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# DIPLOMATIC HISTORY

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## Power, Pride, and Purse: Diplomatic Origins of the Constitution

FREDERICK W. MARKS III

Few questions are more vital to American scholars during this, the bicentennial year of the United States Constitution, than those regarding the origin of America's most fundamental document. For to pursue the question of origin is to probe motivation. And motivation, in turn, discloses meaning.

We have known, for some time, a good deal about constitutional origins. But this was not always so. Diplomatic history is a relatively new field, and during the nineteenth century, the great chroniclers of our past told only a small portion of the story. George Bancroft, for example, paid little attention to crucial problems of defense under the Articles of Confederation. He was silent on the role of Henry Knox, Alexander McGillivray, Joseph Brant, and Josiah Harmar. He conveyed little sense of the fierce patriotic pride current at the time. Even John Fiske's highly touted work, *The Critical Period of American History, 1783-1789*, devoted only a scant fifty pages out of four hundred to the subject of foreign relations and said nothing of military challenges affecting the frontier. Fiske mentioned the Jay-Gardoqui negotiations, but not Harmar, McGillivray, or Knox. There was only cursory reference to the issue of national honor and no suggestion of its importance.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this is an oversimplification, but in a nutshell it is a fair representation of nineteenth-century historiography. Twentieth-century historians, and here I am thinking of such pioneers as Charles Beard and Merrill Jensen, did little to fill the vacuum. If anything, their emphasis on socioeconomic conflict and supposed Marxian motives underlying the Constitution tended to downgrade still further

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<sup>1</sup>John Fiske, *The Critical Period of American History, 1783-1789* (Boston, 1888). For nineteenth-century historiography, see Frederick W. Marks III, *Independence on Trial: Foreign Affairs and the Making of the Constitution* (Wilmington, DE, 1986), xvi(n.). Certain path-breaking texts in diplomatic history, for example Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 10th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1980 [1940]), covered the outstanding issues, but such coverage was necessarily in the form of an abbreviated survey.

the role of diplomatic issues. Shays's Rebellion and what it represented were magnified out of all proportion.<sup>2</sup>

Fifteen years ago, when I published *Independence on Trial: Foreign Affairs and the Making of the Constitution*, I attempted to redress the balance. Simply stated, my argument was that while Shays's uprising might be viewed as an event of significance, the lion's share of our attention should go to problems of national defense, foreign trade, and overseas reputation. Later, in the course of doing research for a paperback edition, I came to the conclusion that my thesis was, if anything, understated, and for a number of reasons which I should like, very briefly, to set forth.

First of all, I never realized during my original canvass of sources how rapid was the rate of acceleration achieved by the constitutional reform movement, especially from late 1785 into the following year and up to the months immediately preceding Shays's Rebellion. So much seems to depend upon which segment of the Confederation period one happens to examine. If one takes the years 1783, 1784, or even 1785, what registers is a buoyant sense of optimism. If, on the other hand, one concentrates on the year 1786, the perspective is entirely different.

Only a handful of individuals who were at once exceptionally practical and highly visionary saw the need for thoroughgoing constitutional reform in the early years. Alexander Hamilton and George Washington certainly did. But the list is not long. Generally, hope ran high that a loose union of states under the Articles would suffice. As late as June 1785, John Adams, who was nothing if not astute, and who has never, to my knowledge, been credited with a specially sanguine disposition, continued to predict that the separate states, acting on their own, would succeed in meeting the demands of the

<sup>2</sup>Marks, *Independence on Trial*, xvii-xix. For recent examples of the socioeconomic interpretation, with its standard emphasis on class conflict as allegedly demonstrated by Shays's Rebellion, see Forrest McDonald, *E Pluribus Unum: The Formation of the American Republic, 1776-1790*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis, 1979); Page Smith, *The Shaping of America: A People's History of the Young Republic* (New York, 1980); and James MacGregor Burns, *The Vineyard of Liberty* (New York, 1982). On balance, though, the trend would appear to be away from this type of "Beardian" analysis. For other accounts that give Shays's Rebellion something less than the prominent place it once occupied in general surveys, see Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York, 1982); and Maldwyn A. Jones, *The Limits of Liberty* (New York, 1983). Jones, it should be said, stands virtually alone among textbook authors at this stage in raising the important issue of national honor. For a recent account that distinguishes between "cosmopolitan" and "local" approaches to constitutional reform, see Arthur Link et al., *A Concise History of the American People* (Arlington Heights, IL, 1984), 111. Refreshingly broad consideration is given to a variety of key issues in Jack N. Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics* (New York, 1979). Rakove's coverage of foreign policy is probably not meant to be comprehensive, yet he leaves little doubt as to the relative importance of problems connected with it (see especially chapter 14, pp. 342, 351-52, 454n.). For an interesting treatment of state, as opposed to national, authority insofar as it affected American compliance with the law of nations and hastened constitutional reform, see G. S. Rowe and Alexander W. Knott, "The Longchamps Affair (1784-86), the Law of Nations, and the Shaping of Early American Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 10 (Summer 1986): 199-220.

day.<sup>3</sup> That same year Americans believed that the Indian tribes of the north and southwest, menacing as they might be, were basically weak and hence not a threat of the first magnitude. Indeed, Indian treaties were concluded at Forts Stanwix and McIntosh in late 1784 and early 1785.<sup>4</sup> By this time, Britain had decided to exclude American shipping and the bulk of the American provisional trade from her West Indian possessions, causing severe dislocation and financial loss.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, observers felt confident that Whitehall would eventually relent and sign a treaty of commerce.<sup>6</sup> If not, France would invite American ships and goods into its own West Indies, thus affording a certain diplomatic leverage against England. Adams, in particular, predicted that Americans would "do very well in the French Indies."<sup>7</sup> Nor were the British restrictions an insurmountable obstacle, since American ship captains were judged capable of evading them with the complicity of West Indian governors. Similar confidence was felt when Barbary pirates began to prey upon America's thriving trade with the Mediterranean and native captains no longer sailed under the protective ensign of the British crown. Surely, American shippers would find a way to forge British naval passes and the states of North Africa would agree to negotiate treaties of friendship.

One by one, within a year, at most a year and a half, each of these hopes foundered. Paris, by 1786, had proven as harsh and discriminatory as London.<sup>8</sup> British Foreign Secretary Lord Carmarthen announced his final refusal to sign a commercial treaty on 20 February.<sup>9</sup> Far from evading British restrictions in the West Indies, American ship captains had to run a gauntlet of armed brigs and schooners. Many lost their cargoes even when not actually engaged in smuggling, as for instance when they were apprehended in the general vicinity of the British islands and convicted on circumstantial evidence

<sup>3</sup>John Adams to John Jay, 26 June 1785, U.S. Department of State, *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States of America, from the Signing of the Definitive Treaty of Peace, September 10, 1783, to the Adoption of the Constitution, March 4, 1789*, 3 vols. (Washington, DC, 1837), 2:385 (hereafter cited as *DC*).

<sup>4</sup>Report of Congressional Committee on Indian Affairs in the Southern Department, 28 May 1784, and proceedings of 3 June 1785, *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, ed. Gaillard Hunt, 34 vols. (Washington, DC, 1904-37), 27:454, 28:423-24.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, North Carolina delegates to Governor Alexander Martin, 26 September 1783, and John Francis Mercer to Benjamin Harrison (governor of Virginia), 10 December 1783, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, ed. Edmund Cody Burnett, 8 vols. (Washington, DC, 1921-36), 7:309, 390.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, William Ellery to Jabez Bowen (deputy governor of Rhode Island), 10 April 1784, *ibid.*, 490.

<sup>7</sup>John Adams to Robert R. Livingston, 16 July 1783, *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States*, ed. Francis Wharton, 6 vols. (Washington, DC, 1889), 6:552.

<sup>8</sup>Rufus King to Jonathan Jackson, 22 April 1786, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:344; Elbridge Gerry to King, March [?] 1785, and King to John Adams, 5 May 1786, *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King*, ed. Charles R. King, 6 vols. (New York, 1894-1900), 1:74, 173; John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 7 August 1785, and John Adams to Jay, 10 August 1785, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: with a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston, 1850-56), 8:292, 299.

<sup>9</sup>*Pennsylvania Gazette*, 19 July 1786 (publishing the Carmarthen answer).

or tossed into port by violent storms and heavy seas.<sup>10</sup> Closer to home, American shipping, and to a lesser degree American goods, were being overwhelmed by British competition.<sup>11</sup>

Rufus King of Massachusetts seemed to make light of the Barbary pirates in a letter dated 1 May 1785, stating that the problem, though real, was doubtless exaggerated. Professor Jensen based much of his case on this letter.<sup>12</sup> Yet the situation was more complex than it might appear. King was speaking of exaggeration by Lloyd's of London, not by American shippers. The question of whether higher insurance rates were justified was inconsequential by comparison with the actual cost of increased premiums and the consequent decline in trade.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, King expressed his opinion several weeks before the two most chilling incidents of Barbary terrorism took place, and several months before Algiers declared open war on the Confederation.<sup>14</sup> Nor were Americans successful in forging British naval passes, as Jensen assumed.<sup>15</sup> Efforts were made to arm merchantmen and introduce escort service, but to no avail.<sup>16</sup> By 1786, Americans realized that they would not be able to buy peace or friendship with any North African state except Morocco.<sup>17</sup> They did not have the wherewithal to purchase "protection" any more than they had the means to fight, although leaders like Thomas Jefferson and John Jay were angry enough to advocate war and there was talk of organizing a league of Christian naval powers.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>10</sup>*New Jersey Gazette*, 24 April and 8 May 1786; *New York Packet*, 24 April 1786; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 26 October 1785, 28 June and 27 September 1786.

<sup>11</sup>Isaac Lee to William Lee, 18 July 1785, Perkins Papers, William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan; Pierce Long to John Langdon, 31 January 1785, and James Monroe to Jefferson, 15 August 1785, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:18, 186-87.

<sup>12</sup>Merrill Jensen, *The New Nation: A History of the United States during the Confederation, 1781-1789* (New York, 1965), 256.

<sup>13</sup>*Massachusetts Centinel*, 27 April and 11 May 1785; Gerry to King, 30 May 1785, in King, *Rufus King* 1:102.

<sup>14</sup>Marks, *Independence on Trial*, 38.

<sup>15</sup>Jensen, *New Nation*, 212-13.

<sup>16</sup>Thomas Fitzsimmons to James Searle, 4 April 1785, #9465, Emmet Collection, New York Public Library, New York, New York; St. George Tucker, *Reflections on the Policy and Necessity of Encouraging the Commerce of the Citizens of the United States of America and of Granting Them Exclusive Privileges of Trade* (Richmond and New York, 1786), 12; *Gentleman's Magazine* [London] 56 (January 1786): 71; King to John Adams, 5 May 1786, in King, *Rufus King* 1:172; report by Jay to Congress, 2 January 1786, and proceedings for 3, 4, and 5 April 1786, in Hunt, *Journals* 30:11-12, 152.

<sup>17</sup>Theodore Sedgwick to Caleb Strong, 6 August 1786, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:415.

<sup>18</sup>Jay to Jefferson, 14 December 1786, *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay*, ed. Henry Phelps Johnston, 4 vols. (New York, 1890-93), 3:223; Jefferson to John Adams, 11 July 1786, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester Cappon, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill, 1959), 1:142-44; report by Jay to Congress, 20 October 1785, in Hunt, *Journals* 29:843; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 21 September 1786. According to Jensen, "Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli refused to concede anything to the United States until the presidency of Thomas Jefferson. He sent naval squadrons to war on Tripoli and by 1805 had the Barbary States very willing to leave the United States alone" (*New Nation*, 213). In fact, Jefferson paid tribute, just as his predecessors had done, but when he dry-docked five out of seven capital ships, his legacy from the Adams administration, the bashaw of Tripoli suddenly declared himself dissatisfied with the level of

These two problems, that of a sharply reduced Mediterranean trade, coupled with closure of the French and British West Indies to American shipping and a large share of American produce, played havoc with America's leading industry, that of shipbuilding, virtually closing it down. Badly injured as well were persons engaged in commerce, shipping, nautical skills, whaling, and agriculture. West Indian markets had originally absorbed an estimated three quarters of America's provision trade and nearly all of its grain.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, then, the volume of letters and newspaper reports testifying to real economic distress is substantial. Nor is it confined to New England shipowners and fishermen, as Jensen implied.<sup>20</sup> Future Federalists and future Antifederalists were alike agreed on the need for drastic action to restore the country to its former international position.<sup>21</sup> I never appreciated until recently how much in the forefront was the agricultural sector, in particular that of

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payment. To give emphasis to his dissatisfaction, he cut down the flagstaff of the American consulate. Naval squadrons were sent by Jefferson and the marines marched across Libya, but all the president was able to accomplish on the military front was to blow up one of his own frigates that had struck a reef and fallen into enemy hands. By the time Jefferson persuaded Tripoli to come to terms, he was not in an advantageous bargaining position and ended up paying \$600,000 for the release of 300 prisoners. Nor did this solve the problem of North African terrorism. President Madison had to contend with Algerian hostility and blackmail. Once the War of 1812 had ended, he sent Commodore Stephen Decatur, who negotiated for the release of 450 hostages beneath the muzzle of his guns. It was not really until the French *tricolore* began to wave over North Africa that the area became relatively safe for travel and trade. Even then, Theodore Roosevelt was forced to dispatch American warships on a dramatic mission to rescue Jon Perdicaris. Unlike Jefferson and Madison, however, he paid no tribute and fired no guns.

<sup>19</sup>Sir Philip Gibbes, *Reflections on the Proclamation of the Second of July 1783, Relative to the Trade Between the United States of America and the West India Islands: Addressed to the Right Honourable William Pitt, First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer* (London, 1783), 8.

<sup>20</sup>See Jensen, *New Nation*, 164.

<sup>21</sup>For abundant evidence of the damage suffered by American commerce and the ensuing sense of urgency, see James Manning to John Collins (governor of Rhode Island), 26 May 1786 ("trade embarrass'd all most prostrate" [sic]). Charles Pettit to Jeremiah Wadsworth, 27 May 1786, and Henry Lee to Washington, 11 October 1786, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:366-67, 370, 482; Philadelphia Committee of Merchants to Boston Committee, 19 May 1785, #9328, Emmet Collection; *Gentleman's Magazine* 55 (September and October 1785): 740, 824; *New York Packet*, 14 August 1786; *New York Journal*, 23 February 1786. It was a situation in which imports, including many luxury items, rose increasingly to a level where they exceeded exports. See Isaac Lee to William Lee, 18 July 1785, Perkins Papers. According to Rufus King, writing in May 1786, American commerce was "almost ruined." See King to John Adams, 5 May 1786, in King, *Rufus King* 1:172. Among future Antifederalists who expressed deep concern regarding the depressed state of American commerce were Elbridge Gerry, Samuel Adams (who withheld his support from the Constitution until the last moment), George Mason of Virginia, and George Bryan of Pennsylvania. Bryan remarked on the "destruction of our navigation" and the countrywide disposition to vest Congress with regulatory power. See Samuel Adams to John Adams [?] July 1785, Samuel Adams to Gerry, 19 September 1785, and Gerry to Samuel Adams, 30 September 1785, Samuel Adams Papers [Bancroft Transcripts], New York Public Library; George Bryan to Atlee, 23 July 1785, William Augustus Atlee Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC; and Samuel Bryan to George Bryan, May 1785, David Jackson to George Bryan, 18 and 27 July 1785, and unidentifiable manuscript [last item in the "1786" folder], George Bryan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

the southern states. Discontent emanating from Boston spread quickly to New York and Philadelphia.<sup>22</sup> But the sting was felt not only in New England and the northeast. Virginia and Maryland were the first states to authorize congressional regulation of foreign trade, and James Madison's voice, on behalf of Virginia, came through with the clarity of a trumpet.<sup>23</sup> The first state to legislate against British shipping was Virginia, not Massachusetts, just as Virginia was the driving force behind Annapolis. Virginia was likewise prompt to endorse the Annapolis Report, doing so unanimously.<sup>24</sup> American manufacturers or "artisans," as they were generally called, felt strongly too. Far from there being a major division between merchants and artisans, as alleged, the two groups were often in harness, sponsoring the same meetings for the same kind of constitutional reform.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, commercial problems caused by inability to retaliate effectively against foreign trade restrictions tended, more than anything else, to unite the new nation. Jensen could not have been farther from the truth when he declared that "the trade and navigation acts passed by the states were strikingly effective."<sup>26</sup> If one studies the situation in 1783, 1784, or even 1785, there may be some basis for such an assessment. But by 1786 it was evident to all but a few that the states acting individually would never achieve the uniformity necessary to retaliate against external constraints or to vest Congress with requisite power. This despite the fact that nearly all states agreed on the need to do so.

The period 1785-86 was critical for an accelerated sense of crisis in two other respects. It suddenly dawned on Americans that the British were not about to vacate any of the major posts along the northern border, notably the posts at Niagara and Detroit.<sup>27</sup> On the contrary, His Majesty's lieutenants

<sup>22</sup>Madison to Monroe, 21 June 1785. *The Writings of James Madison*, ed. Gaillard Hunt, 9 vols. (New York, 1900-10), 2:147.

<sup>23</sup>Virginia Legislative Petitions, Dinwiddie County, 3 November 1786, and Nansemond County, 4 November 1785, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia; Jensen, *New Nation*, 401; Monroe to Jefferson, 16 June 1785, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:143; Madison to Jefferson, 10 December 1783, in Hunt, *Writings of James Madison* 2:27-28.

<sup>24</sup>Madison to Washington, 8 November 1786, in Hunt, *Writings of James Madison* 2:283. Virginia was, of course, the state that proposed a convention at Annapolis and issued the invitations.

<sup>25</sup>*Massachusetts Centinel*, 7 May 1785; *Boston Gazette*, 22 August 1785; Virginia Legislative Petitions, City of Norfolk, 4 November 1785. The *Boston Gazette* for 9 January 1786 referred to action taken by associations of tradesmen and manufacturers in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.

<sup>26</sup>Jensen, *New Nation*, 300.

<sup>27</sup>Mercer to James Madison, 12 November 1784, and Samuel Hardy to Harrison, 14 November 1784, in Burnett, *Letters* 7:609-11; Secretary at War Henry Knox report, 31 March 1788, in Hunt, *Journals* 34:139 (for the importance of Niagara and Detroit); *New York Packet*, 11 August 1785. Hope still lingered for evacuation in August 1785. See *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 3 August 1785. For the names of the posts in question, see John Adams's diary entry for May 1785, where he lists Oswegatchy on the St. Lawrence River; Oswego on Lake Ontario; Niagara and its dependencies; Presqu'Isle and Sandusky on the east shore of Lake Erie; Detroit; Michilimackinac; St. Mary's on the south shore of the strait between Lakes Superior and Huron; St.

began to reinforce their position with troops and naval power on the Great Lakes. This spelled trouble with various Indian tribes, not to mention the loss of an enormously lucrative fur trade affecting New York and Virginia and, in addition, the normal trade with the Indians.<sup>28</sup> According to John Adams, the estimated value of the trade lost by June 1785 was in the neighborhood of £300,000, equivalent to roughly \$60 million in current values, without allowing for the diminutive size of the population in 1786.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, when the British promised to honor their treaty obligations as soon as the United States honored its own, but no sooner, their argument was difficult to refute.<sup>30</sup> Various states had placed legal obstacles in the way of British creditors, and by 1786 it was unlikely that all would agree to remove them. Barring this, the British would not budge without congressional resort to war which, in 1786, would have been worse than futile as the national treasury in that year declared itself insolvent. Congress, having raised 700 troops to help secure American borders along the Ohio River, could not meet its payroll, and the troops, which had never been adequate for the work at hand, turned to mutiny and desertion.<sup>31</sup> Colonel James Monroe, commissioned two years earlier by Congress to make an inspection trip along the northern frontier, returned home with three of his party killed and one badly injured. This marked the beginning of a mounting toll of massacres, as more and more backwoodsmen paid with their lives for national ineptitude. According to reliable estimates, 200 Virginians had perished by October 1786. In Kentucky the estimate runs as high as 1,500 killed between 1783 and 1790.<sup>32</sup> Measured

Joseph at the bottom of Lake Michigan; Ouitanon; and Miamis. See Adams, *Works of John Adams* 3:393.

<sup>28</sup>Manning to Collins, 26 May 1786, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:366-67; Monroe to Jefferson, 12 April 1785, *The Writings of James Monroe Including a Collection of His Public and Private Papers and Correspondence Now For the First Time Printed*, ed. Stanislaus Murray Hamilton, 7 vols. (New York, 1898-1903), 1:72; Alexander Hamilton, "A Letter from Phocion to the Considerate Citizens of New York," 1-27 January 1784, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold Syrett, 26 vols. (New York, 1961-79), 3:491-92; Governor George Clinton speech, 16 January 1786, and the reply of the New York State Senate, *New York State Journal*, 9th Session (January-May 1786), 4, 7; "Petition of Three Merchants Read in the Pennsylvania Assembly," 10 September 1785, Records of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, Record Group 7, General Assembly file, box 2, undated petitions, 1785-88, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

<sup>29</sup>John Adams to Jay, 17 June 1785, *DC*, 2:379; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, DC, 1975), 1196. The daily wage in Virginia in 1781 was £5 for skilled labor (carpenters, masons, and tailors). Hamilton put the loss for New York alone at £50,000 (or \$10 million in today's terms). See "Letter from Phocion," in Syrett, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton* 3:492.

<sup>30</sup>John Adams to Jay, 16 June 1786, *DC*, 2:668-69. See also Carmarthen to John Adams, *ibid.*, 581-91.

<sup>31</sup>King to Gerry, 30 April 1786, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:346; Hunt, *Journals* 30:119; Lee to Washington, 18 April 1785, *The Letters of Richard Henry Lee*, ed. James Curtis Ballagh, 2 vols. (New York, 1911-14), 2:349.

<sup>32</sup>*Gentleman's Magazine* 54 (December 1784): 866-67; *ibid.*, 55 (February 1785): 148; *ibid.*, 56 (October 1786): 899-900; Jensen, *New Nation*, 357; Richard Dobbs Spaight to Alexander Martin, 23 July 1784, and Hardy to Harrison, 3 August 1784, in Burnett, *Letters* 7:573, 579; Monroe to Madison, 15 November 1784, in Hamilton, *Writings of James Monroe* 1:47.



in today's terms this would be equivalent to the combined American losses in World War I, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Spanish-American War.

How can one negotiate with powerful Indian confederations without occupying key posts, without sufficient money for the traditional exchange of gifts, without troops capable of protecting one's commissioners, and without the power to carry treaty provisions into effect? By October 1786 a two-front war was virtually certain. Sizable concentrations of Indians had mustered along the northern and southern border. They were led by brilliant and highly respected chieftains, men such as Joseph Brant and Alexander McGillivray, who could count on logistical support from British and Spanish outposts to the rear. Despite a valiant effort by General Clarke, the Creeks proved alarmingly effective, and by 1786 seven to eight thousand of their best warriors threatened Savannah.<sup>33</sup> Again, if one assesses the military picture in 1783, 1784, or 1785, one will come away with a totally false sense of national well-being.

Bankruptcy carried with it a number of serious implications. Americans could not pay the interest on their foreign debt. They could not deal with marauding pirates and Indian tribes. They could not underwrite the vital work of envoys seeking to represent their interests abroad. The thought was still current from 1783 to 1785 that Congress' request for authority to levy a 5-percent customs duty would be approved by all the states. But rejection of the scheme by New York State in May 1786 guaranteed failure, notwithstanding varying degrees of compliance by other states. Owing to the Confederation rule of unanimity, every state had to agree to all the terms of a proposed increase in congressional power. American credit was thus endangered to the point of evaporation in one foreign country after another, including the Netherlands, which had always been ultraliberal in its loan policy. Shortly after New York's damning negative, the Treasury Board reported a fiscal impasse arising from unpaid interest on French loans.<sup>34</sup>

Still another misfortune associated with 1786 concerned Spanish pretensions. In 1784 the Court of Madrid had stirred resentment in communities west of the Alleghenies with its refusal to permit the passage of American ships beyond New Orleans. Two years later, however, it planted additional seeds of discontent and disunion by laying claim to territory which Britain had ceded to the United States in the treaty of peace, territory extending as far north as the Ohio River and impinging upon land assumed to be in the

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<sup>33</sup>Hugh Williamson to Jefferson, 11 December 1784, and Madison to Jefferson, 24 October 1787, in Burnett, *Letters* 7:623 and 8:663; *Gentleman's Magazine* 58 (January 1788): 74-75; congressional committee report read 30 October 1786, in Hunt, *Journals* 31:917. For the situation six months later see Hunt, *Journals* 32:368 and 33:388.

<sup>34</sup>Paine Wingate to John Sullivan, 23 April 1788, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:725. See also *ibid.*, preface, xvi ff.

domain of Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia.<sup>35</sup> Once more, Congress proved powerless to vindicate the rights of its citizenry, and no state, acting on its own, could hold out any real hope of relief. Most of the nation's military muscle came from northern states with large shipping interests, states unwilling to succor the south unless southern leaders pulled their full weight in the movement to restore trade and navigation.

So it was that talk of secession came to a head in 1786, and I should perhaps stress that such talk was more prevalent than I first realized.<sup>36</sup> There was, of course, the west which, in Washington's words, stood "upon a pivot"—the "touch of a feather" would turn it either way.<sup>37</sup> Unable to obtain the help they needed against Indian depredations, westerners were increasingly inclined to look to Britain, the dominant power in the area. They also began to approach Spain for a restoration of their lifeline to the Gulf of Mexico. Congress, in 1786, came within a single vote of approving a thirty-year cession of western rights on the Mississippi in return for concessions to eastern trade. More than anything else, perhaps, this suspected treachery on the part of the east aroused feelings of disgust and anger across the mountains.

A second area alive with secessionist sentiment was New England. The Hartford Convention would not materialize for another thirty years, but the situation in 1786 may be regarded as comparable in many respects to that of 1815. Northerners such as Rufus King, Theodore Sedgwick, and Jesse Root spoke in earnest of leaving the union, and southerners of the caliber of Madison and Washington took them seriously.<sup>38</sup> With Monroe accusing John Jay, minister for foreign affairs, of plotting the birth of a separate nation north of the Potomac, what impended was nothing less than the emergence of three separate countries, one comprising New England, another stretching from New York to Maryland or Virginia, and a third spanning the remainder of the southern states.<sup>39</sup> According to Benjamin Rush, some of America's leading

<sup>35</sup>Hardy to Patrick Henry (governor of Virginia), 5 December 1784, Monroe to Madison, 6 December 1784, Spaight to Martin, 6 December 1784, and Williamson to Jefferson, 11 December 1784, in Burnett, *Letters* 7:620–24; report by the secretary for foreign affairs, 17 August 1786, in Hunt, *Journals* 31:537–38; *Boston Gazette*, 1 May 1786.

<sup>36</sup>For sample comments reflecting the widespread fear of a dissolution of the union see *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 22 June 1785; *Gentleman's Magazine* 57 (July 1787): 631 (reproducing a letter of Dr. Richard Price); and Hamilton speech, 15 February 1787, in Syrett, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton* 4:92.

<sup>37</sup>Washington to Harrison, 10 October 1784, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, ed. John Clement Fitzpatrick, 39 vols. (Washington, DC, 1931–44), 27:475.

<sup>38</sup>Jensen, *New Nation*, 406; King to John Adams, 2 November 1785, and Sedgwick to Strong, 6 August 1786, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:247, 415; Madison to Monroe, 7 August 1785, and Madison to Jefferson, 20 August 1785, in Hunt, *Writings of James Madison* 2:157–59, 161; Washington to Lee, 22 September 1788, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington* 30:96.

<sup>39</sup>Lynn Montrose, *The Reluctant Rebels* (New York, 1950), 386; Monroe to Madison, 3 September 1786, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:461.

men were considering such an idea by October 1786 and an alarmed Madison found reports of it in the newspapers early the following year.<sup>40</sup>

Consider, in addition, that the whalers of Nantucket, who in earlier years had employed upwards of three hundred ships and five thousand of America's best sailors, were by 1786 on the verge of ruin. Those who had not already emigrated to British territory or placed themselves under the protection of a foreign flag were sorely tempted to do so. They simply could not survive as a province of Massachusetts without relief from British trade restrictions, in this case the exclusion of American whale oil and whale bone from the English market. Neither could Boston tolerate the loss of one of its richest sources of tax revenue.<sup>41</sup>

To complete the circle of woe, officials in Vermont, as well as the leaders of Shays's Rebellion, were known to be in touch with British authorities, giving rise to an aura of secession coupled with subversion.<sup>42</sup> It is hard to find a single American official who viewed Shays's Rebellion in terms of class conflict. But any number of letters make the connection between back-country discontent and the long insidious arm of British Canada. There may have been political reasons for suggesting such a link, and one may, if one wishes, discount such allusions when contained in a circular letter issued by a Boston town meeting chaired by Sam Adams.<sup>43</sup> Still, intelligent observers such as Washington and Jay, writing without any special axe to grind, were thinking along the same line.<sup>44</sup> The notion figured in such prominent newspapers as the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, the *Virginia Gazette*, the *New Jersey Gazette*, and the *New York Journal*, and almost without exception the citations are dated 1786.<sup>45</sup> At the risk of sounding repetitive, I would again submit that those who focus on the Confederation in 1783, 1784, and 1785 will gain a distorted impression. By the time Shays came to prominence in late 1786 talk had already spread of a dissolution of the union. Furthermore, Shays was connected in the public mind not only with British subversion, but also with political imbecility. Insofar as the domestic scene in certain areas was marked

<sup>40</sup>Madison to Edmund Pendleton, 24 February 1787, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:548; Rush to Dr. Richard Price, 27 October 1786, *The Letters of Benjamin Rush*, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ, 1951), 1:408. See also Richard Champion, *Considerations on the Present Situation of Great Britain and the United States of North America With a View to Their Future Commercial Connections* (London, 1784), 137–38, 143.

<sup>41</sup>*Gentleman's Magazine* 56 (March 1786): 260; "Jefferson's Observations on the Whale Fishery," *DC*, 2:241–42; *Massachusetts Centinel*, 2 April 1785.

<sup>42</sup>Gery to King, 29 November 1786, in King, *Rufus King* 1:197; Hamilton speech, 28 March 1787, in Syrett, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton* 4:134–35; Dane to Phillips, 20 January 1786, Nathan Dane Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>43</sup>*Pennsylvania Gazette*, 27 September 1786.

<sup>44</sup>Washington to David Humphreys, 26 December 1786, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington* 29:126; Jay to Jefferson, 14 December 1786, *DC*, 1:809; Grayson to Monroe, 22 November 1786, series 1, vol. 1, Papers of James Monroe, Library of Congress. See also Edward Carrington to Edmund Randolph, 8 December 1786, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:516; and *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 17 May 1786.

<sup>45</sup>*Pennsylvania Gazette*, 27 September, 20 December 1786; *Virginia Gazette*, 30 November 1786; *New Jersey Gazette*, 23 October 1786; *New York Journal*, 28 September 1786.

by depression, indebtedness, and a shortage of circulating specie, the root of these ills could be traced to the loss of trade, manufacturing, and security, all problems thrown up by paralysis on the diplomatic front.

It requires a certain effort in 1987 to conceive of the sheer weakness of the Confederation. Though rarely mentioned in the secondary literature, it is significant that most warships acquired during the Revolution had been sold, so that for all intents and purposes the American navy ceased to exist.<sup>46</sup> In addition, land forces, as mentioned above, were negligible. No one would deny that the country had risen gloriously in a war against mighty Britain, but had this not been due largely to an alliance with mighty France? Would such aid be forthcoming in a future contest? And was such a contest not imminent? It had long been thought that England was spoiling for a chance to resubjugate its former colonies, indeed everything about British policy pointed in this direction.<sup>47</sup> By 1786 nearly all observers anticipated the outbreak of a European war, one in which an Anglo-Spanish combination would pose grave problems for the Confederation, with Britain poised to strike along the northern flank and Spain capable of penetration along a wide arc running south-southwest.<sup>48</sup> On hindsight, we know that such fears were far from illusory. Within the space of a few years war did in fact break out in Europe. England and Spain did join hands against Napoleon, although by this time Spain was less of a threat, having sold its stake in Louisiana. The United States did engage in another round of hostilities with the mother country. Its capital was put to the torch and its one great victory followed ingloriously on the aftermath of peace. The men of 1786 had reason to fret. They may be taken at their word.

All of which brings us to the much neglected question of national pride. Surely, if historians are willing to accept injury to public honor as a leading cause of American entry into the War of 1812 and World War I, they should be prepared to regard such sentiment as an agent in sparking constitutional reform. What is striking on reexamination of the manuscript sources is the

<sup>46</sup>Long to Langdon, 6 August 1786, and Williamson to Madison, 2 June 1788, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:414, 746; David Ramsay, "An Address to the Freemen of South Carolina," in *Pamphlets on the Constitution of the United States, 1787-88*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (Brooklyn, 1892), 378-79.

<sup>47</sup>Among those who anticipated a renewal of the contest with Britain were R. H. Lee, Jefferson, Monroe, Samuel Adams, John Adams, and Jay. See R. H. Lee to Henry, 18 December 1784, and Lee to Madison, 27 December 1784, in Burnett, *Letters* 7:631, 638; Lee to John Adams, 18 November 1784, and John Adams to Samuel Adams, 2 June 1786, Adams Papers (transcripts); Monroe to Madison, 6 March 1785, in Hamilton, *Writings of James Monroe* 1:65; John Adams to Jay, 13 April and 6 August 1785, in Adams, *Works of John Adams* 8:235, 291; Jay to Jefferson, 13 July 1785, and John Adams to Jay, 30 August 1785, *DC*, 1:615, and 2:469-70; and *New Jersey Gazette*, 13 November 1786.

<sup>48</sup>Monroe to Jefferson, 16 June 1786, in Hamilton, *Writings of James Monroe* 1:137; Marquis de Lafayette to Jay, 8 February 1785, in Wharton, *Diplomatic Correspondence* 1:301; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 5 July 1786; Lee to Henry, 18 December 1784, in Ballagh, *Letters of Richard Henry Lee* 2:315. For later expressions of concern see *Federalist*, No. 24; "Secretary of Congress to the States," 28 November 1787, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:684; and Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington* 29:350-51.

frequency with which this topic arises. It runs like the song of the whippoorwill through the letters and writings of Madison, Monroe, and the brace of Adamses; of Franklin, Jay, Hamilton, King, John Tyler, William Grayson, Pelatiah Webster, and Tench Coxe.<sup>49</sup> A constant in the correspondence of Washington, it may also be found, often enough, in Virginia's legislative petitions.<sup>50</sup> Was this not, after all, the "City Upon a Hill," and if one may quote Richard Henry Lee, president of Congress, were the "eyes of the world" not upon it?<sup>51</sup> Journals and personal reports are replete with tales of the shabbiness with which Americans were treated abroad. When the captain of a ship owned by Pennsylvania financier Robert Morris put into Barbados with a request to overhaul leaks, the British admiral in charge allowed entry for repair, but after a short interval, local officials proceeded to throw overboard some four hundred barrels of American flour, serving notice on the startled captain that he could either weigh anchor or face impoundment. When he asked indignantly where he was to go with a vessel stripped of cargo and ballast, he was reportedly told that he could go "to hell."<sup>52</sup> In another incident, a British patrol off the coast of Ireland fired into the rigging of an American merchantman without any apparent reason other than spite. American goods were repeatedly seized on frivolous pretexts.<sup>53</sup>

Needless to say, Spanish closure of the Mississippi was cited as yet

<sup>49</sup>See, for example, William Grayson to Madison, 22 March 1786, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:333; John Adams to R. H. Lee, 23 December 1784, and R. H. Lee to John Adams, 14 March 1785, Adams Papers (transcripts); Tench Coxe, *An Inquiry into the Principles on Which a Commercial System for the United States Should be Founded* (Philadelphia, 1787), 51; Pelatiah Webster, *Remarks on the Address of Sixteen Members of the Assembly of Pennsylvania to Their Constituents. Dated September 29, 1787. With Some Stricture on Their Objections to the Constitution Recommended by the Late Federal Convention, Humbly Offered to the Public. By A Citizen of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1787), 25; Madison to Jefferson, 18 March 1786, in Hunt, *Writings of James Madison* 2:227; King to John Adams, 2 November 1785, in King, *Rufus King* 1:113; Monroe to Madison, 15 November 1784, in Hamilton, *Writings of James Monroe* 1:49; Jay to Livingston, 19 July 1783, Jay to Jefferson, 14 July 1786, and Jay to John Adams, 21 February 1787, in Johnston, *Papers of John Jay* 3:55, 206, 235; Hamilton, "Continentalist No. 6," and "Letter from Phocion No. 1," in Syrett, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton* 3:106, 492; John Adams to Arthur Lee, 6 September 1785, in Adams, *Works of John Adams* 9:537; Franklin to president of Congress, 13 September 1783, *DC*, 1:369; Hunt, *Journals* 31:869; R. H. Lee to Samuel Adams, 14 March 1785, in Ballagh, *Letters of Richard Henry Lee* 2:342; and Tyler to Monroe, 26–27 November 1784, series 1, vol. 1, Monroe Papers.

<sup>50</sup>See, for example, Washington's letters to William Gordon, 8 July 1783, Benjamin Harrison, 18 January 1784, Clinton, 25 November 1784, R. H. Lee, 14 December 1784, James Duane, 10 April 1785, R. H. Lee, 22 June 1785, James McHenry, 22 August 1785, Henry Lee, 31 October 1786, Madison, 5 November 1786, William S. Johnson, 12 November 1786, Knox, 26 December 1786, and Lafayette, 15 August 1787, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington* 27:49, 306, 501, 28:10, 124, 174, 230, and 29:34, 51, 61, 122, 124, 260; and Virginia Legislative Petitions, Amherst County, 9 November 1784, Augusta County, 25 October 1786, Nansemond County, 4 November 1785, and Norfolk County (town of Portsmouth), 5 November 1785.

<sup>51</sup>R. H. Lee to Samuel Adams, 14 March 1785, Adams Papers (transcripts).

<sup>52</sup>*New Jersey Gazette*, 8 May 1786.

<sup>53</sup>*Pennsylvania Gazette*, 5 July and 30 August 1786.

another chapter in the chronicle of "national outrage."<sup>54</sup> Galling, too, was a report that American captives in Algiers were beholden for their deliverance to the resident British consul—this at a time when Great Britain had yet to exchange envoys with the United States.<sup>55</sup> The Court of St. James's accepted an American minister in the person of John Adams, but it would not reciprocate. Adams and his wife, Abigail, have long been celebrated for their extreme sensitivity to anything even remotely approaching an insult. He regarded Joel Barlow's epic work, *The Vision of Columbus*, as the greatest poetry since Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and while in London from 1785 to 1788 he penned a three-volume defense of the American constitutions. Letter after letter flowed from Adams's busy hand, exhorting the states individually, then as a group, to bolster their union and make the flag respectable. Obligated to press for British compliance with a treaty flouted by renegade states, Adams was further reduced to begging for a commercial treaty in the name of a Congress that could not answer for national conduct in any important area, least of all commerce. Snubbed by society and held at arm's length by the diplomatic community, he was hard-pressed to remain on the political offensive.<sup>56</sup> Neither he nor Jefferson, who headed the American mission in France, could afford to entertain in the customary manner, and both complained of slender allowances. Did Congress not realize that American envoys were despised as the pale "shadow of a shade." Only payment of the national debt, wrote Adams, would "protect us from a war and confute forever the numberless calumnies." In no other way would it be possible "to vindicate the faith or the honor of our country." Unburdening himself to Cotton Tufts in May 1786, Adams became almost apoplectic: "I would repeal every law," he wrote, "that has the least appearance of clashing with the treaty of peace. . . . I would prohibit or burden with duties every importation from Britain, and would demand, in a tone that would not be resisted, the punctual fulfillment of every iota of the treaty on the part of Britain. Nay, I would carry it so far, that if the posts were not immediately evacuated, I would not go and attack them, but declare war directly, and march one army to Quebec and another to Nova Scotia."<sup>57</sup> One of the things that rankled most was the rabidly anti-American tone of the English and Continental press. "An Ambassador from America! Good Heavens!" hissed one foreign journal.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Hardy to Henry, 5 December 1784, in Burnett, *Letters* 7:620.

<sup>55</sup>Report by John Jay, 2 January 1786, in Hunt, *Journals* 30:11–12.

<sup>56</sup>"Report of the Congressional Committee on Despatches from Foreign Ministers," 25 September 1783. Stephen Higginson to Samuel Holten, 14 October 1783, Abiel Foster to Meshech Weare, 15 October 1783, and Virginia delegates to Governor Harrison, 1 November 1783, in Burnett, *Letters* 7:305–6, 334, 336, 366–67; Elias Boudinot to John Adams, 1 November 1783, and John Adams to Livingston, 16 and 18 July 1783, in Wharton, *Diplomatic Correspondence* 6:554, 561, 719; John Adams to Jay, 3 and 8 May, and 19 July 1785, *DC*, 1:487, 491–94 and 2:399–400.

<sup>57</sup>John Adams to Arthur Lee, 6 September 1785, and John Adams to Tufts, 26 May 1786, in Adams, *Works of John Adams* 9:537, 549. See also Marks, *Independence on Trial*, 131–33.

<sup>58</sup>Abigail Adams to Jefferson, 6 June 1785, in Cappon, *Adams-Jefferson Letters* 1:29. See also Adams to Jay, 15 December 1785, and Smith to Jay, 6 December 1785, *DC*, 2:550–51 and 3:12.

Two years earlier, in late 1784, Samuel Adams had displayed a not uncommon optimism, albeit one mixed with foreboding, when he declared that "by God's blessing on the councils and the arms of our country we are now ranked with nations . . . [but] better it would have been for us to have fallen in our highly famed struggle for our rights . . . than now to become a contemptible nation. The world has given us an exalted character, and thus have . . . raised expectations from us! How shall we meet those expectations?"<sup>59</sup> By August 1786 such expectations were fast crumbling, with thirty Americans languishing in North African prison camps, roughly equivalent in today's terms to 3,000 persons in the hands of terrorists. Franklin's abolitionist society made good use of this issue, lobbying the Philadelphia Convention with dire accounts that detailed the physical distress American unfortunates endured at the hands of their pirate-captors. In his inimitable way, Franklin drew a neat parallel between the fate of American "slaves" in North Africa and that of African bondsmen in America.<sup>60</sup> Especially painful for Congress was its chronic inability to obtain a bare working quorum, the requisite two-thirds attending on only three days between October 1785 and May 1786.<sup>61</sup> Few Americans needed to be reminded by such overseas friends as Richard Price that the power of Congress had become "an object of derision."<sup>62</sup>

I know of no other period in American history when foreign affairs has been so crucial for the future of the Republic yet so neglected by American historians. Diplomatic problems, which occupy only about five percent of the space in Jensen's *New Nation*, had reached the boiling point by early 1786.<sup>63</sup> In February the Treasury Board reported desperation on the fiscal front. In June the secretary of war warned Congress that the forces at his disposal were "utterly incompetent." In August, and again in October, Congress reported that the union was threatened with "calamity." Washington, along with Jay and many others, agreed that affairs were drawing rapidly to a "crisis."<sup>64</sup>

This is not to suggest that the disturbances in Massachusetts, which began in late August and reached their culmination in December and January

<sup>59</sup>Samuel Adams to R. H. Lee, 23 December 1784, Adams Papers (transcripts).

<sup>60</sup>Rhode Island delegates to Governor John Collins, 28 September 1786, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:471-72; *Gentleman's Magazine* 57 (October 1787): 925; *New Jersey Gazette*, 2 January 1786.

<sup>61</sup>Dane to Edward Pullen, 8 January 1786, and King to Gerry, 30 April 1786, in Burnett, *Letters* 8:281-82, 346; Franklin to Jefferson, 20 March 1786, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Albert Henry Smyth, 10 vols. (New York, 1905-7), 9:499.

<sup>62</sup>*Gentleman's Magazine* 57 (July 1787): 631.

<sup>63</sup>Although Jensen's *New Nation* was written as a general survey of the period, its author devoted only about 20 pages out of 420 to diplomatic origins of the Constitution, and the index of the book does not contain a single entry for Joseph Brant, Alexander McGillivray, Josiah Harmar, the *Betsey*, the *Dauphin*, or the *Maria*.

<sup>64</sup>Washington to Jay, 15 August 1786, in Johnston, *Papers of John Jay* 3:207-8; Treasury Board report, 8 February 1786, congressional report to the states, 31 August and 9 October 1786, and report of the secretary at war, 21 June 1786, in Hunt, *Journals* 30:54-59, 346 and 31:753-58.

of 1787, were not important.<sup>65</sup> The proverbial straw that broke the camel's back was also important. Or, as the *Virginia Independent Chronicle* so aptly put it, Shays and his followers completed "the full measure of our calamities."<sup>66</sup> Had Shays led his men against Massachusetts courts in 1783, 1784, or 1785, historians probably never would have accorded him more than the minor place he deserves. As it happened, however, his mobilization of 1200 men came at the eleventh hour, when Congress was debating the Annapolis Report and deciding whether or not to recommend a convention with power broad enough to draft a new constitution. Interestingly enough, Congress gave no sign of panic. It authorized General Knox to raise troops in case of emergency, but these troops were never deployed against Shays. Nor did Congress hurry in its endorsement of Annapolis. Instead, the pace was deliberate. Hamilton's report proposed a meeting on the second Monday of May, but Congress set the date slightly later. When the appointed hour arrived and Philadelphia's bells began to ring, only two states were in attendance. Hardly a sign of panic in the ranks of Federalism.

Nineteen furies had driven the Confederation to the point of no return by 1786. One more fury may or may not have been needed. In the event, such a fury materialized. His name was Daniel Shays, and there can be no doubt of his fury. At the same time, he should not be depicted as a force of nineteen when, in fact, he was only one.

Was Massachusetts somehow radicalized by Shays's Rebellion and by the events leading to it? If so, one would expect its behavior to differ from that of the other states. But in what respect was it different? Take, for example, Virginia's invitation to Annapolis. Some states acted promptly, hastening to name delegates, who hastened to attend. Other states declined to name delegates at all. And what of Massachusetts? It named delegates, but they did not arrive in time to participate. New Jersey and New York were represented, but not Massachusetts. One can go a step further. Was Massachusetts one of the first states to second the official recommendation for a constitutional convention, or perhaps one of the *last*? Did its conduct stand out in any appreciable way? Again, the answer is no.<sup>67</sup> One might add that Federalists in the Bay State had numerous reasons, apart from their aversion to Shays, to desire such a convention: manufacturing and commercial distress, a shipping depression, destruction of the whaling industry, and much else. It is true that one of Massachusetts's delegates to the Philadelphia Convention was

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<sup>65</sup>Madison included paper money, debts, and the "occlusion of courts" in his 1787 list of grievances leading to Philadelphia. Later in life, he again credited Shays's protest movement as being a definite factor in triggering constitutional reform. See Madison, "Observations," April 1787, and undated manuscript [circa 1835?], in Hunt, *Writings of James Madison* 2:362, 406.

<sup>66</sup>*Virginia Independent Chronicle*, 5 December 1787.

<sup>67</sup>By 21 February 1787, when Congress approved the Annapolis Report, five states had already decided to send delegates to a constitutional convention: North Carolina, Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.



outspoken in decrying the evils which flow from "an excess of democracy." But Elbridge Gerry was an Antifederalist!<sup>68</sup>

Two other questions come to mind regarding the behavior of Massachusetts. Was it one of the first states to ratify the Constitution, or perhaps one of the *last*? Was it conspicuous in its haste or tardiness? Its approval came on 7 February 1788. This, one notes, was after Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Georgia had all made their decision, but well in advance of other states. Admittedly, the final vote in the Massachusetts ratifying convention was close, 187-167, and much has been made of the animus between backcountry and eastern establishment. Nevertheless, other states approved by equally narrow margins: Virginia, for example, and New York (89-79 and 30-27 respectively). And what does the closeness of the vote prove? If the backcountry delegates in Massachusetts were generally opposed to the eastern delegates, was this not true in other states that had not experienced anything on the order of Shays's Rebellion? In Virginia, had not ten of Kentucky's fourteen delegates lined up behind Patrick Henry against a phalanx representing the Tidewater region?

It would seem that the only thing definite one can say about the state in which Shays's Rebellion occurred is that its political behavior, at least in the context of constitutional reform, was totally unexceptional. And should one be surprised? Can one not assume, as a rule, that more remote areas with less wealth and education tend to be more stand-pat conservative, more provincial, and more susceptible to conspiracy theories than their counterparts? Presumably, the greater the contact with the world of commerce and foreign nations, the more interested one would be in framing a new constitution, especially if the underlying thesis of this essay is tenable: namely, that the strongest driving force behind the Constitution by far was a crying weakness in the area of foreign affairs.

Today, more than at any time since the turn of the century, Americans may be in a position to appreciate the range of problems experienced in 1786, for in many respects it appears that we have come full circle. Once again, the specter of state-sponsored terrorism in the Mediterranean and Middle East has reared its ugly head. Americans are again being wounded, insulted, and held for ransom. Once more we find ourselves threatened with national annihilation, the only difference being that, instead of facing forty-gun frigates, we are called upon to contemplate an arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles. Our national honor continues to smart after misadventures in Southeast Asia and a wholesale desertion of allies. The accumulated weight of imprudence and scandal has weakened our executive, and we sense instability in the realm of trade and fiscal policy. There is even talk of the need for a constitutional convention. Some have spoken of extending the terms of congressmen from two years to four, others of lengthening the presidential term. Fresh consideration is being given to the advantages of the parliamentary system.

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<sup>68</sup>Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia* (Boston, 1966), 45.

Not that our quandaries and problems are on a par with those facing the leadership of 1786. They are not. But we may be better equipped than we have been for some time to realize that our nation was formed in a crucible of insecurity and that there is an abiding need for vigor, consistency, and boldness in the federal government. As students of diplomacy in the Confederation era, we can observe the price to be paid for head-in-the-sand isolationism. We can also take pride in what our forebears accomplished against heavy odds. Finally, we can appreciate the potential for intelligent change when we ponder what a new government under Washington was able to achieve in eight short years, from 1789 to 1797, as compared with the drift and stagnation of the previous eight.