprisings occurred on a smaller scale in Maine, Connecticut, New York and Pennsylvania among others places.
While Governor Bowdoin had acted decisively in crushing the rebellion, the voters turned against him in the next election. This high level of discontent, popular resistance, and the election of pro-debtor governments in many states threatened the power of many political and social elites.

Shays' Rebellion showed the high degree of internal conflict lurking beneath the surface of post-Revolutionary life. National leaders responded by writing the nation's Constitution to establish a stronger central government and electing the first president, George Washington.
Quiz

1. Read the sentence from the section "Discontent leads to change."

   Shays’ Rebellion showed the high degree of internal conflict lurking beneath the surface of post-Revolutionary life.

   Which sentence from the article BEST supports the statement above?

   (A) After the American Revolution, many farmers faced financial hardships.

   (B) In the 1780s, many state governments passed laws that were favorable to debtors — that is, people who took on debt.

   (C) But this time it was Massachusetts’ settlers who were angry with a republican government in Boston, rather than with the British government across the Atlantic.

   (D) National leaders responded by writing the nation's Constitution to establish a stronger central government and electing the first president, George Washington.

2. Which of the following selections BEST supports the idea that Shays' Rebellion was caused by harsh debt laws?

   (A) After the American Revolution, many farmers faced financial hardships. They borrowed money from the government to start farms. Some farmers could not pay the money back.

   (B) To start the farms, they had to take on debt. In the 1780s, many state governments passed laws that were favorable to debtors — that is, people who took on debt.

   (C) Sometimes, these governments did not force debtors to pay back the money they owed. This is known as debt forgiveness.

   (D) However, the Massachusetts government didn't respond to the economic crisis by passing pro-debtor laws. Instead, local sheriffs seized many farms and some farmers who couldn't pay their debts were put in prison.
3. How did Shays' Rebellion cause changes in the local and national government?
   (A) It resulted in the weakening of local governments that soon became controlled by the large national government.
   (B) It resulted in the election of pro-debtor local governments and the creation of a stronger national government.
   (C) It resulted in the strengthening of local governments that helped suppress uprisings against the national government.
   (D) It resulted in the creation of harsher local government laws that were overturned by the national government.

4. Which of the following would BEST describe the organization of Shays' Rebellion?
   (A) Farmers held special meetings to coordinate a revolt with methods similar to those of the American Revolution, but the rebellion fell apart quickly when faced with better-organized troops.
   (B) Farmers improved upon the ideas that had been used in the American Revolution to form a strong resistance, which was only defeated by forces of the federal government.
   (C) Daniel Shays convinced his followers to hold special meetings to gain the support of local farmers and businesses, and it was only through luck that the governor was able to defeat them.
   (D) Daniel Shays assumed leadership of the revolt after rebels freed him from jail so that he could use his military skills to train a strong rebel military force to defeat the state.
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