

## GEORGE WASHINGTON

### Letters about Shays's Rebellion (1786)

*The eruption in Massachusetts ignited public and private outbursts within and well beyond the state. Newspaper publishers filled column upon column with reports of the insurgents' as well as the government's actions, while correspondents penned their opinions of the legality, morality, and repercussions of the rebellion. Some Americans supported the rebellion, but many others feared, deplored, and condemned it. The strong reactions showed how sensitive many Americans, including George Washington, were to both the image as well as the implementation of their republican experiment. Washington, who had resigned his commission and returned to private life as a planter after the war, was still vitally concerned about the security and interests of the new nation. To that end he encouraged attendance at the Annapolis Convention in September 1786, and then when that failed to draw enough delegates, he supported the call for a convention to take place the following year in Philadelphia. In almost constant communication with other leading revolutionaries, he continued to influence events as he offered his opinions and advice.*

---

From John C. Fitzpatrick, *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 29 (Washington, D.C., GPO, 1939), pp. 50–52, 121–124.

#### *To James Madison*

Mount Vernon, November 5, 1786

My dear Sir: . . . Fain would I hope, that the great, and most important of all objects, the federal governmt., may be considered with that calm and deliberate attention which the magnitude of it so loudly calls for at this critical moment. Let prejudices, unreasonable jealousies, and local interest yield to reason and liberality. Let us look to our National character, and to things beyond the present period. No morn ever dawned more favourably than ours did; and no day was ever more clouded than the present! Wisdom, and good examples are necessary at this time to rescue the political machine from the impending storm. Virginia has now an opportunity to set the latter, and has enough of the former, I hope, to take the lead in promoting this great and arduous work. Without some alteration in our political creed, the superstructure we have been seven years raising at the expence of so

much blood and treasure, must fall. We are fast verging to anarchy and confusion!

A letter which I have just received from Genl Knox, who had just returned from Massachusetts (whither he had been sent by Congress consequent of the commotion in that State) is replete with melancholy information of the temper, and designs of a considerable part of that people. Among other things he says,

there creed is, that the property of the United States, has been protected from confiscation of Britain by the joint exertions of *all*, and therefore ought to be the *common property* of all. And he that attempts opposition to this creed is an enemy to equity and justice, and ought to be swept from off the face of the Earth.

again

They are determined to anihillate all debts public and private, and have Agrarian Laws, which are easily