

Shays's Rebellion

In 1787, Daniel Shays and rebellious farmers clashed with the Massachusetts state militia. Farmers were angry that they could be put in prison or their land was seized when they could not pay their taxes or repay their debts. As you read the reactions of Thomas Jefferson and Samuel Adams to this rebellion, think about the reasoning behind their reactions and think about which man you would agree with.

"An Honorable Rebellion"

"[A]nd can history produce an instance of rebellion so honourably conducted? I say nothing of [its] motives. They were founded in ignorance, not wickedness. God forbid we should ever be 20 years without such a rebellion. The people cannot be all, & always, well informed. The part which is wrong will be discontented in proportion to the importance of the facts they misconceive; if they remain quiet under such misconceptions it is a lethargy, the forerunner of death to the public liberty. We have had 13 states independent 11 years. There has been one rebellion. That comes to one rebellion in a century & a half for each state. What country before ever existed a century & a half without a rebellion? & 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 them take arms. The remedy is to set them right as to facts, pardon & pacify them. What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants."

—Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to William S. Smith

"Rebellion Against a Republic"

"Rebellion [against a king] may admit of being pardoned or lightly punished, but the man who dares rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death."

—Samuel Adams

Readers' Dictionary

ignorance lack of knowledge, unawareness

misconception a mistaken idea or view; misunderstanding

lethargy a state of mental dullness; lack of energy

1. Read "An Honorable Rebellion".

The meaning of Jefferson's words is hard to understand at first because of the vocabulary and the format of his writing. It will take several readings of the text and a few probing questions to fully understand what Jefferson is saying about Shay's Rebellion and its important influence on liberty.

2. Look at the 3 words in the "Reader's Dictionary". A form of all 3 words are used by Thomas Jefferson in his letter to William S. Smith. Find the use of each word and circle it in the text.

3. What does Jefferson believe was the motive of the farmers who rebelled? Read Jefferson's 3rd sentence. The motive of Shay's Rebellion was not wickedness but was founded in _____.

4. Look at the definition of the word "lethargy" again. Read Jefferson's 6th sentence. It is a long sentence you may need to read it a couple of times. From this sentence, what can we conclude that Jefferson thinks is a greater danger in a republic than rebelling? _____

5. Jefferson says "Let them take arms." In his writing, he encourages rebellion. Why does Jefferson think a Republic needs a rebellion from "time to time" to "preserve its liberties"? _____

5. Read "Rebellion Against a Republic" by Samuel Adams.

The meaning of Adams's words is very clear.

How should those who rebel against a king be punished? They should be _____.

How should someone who rebel against the laws of a republic be punished. They should suffer _____.

6. What reasoning do you think is behind Adam's reaction? _____

7. Look back at the Enlightenment Influence page in your Constitution notebook. Of the 3 philosophers, which do you think had the most influence of Thomas Jefferson? Hobbs, Locke, or Montesquieu, why?

Name of philosopher that most influenced Thomas Jefferson. = _____

Why did you pick this philosopher? _____

8. Do you agree with Jefferson's or Adam's point of view? Defend your position. On the following line state your opinion about Rebellions in a Republic like the United States and give a reason for your opinion.
