



Written by [Becky Akers](#) on February 3, 2010

## Mission Impossible: Suppressing the Government from All Tyrannical Oppression

“The sky [was] unclouded and the moon in full splendor,” Mercy continues, “but after a few hours the wind rose, the clouds gathered blackness, and the cold was so intense that it was scarcely supportable by the hardiest” of soldiers. Compounding the troops’ suffering was a “deep snow that had previously fallen, and lain so uncemented that the gusts drove it in the faces of the army with the violence of a rapid snow storm.”

Good: these Americans deserved all the punishment the elements could dish out – though you’ll never learn that from Mercy. She portrays them as heroes for marching through this bitter night 223 years ago to defend Massachusetts’ politicians from the angry farmers footing their extravagances. We still pay the costs of this skirmish; in a sense, it was the penultimate battle of the American Revolution, though statists then and ever since pooh-pooh it as Shays’ Rebellion. Whatever its name, it provided an excuse for a Constitutional Convention later that year – a Convention whose locked doors and secret debates spawned the central government that hatched our modern Leviathan.



In 1775, the Continental Congress found itself raising an army to overthrow government but without any power to tax. It could ask the thirteen states for troops as well as the money to feed, clothe, and equip them, but finances always fell far short. So politicians took the easy way out, as they do now: they printed money. Nothing tangible backed the issues then, either, only a promise to pay with tax-receipts one day. And the representatives approving this larceny were as economically stupid as their descendants: though we can applaud one delegate for asking why “he was expected to help tax people,” he objected because Congress could always “go to the printing office and get money by the cart load.”

Those cart-loads of scraps, dubbed “Continental,” paid soldiers as well as the farmers from whom the army’s foragers wrested rations. Inflation even worse than ours quickly robbed the bills of their nominal value, until Americans spoke with disgust of anything useless as “not worth a Continental.”

But when the war’s shooting subsided, speculators discovered a use for Continentals. Betting that



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Congress would fulfill its threat to tax Americans now that peace was on its way, they scooped up dollars from soldiers and farmers selling at steep discounts lest their families starve. And when speculators were politically powerful – one, James Bowdoin, was governor of Massachusetts in 1787; others were cronies –, they manipulated the laws of repayment and taxation to even greater benefit.

Bowdoin's minions began dunning veterans recently returned to their neglected farms with little to show for their valor but a few coins from a speculator. More and more families lost homes as the state foreclosed. Men gathered to oppose American tyrants as they had British ones 20 years before, and with the same tactics.

First, they petitioned, informing their rulers that they would not tolerate tyranny: "Surely your honours are not strangers to the distresses of the people but do know that many of our good inhabitants are now confined in goal for debt and for taxes: many have fled." Why, then, did politicians continue pocketing large "salaries and grants," which the petitioners could not "reconcile...with the principles of our [Massachusetts' state] Constitution [viz] piety, justice, moderate, temperance, etc"?

Because rulers deal in force, they seldom heed mere words. That compelled the farmers to stronger measures. They forcibly closed the courthouses stripping them of their homes for unpaid taxes. One addressed onlookers in Concord: "As Christ laid down his life to save the world, so will I lay down my life to suppress the Government from all tyrannical oppression, and you who are willing to join us in this here affair may fall into our ranks."

Rhetoric is one thing; rhetoric from a guy toting a musket and closing courthouses is another. Massachusetts' eighteenth-century administrators trembled as much as its modern ones would, then summoned the militia. Or tried to: few citizens responded. Indeed, so widespread was the outrage at the American despots who had replaced British ones that the government never did field a force large enough to defeat these patriots.

Daniel Shays was a Revolutionary veteran under the impression that he had fought a war against just such taxation as Massachusetts was imposing. Although the rebellion bears his name, historian Page Smith points out that Captain Shays "simply appeared as its leader in the latter and most critical phase of the movement... Perhaps there was a feeling...[that] to call the farmers' insurrection Shays' Rebellion might suggest that it was the work of one dangerous demagogue and not a popular uprising." And the Captain himself denied leading anything or -one: "I at their head! I am not!" Better to denominate these lovers of liberty as they themselves did: Regulators.

The term owned a different and delightful definition then, when taxpayers regulated government instead of the other way around. Regulators in North Carolina had rebelled against taxation and corruption from 1764 to 1771, just as Massachusetts' were now protesting the evils that are ever synonymous with the State.

After a summer and fall of closed courthouses and conflict, the Regulators marched on the government's arsenal at Springfield that "intense[ly] cold" February 3. There mercenaries whom speculators and merchants had hired, who had hiked overnight through blinding snow, turned the arsenal's cannon on them, capturing about 1000 men. As February ended, so did the revolt, in another bloody defeat at Sheffield.

Federalists were already at work, distorting events to insist that violence and chaos were the inevitable alternatives to strong, centralized government. They turned the Regulators into communists hoping to abolish private property or even civilization itself. General Henry Knox, commander of artillery during



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the Revolution, shamelessly slandered “the people who are the insurgents” by alleging that “they see the weakness of government; they feel at once their own poverty compared with the opulent, and their own force, and they are determined to make use of the latter in order to remedy the former.” Indeed, they had mounted “a formidable rebellion ... against the very name of liberty.”

Centralizers also pretended the Regulators were deadbeats dodging honest debts. John and Abigail Adams were then in London, representing America at the British Court, yet distance didn’t keep Abigail from sneering at the Regulators as “ignorant, wrestless desperadoes, without conscience or principles” and “mobbish insurgents” (the eighteenth-century equivalent of “domestic terrorists”). She feared they would “shear” America’s “glory” and “blast” its “laurels.”

General “Lighthouse Harry” Lee, a Revolutionary hero whose son Robert E. would repudiate his Federalism, darkly predicted that “A continuance of our present feeble political form is pregnant with daily evils & must drive us at last to a change.”

The daily evils didn’t: Federalist propaganda did. Lee and others fed a steady diet of it to General George Washington. He’d announced his retirement to Mount Vernon, but the hysteria over Shays’ Rebellion perturbed him into lending his considerable influence to the cries for a national government. With the man Lighthouse Harry described as “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen” presiding at the Constitutional Convention, American acceptance of whatever it produced was almost guaranteed - an excellent lesson to trust in God and liberty alone, not in any man, however wise or virtuous.

Shays’ Rebellion was the last in the series of armed protests against taxation and oppression we call the American Revolution. Mercy Otis Warren tacitly recognized this when she concluded her History with it. On the other hand, it tragically reversed most of the Revolution’s accomplishments. Patriots had deposed one set of tyrants; Federalists installed another, albeit native-born. Status quo resumed - and reigns to this day. Notwithstanding claptrap about “of, by, and for the people,” the worthless but powerful govern — which is to say tax, victimize, and exploit - the productive and poor, as they always have and always will. America’s twist on this age-old phenomenon was to replace heredity with fluidity: even impoverished kids can grow up to lord it over their betters, provided they’re corrupt, ruthless, and tyrannical. The silly and senseless consider this an improvement.

For a dozen glorious years, from April 1775 until February 1787, it seemed mankind might finally shuck the State’s shackles, might finally rise up and live free. The Regulators proved we must first drive government from the earth.

**Becky Akers**, an expert on the American Revolution, writes frequently about issues related to security and privacy. Her articles and columns have been published by *Lewrockwell.com*, *The Freeman*, *Military History Magazine*, *American History Magazine*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *New York Post*, and other publications.



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