Handout I: Analysis of Shays’s Rebellion

Directions: Discuss the passages below in light of Shays’s Rebellion and answer the questions that follow.

The Preamble of the Constitution of the United States of America, 1787

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America.

Discuss: To what extent was any level of the government (national, state, or local) of 1786-87 able to carry out the functions for which government is established? To what extent were purpose(s) of government listed in the Preamble threatened by anarchy during this period? Some historians maintain that Shays’s Rebellion and similar uprisings in other areas were really not serious threats to the social order, but that the Constitution’s Framers simply seized on these frightening incidents as a pretext for creating a stronger national government whose main purpose was to protect commercial interests. To what extent do you think Shays’s Rebellion influenced the Framers at the Philadelphia Convention in 1787?

Thomas Jefferson’s Comments on Shays’s Rebellion

“I hold it, that a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms are in the physical... It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government.” Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to James Madison, Jan., 1787

“The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.” Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to Wm. Stephens Smith, Nov., 1787

Discuss: How might Jefferson’s opinion have been affected by the fact that he was living in Paris at the time of Shays’s Rebellion?

Excerpt from Federalist No. 51, James Madison, Feb. 6, 1788

“If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”

Discuss: In what ways can this famous passage from Federalist No. 51 be related to Shays’s Rebellion?
Shays's Rebellion Role Play attribution


Note: for further reading, see The Shays’s Rebellion Website: http://shaysrebellion.stcc.edu/shaysapp/about/project.jsp