

Thomas Jefferson on Shays' Rebellion (Modified)

Paris, November 13, 1787

The British have so long hired their newspapers to repeat every form of lies about our being in anarchy, that the world has at length believed them, and we have believed them ourselves. Yet where does this anarchy exist? Where did it ever exist, except in the single instance of Shays' rebellion? God forbid we should ever be 20 years without such a rebellion.

What country before ever existed without a rebellion? And what country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let the people take arms. The remedy is to present them with the facts, pardon and pacify them.

The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure. Our Constitutional Convention has [made too much of Shays' rebellion]: and in the spur of the moment [I worry they will over-react].

Vocabulary

Anarchy: chaos; confusion and disorder

Remedy: cure

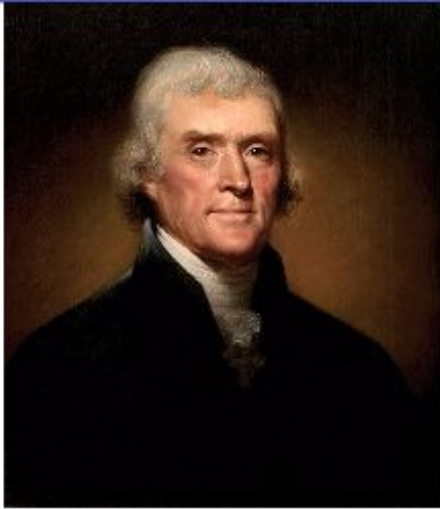
Pardon: forgive

Pacify: calm down

Manure: fertilizer

Source: Thomas Jefferson was in France during Shays' Rebellion, but he wrote a letter to a friend about it.

Opinions about Daniel Shays' Rebellion



THOMAS JEFFERSON

...as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical. Unsuccessful rebellions, indeed, generally establish the encroachments on the rights of the people which have produced them.

An observation of this truth should render honest republican governors so mild in their punishment of rebellions as not to discourage them too much. It is medicine necessary for the sound health of government.

The late rebellion in Massachusetts has given more alarm than I think it should have done. Calculate that one rebellion in 13 states in the course of 11 years, is but one for each state in a century & a half. No country should be so long without one. Nor will any degree of power in the hands of government prevent insurrections.

France, with all its despotism, and two or three hundred thousand men always in arms has had three insurrections in the three years I have been here in every one of which greater numbers were engaged than in Massachusetts & a great deal more blood was spilt.



GEORGE WASHINGTON

But for God's sake tell me what is the cause of all these commotions: do they proceed from licentiousness, British-influence disseminated by the Tories, or real grievances which admit of redress? If the latter, why were they delayed 'till the public mind had become so much agitated?

If the former why are not the powers of Government tried at once?

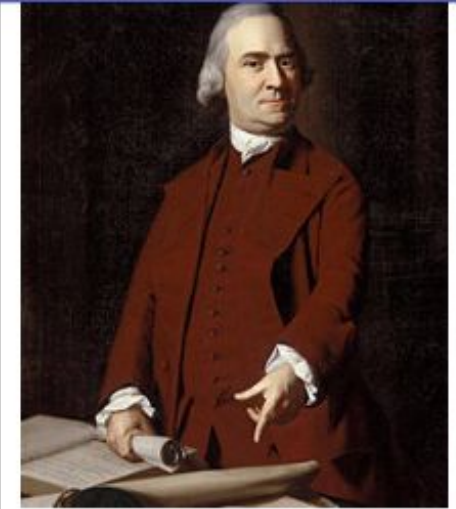
...the accounts which are published of the commotions... exhibit a melancholy proof of what our trans-Atlantic foe has predicted; and of another thing perhaps, which is still more to be regretted, and is yet more unaccountable, that mankind when left to themselves are unfit for their own Government. I am mortified beyond expression when I view the clouds that have spread over the brightest morn that ever dawned upon any Country... To be more exposed in the eyes of the world, and more contemptible than we already are, is hardly possible.



ABIGAIL ADAMS

With regard to the tumults in my Native State 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 desperadoes, without conscience or principals, have led a deluded multitude to follow their standard, under pretense of grievances which have no existence but in their own imaginations.

Some of them were crying out for a paper currency, some for an equal distribution of property, some were for annihilating all debts, others complained that the Court of common pleas was unnecessary 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 more vigorous measures to quell & suppress it...



SAM ADAMS

A commonwealth or state is a body politic, or civil society of men, united together to promote their mutual safety and prosperity by means of their union.

...in monarchies the crime of treason and rebellion may admit of being pardoned or lightly punished, but the man who dares rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death.