



# PERSPECTIVES



by **Rinaldo S. Brutoco**

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## Shay's Rebellion

### *Washington's Personal Example*

What was Shay's Rebellion, and why should we care? It was the first test of a young nation. The United States of America, organized originally under the Articles of Confederation, experienced a revolt starting on August 29, 1786, just three years after formally securing independence through the 1783 Paris Peace Treaty. It was primarily led by Revolutionary War officers and soldiers around Springfield in western Massachusetts.

Sometimes referred to as "America's first civil war" it is extremely important for us to understand today. It was the first time a group of citizens chose to violently attack courthouses and a state capitol to overthrow that state's rightful authority rather than seek to address their grievances through constitutional means.

The rebellion ended in February 1787, when 1,500 men unsuccessfully attacked the Federal arsenal in Springfield with an intent to seize the weapons and overthrow the government. They were repulsed by 1,200 men from the state militia (their version of the National Guard) who were able to hold them off and secure the arsenal. Sounds quite a lot like the direct lineal ancestor of January 6th, doesn't it? That's because it was.

In a contemporaneous account of what transpired on August 29th, Massachusetts Governor James Bowdoin reported "A large concourse of people, from several parts of that county, assembled at the courthouse...many of whom were armed with guns, swords, and other deadly weapons, and with drums beating and fifes playing, in contempt and open defiance of the authority of this Government, did, by their threats of violence and keeping possession of the courthouse until twelve o'clock on the night of the same day."

He could just as easily have been describing our Nation's Capitol on January 6, 2021. And like Vice President Pence on that day, Bowdoin called for every armed officer of the state to assemble and repulse the mob, which they did.

Captain Daniel Ogden Shay, who loyally served as an officer in the Continental Army was a farmer, and ultimately a revolutionary. The grievances he articulated dealt with what he viewed as crushing, undue taxation, and a usurpation of the right of the people to overthrow their government by force if that was their desire. In this, we hear echoes of many of the thousands who mistakenly believed the "Big Lie" — that the government was stolen by an unlawful election, which the Insurrectionist Trump continues to proclaim despite knowing that he lost by over seven million votes.

As you read this column on the 236th anniversary of Shay's Rebellion, we offer two essential takeaways. First, in a democracy, the only way to alter the functions of government is by peacefully invoking the Constitution and following its direction. In the Trump Insurrection case, this meant

allowing the Federal government to complete the task of counting legitimate Electoral College votes and permitting President Biden to be declared the winner. Second, even awful events like an armed rebellion,

in which a capitol was for a time seized by men with guns, swords, spears, and the “beating of drums”, could lead to powerfully useful outcomes.

In the case of Shay’s Rebellion, George Washington observed that it threatened “the tranquility of the Union”, and he gathered Founders Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Dickinson to address what they perceived to be inherent weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation, which was the chief governing document at the time. As Washington wrote to Henry Knox “If three years ago any person had told me that at this day, I should see such a formidable rebellion against the laws & constitutions of our own making as now appears I should have thought him ...a fit subject for a mad house...”.

In response, General Washington and the other Founding Fathers vowed to launch a Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia the very next year to address what they saw as an imminent threat to their collective safety. They saw the necessity to dramatically alter their form of government by common consensus of all 13 colonies lest their experiment in democracy be overturned.

The new form of government they birthed is famous for many things, most importantly these: 1) Washington agreed to abandon his retirement and become the first president of the new Republic in order to provide strong leadership at a time of national disunity; 2) a Constitution that more clearly laid out the respective powers of the Federal Government, the States and the People in an elegant balance of power that has only been challenged twice since 1789; and, 3) that this Constitution survives to this day as the organic, always adaptable collection of guiding principles by which our nation has weathered the attacks of all “enemies foreign or domestic” for the last 233 years. Shay’s Rebellion, as negative as it was for our young nation, catalyzed into existence the great government that we have enjoyed for so long since. Yes, sometimes a stronger Union emerges from the chaos of violent misdirection.

The first violent attempt to overthrow our Constitution occurred just two years later, with the Whiskey Rebellion of 1791 on the frontier in Western Pennsylvania. As it became increasingly violent, Washington accepted that it was his role to lead the federal government in suppressing the revolt. He personally organized and, despite his advanced years, led a force of 12,950 into the battle, warning the local populace: “not to abet, aid, or comfort the Insurgents...as they will answer...at their peril.”

That was what our Founding Father knew had to be done if the Nation was to survive. Incredible foresight, courage, and discipline led Washington to see, in his first term, that the Constitution must be defended at all costs, or the entire struggle for independence would founder on the rocks of what he called “partisan passions.” Best of all, because Washington himself led the unsuccessful peace negotiations that preceded the armed conflict, and then the battle itself to preserve the Union, we never had another insurrection until January 6, 2021.

Washington modeled the requisite patriotism he wanted all of us to mirror. To similarly act from patriotism is the opportunity we share at this critical juncture of American history, as Elizabeth Cheney is doing now. President Washington enjoined us to do precisely that in his farewell address, where he warned us to “be suspicious of anyone who would seek to abandon the Union” or challenge the Constitution’s supremacy.

It also leaves us understanding that Insurrectionist Trump is truly “a subject fit for a madhouse.”

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