
Two hundred years ago a federal tax on distilled spirits led to our young nation's greatest internal crisis.

PRELUDE

On August 1, 1794, a motley army assembled at Braddock's Field on the Monongahela River near Pittsburgh. Nearly seven thousand armed militiamen--some dressed in regimental uniforms, others wearing the yellow hunting shirts of Indian fighters--mustered on the plain where, thirty-nine years before, British General William Braddock had been mortally wounded and his forces defeated during the French and Indian War.

To the casual observer the assembly might have appeared to be a celebration, given the holiday atmosphere that prevailed as military drums beat loudly, soldiers marched and countermarched, and riflemen took target practice, filling the air with thick gray smoke. But the purpose of the gathering was deadly serious. These were the "Whiskey Rebels"--backwoods citizens of Pennsylvania's four western counties (Allegheny, Westmoreland, Fayette, and Washington) who had assembled to demonstrate their defiance of the federal government's excise tax on whiskey and to coerce others into joining them in opposition. Many of the rebels advocated outright independence from the United States, and several of the units displayed a six-striped flag representing the six defiant counties of western Pennsylvania and Virginia.

The insurgents' immediate plan was to seize nearby Fort Fayette and then occupy and burn Pittsburgh, which in their eyes exemplified the haughty eastern patricians who had imposed this unfair tax. The rationale at the time, according to an 1859 defense of a key figure in the events, was that "as old Sodom had been burned by fire from heaven, this second Sodom should be burnt by fire from earth!"

The ardent force was led by "Major General" David Bradford, a wealthy lawyer who fancied himself the "George Washington of the West." As the troops assembled, Bradford, dressed in military attire and mounted on a "superb horse in splendid trappings," dashed across the field "with plumes floating in the air and sword drawn." The ostentatious Bradford (prudently deciding to bypass well-defended Fort Fayette) then led his forces eight miles west toward Pittsburgh for what was euphemistically described as a "visit." Relishing the upcoming plunder of Pittsburgh's fancy shops, one upcountry soldier twirled his hat on his rifle barrel and boasted, "I have a bad hat now, but I expect to have a better one soon."

The advance of such a lawless, anti-aristocratic mob terrified the citizens of Pittsburgh, even though many sympathized with the rebel cause. The residents' apprehension was heightened by an eerie apparition: a lone horseman riding through the streets holding a tomahawk above his head and warning that revocation of the excise tax would be only
the beginning of a larger revolution. "A great deal more is yet to be done," he chanted ominously.

Fearing the worst, Pittsburgh's twelve hundred citizens deployed a shrewd strategy to protect their town. Rather than greeting the insurrectionists with guns, they instead offered the soldiers hams, dried venison, bear meat, and, of course, casks of whiskey. Through these conciliatory actions, and by agreeing to banish known Federalist sympathizers from their limits, the Pittsburgh residents saved their town from destruction. Although the occupying force did burn a few farm buildings and steal some livestock, it soon dispersed, leaving "Sodom" largely undamaged and its populace shaken but unharmed.

The rally at Braddock's Field and the occupation of Pittsburgh marked the high point of what has since become known as the "Whiskey Rebellion." Perhaps because of its bibulous nickname--conjuring up images of a comical, pop-gun skirmish involving moonshining hillbillies--the uprising, regarded by nineteenth-century historians as the most important national crisis between the Revolutionary and Civil wars, today is more often remembered as a minor bump on the road to national consolidation.

Such an interpretation, however, overlooks the true significance of the crisis, which, more than any in the nation's formative years, defined the nature of the new federal government and its relationship to its citizens. This single event embodied nearly all of the fundamental issues and conflicts facing the young American republic and its new Constitution: the clash between liberty and order in a democracy; western versus eastern interests; agriculture versus industry; the nature of taxation; the duties and rights of citizens; relations with European powers such as Great Britain and Spain; the influence of the French Revolution; the rise of political parties; and the meaning of the American Revolution itself.

While some historians have dismissed the suppression of the rebellion as "duck soup" for the federal government, the outcome of this Constitutional crisis was, in fact, far from a foregone conclusion. It might well have resulted in the establishment of new states, fully independent of the government in Philadelphia, or perhaps in the alliance of trans-Appalachian counties with British Canada to the north or New Spain to the south. Moreover, the uprising was fraught with fascinating ironies: the requirements of the excise tax that triggered the revolt were relaxed just prior to the largest protest against it; the insurrection itself seemed to be dying out just when the federal government decided to suppress it; and President Washington, who had led the American rebellion against British taxation, now found himself on the opposite side, crushing a revolt against a similar internal tax.

I.

The roots of this complex and intriguing episode lay in the unique character of life on the western frontier during the 1780s and '90s. Separated from the coastal regions by vast stretches of rugged wilderness, westerners lived an isolated and dangerous existence that
was characterized by violence, economic uncertainty, and physical hardship. Despite frequent appeals to the federal government for protection, people all along the frontier lived in constant fear of massacre. Between 1783 and 1790 alone, fifteen hundred settlers in the Ohio Valley were killed, wounded, or captured by hostile Native Americans.

Many settlers who had moved west in pursuit of economic opportunity and personal liberty now found themselves living in lice-infested hovels and scratching out a bare subsistence on land owned by absentee landlords. Geography and politics made it difficult for farmers to ship their commodities to larger markets: overland transportation of goods to eastern cities was costly, while Spanish control of New Orleans prevented shipment via the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The settlers begged the federal government to negotiate with Spain for transportation rights, but by 1791 no agreement had been reached.

Amid such poverty and economic isolation, many backwoodsmen fell into a life of crudity and dissipation. Squalid living conditions, excessive drinking, and random violence were common. Headstrong settlers--many recently arrived from Scotland, Ireland, and Germany--grew increasingly frustrated by the disparity between their expectations of prosperity in America and the harsh realities of frontier life. Increasingly, they blamed their troubles on a presumed conspiracy between the federal government, which had proved unable or unwilling to control the Indians or to secure westerners access to Mississippi River trade rights, and the eastern elite.

It was against this background of economic impoverishment, political frustration, and social unrest in the trans-Appalachian West that, in March of 1791, the federal government imposed an excise tax on whiskey. Seeking to put the new nation on a sound financial footing, Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton convinced Congress and President Washington that the whiskey tax was needed to pay off the debts, now assumed by the federal government, that had been incurred by the former colonies during the Revolutionary War.

The new excise law required that each rural distiller pay either an annual rate of sixty cents for each gallon of his still's capacity or nine cents per gallon produced. Distillers also were expected to keep accurate records of production and to gauge and label each cask before shipment--stipulations that placed a particular burden on part-time, small-scale distillers not accustomed to such strict accounting. Federal excisemen were empowered to inspect stills and search property for contraband goods and illegal distilling operations. And, even more disturbing to westerners, the law called for accused tax evaders to be tried in federal courts at Philadelphia, necessitating a costly, time-consuming journey that could ruin a distiller financially even if he were found innocent.

The concept of an excise tax--an internal, direct tax on products produced--was especially odious to western Pennsylvanians. Numerous attempts to levy such taxes within the late colony of Pennsylvania had met with failure. Many recent immigrants from the British Isles had experienced first-hand the oppressive practices of the Crown's hated excise collectors, who often confiscated property and employed paid informers. And, of course,
it had been an excise tax—the Stamp Tax—that had angered and turned American colonists against Britain, leading to the late war for independence. That the infamous tax of 1765 had been imposed by a government in which they enjoyed no representation, while the tax on whiskey was enacted by their duly elected representatives, mattered little to a populace not yet used to the federal system of government created only a few years before.

Finally, citizens feared that, once the federal government got its foot in the door with the whiskey tax, it would soon pass internal taxes on other goods. "I plainly perceive," a Georgian predicted, "that the time will come when a shirt shall not be washed without an excise."

Hamilton dismissed many of the objections raised against the whiskey tax. The imposition of the duty, he believed, did not unfairly burden whiskey-producing areas because the tax rates—only a few dollars a year for the average small distiller—seemed quite low. And, reasoned Hamilton, if distillers did not want to pay the duty, they could simply produce less whiskey. What the Treasury Secretary failed to grasp was the centrality of whiskey to frontier life.

II.

On the nation's western perimeter, whiskey was more than a luxury item or an incidental distraction from the rigors of survival. It was the lifeblood of the backwoods economy and culture. Virtually cut off as they were from eastern markets and the Mississippi River trade, farmers found it more efficient to distill their rye grain into whiskey that could easily be sold or bartered. While the average pack horse, for instance, could carry only four bushels of grain, it could haul the equivalent of twenty-four bushels if that grain were converted into two casks of whiskey. Thus, in this more portable liquid form, "Monongahela Rye" became the "coin of the realm" in western Pennsylvania, used to pay hired workers or to buy everything from salt to nails to gunpowder.

But whiskey was much more than just commodity or currency on the frontier; it was a way of life. Whether sweetened with tansy, mint, or maple sugar or swallowed straight, whiskey lubricated nearly every rite of frontier existence. No marriage, baptism, contract signing, brawl, trial, election, meal, or funeral took place without generous helpings of the local brew. Doctors prescribed it for nearly every ill; ministers sipped it before services, field workers demanded it as refreshment; and the United States Army issued a gill each day to soldiers.

This insatiable thirst for whiskey rendered the still a "necessary appendage of every farm" that could afford it. "In many parts of the country," wrote one observer, "you could scarcely get out of sight of the smoke of a stillhouse." While perhaps only ten to twenty percent of western Pennsylvania farmers actually owned whiskey stills, many neighbors purchased stills together and shared their use. And, even those farmers who performed no distilling had a direct stake in whiskey production because they sold their rye grain to the local distillers.
Given the importance of whiskey on the frontier, it is not surprising that residents of the trans-Appalachian counties violently opposed the federal excise tax. The federal government in far-away Philadelphia--the same government that could not protect them from the Indians and could not secure them trade rights on the Mississippi--was asking westerners to shoulder a disproportionate financial burden by taxing their region's dominant product. Worse yet, in a society based on a barter economy, where coin and currency were scarce, the government demanded that its excise be paid not in whiskey or other commodities, but in hard specie.

It soon became clear that, in its search for the sweet honey of revenue, the federal government had stuck its hand into a beehive. Shortly after the whiskey tax went into effect on July 1, 1791, western Pennsylvanians responded with protest meetings, petitions, and outright assaults on revenue agents. In September 1791, sixteen Washington County men dressed in women's clothing seized excise collector Robert Johnson, cut off his hair, then tarred and feathered him. When John Connor tried to serve warrants to those accused of the assault, he himself was whipped, tarred and feathered, and tied to a tree.

Mobs burned revenue collectors in effigy and attacked their offices and lodgings. To show that the backwoodsmen equated the excise tax with British colonial oppression, dissidents erected "liberty poles," familiar icons of the Revolutionary War, and set up committees of correspondence similar to those that had kept protestors informed of developments in the struggle against the former mother country.

Inspired by the French Revolution as well as the American, tax resisters formed numerous democratic societies modeled after the Jacobin Clubs, righteously vowing to "erect the temple of LIBERTY on the ruins of palaces and thrones." These extra-legal organizations particularly irked President Washington, who, with France's upheavals in mind, viewed them as a direct challenge to Constitutional authority. They masked, he said, "diabolical attempts to destroy the best fabric of human government."

In May 1792, Secretary Hamilton, hoping to defuse the protests that rendered the whiskey revenue virtually uncollectible, persuaded Congress to reduce the tax rates and allow for monthly payments. When this failed to discourage the assemblies and quell the violence, Washington, in September 1792, issued a proclamation ordering the dissolution of any organization or meeting designed to obstruct the enforcement of any federal law. This action, however, also effectively silenced the moderates who sought a peaceful solution to the controversy, thus leaving radical leaders free to pursue their violent tactics.

III.

Sporadic attacks on revenue collectors continued through 1793, completely shutting down the collection of whiskey tax in all frontier regions. Meanwhile, the federal government in Philadelphia--already preoccupied by the Reign of Terror in France, Indian attacks on the frontier, and threats by Spain and Britain--was brought to a near-
standstill by a yellow fever epidemic that killed more than four thousand people in that city. Mistaking the federal government's distraction for lack of resolve on excise enforcement, tax protestors pressed their demands for its repeal.

In early 1794, radical leaders took a new tack. Instead of directing violence only against collectors and their offices, they now targeted anyone who complied with the tax or cooperated with its enforcement. Law-abiding distillers were visited by "Tom the Tinker" who "mended" their stills by riddling them with bullets. In Allegheny County, for example, mobs destroyed the 120-gallon still of William Cochran and dismantled the grist mill of James Kiddoe simply because both men had registered their stills with authorities as the law required.

Seeking to pacify the insurgents, Congress on June 5, 1794 further amended the excise law to provide accused tax evaders with local trials and small distillers with a special license for temporary operations. But on that same day, Congress passed a new revenue act extending excise levies to snuff and sugar—a move that confirmed protestors' fears that the excise on whiskey would inevitably expand to other products.

When federal agents began serving arrest warrants on alleged tax evaders during the summer of 1794, violence erupted anew. At dawn on July 16, forty rebels arrived at Bower Hill, the home of distinguished Revolutionary War officer John Neville, to demand his resignation as Inspector of Revenue for western Pennsylvania. Before his appointment as supervisor of excise collection, Neville—a wealthy whiskey producer whose clapboard mansion boasted such luxuries as mirrors, carpets, and an eight-day clock—had adamantly opposed the whiskey tax, leading rebels to suspect that he had taken a large bribe to assume his federal office. The once-respected Neville now was detested as a turncoat by the insurgents.

When the mob in his front yard ignored an order to disband, Neville fired into their midst, mortally wounding Oliver Miller. The rebels shot back and were closing in on the house when some of Neville's slaves, armed in anticipation of attack, opened fire from the rear, wounding four more militiamen. After a twenty-five-minute gun battle, the posse retreated.

The next day an army of five to seven hundred men led by Captain James McFarlane showed up at Bower Hill, which was now defended by ten federal soldiers from Fort Pitt, under the command of Major James Kirkpatrick. After brief negotiations, the rebels set several of the estate's outbuildings on fire and began an exchange of gunfire with the defending troops. During a lull in the fighting, McFarlane, thinking he had heard a call to parley, stepped out from behind a tree and was shot dead by the regulars. Smoke and heat from the burning structures subsequently filled the house, forcing the soldiers to surrender. The insurrectionists pillaged Neville's home and estate, liberating the mirrors and fancy clock. But Neville, who had been secreted in a nearby ravine by the soldiers before the rebels appeared on his property, escaped, as did his family.
With the death of McFarlane—who was a respected Revolutionary War hero—the insurgents now had a martyr. Radical leader David Bradford denounced McFarlane's "murder" and called for the rendezvous of militia forces at Braddock's Field. As it turned out, this dramatic show of force on August 1 marked the rebellion's zenith—and helped to provoke its violent suppression.

On learning of the rebels' "visit" to Pittsburgh, President Washington and Secretary Hamilton decided that time for military action had come. The nascent federal government, they believed, could no longer tolerate such blatant defiance of its laws. Although most residents of upcountry Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia also refused to pay the excise tax, the opposition in western Pennsylvania was more visible and violent than in these states, and its suppression would send a strong message to all of the dissidents.

Moreover, it was unthinkable to allow such treason to flourish in the very state that held the nation's capital. Exaggerated rumors of attacks on federal arsenals and invasions of towns by armed mobs swept through eastern cities. With Britain and Spain seeking to bully the young nation and France grappling with its revolution, this was no time for conciliation. At issue, Washington and Hamilton believed, was the very integrity and credibility of the federal government—perhaps even its survival.

Although he had made up his mind to wage war, Washington, hoping to appear conciliatory, in late August went through the motions of sending peace commissioners to seek a non-military solution. Thinking these negotiations legitimate, moderate leaders like Albert Gallatin, who himself later served as Secretary of the Treasury, persuaded many of the dissidents to cease their violence. Ironically, evidence suggests that opposition to the tax was waning just as Washington was preparing for military operations.

By early October, Washington had assembled a 12,950-man army from the state militias of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia, and Maryland. In many ways these forces were no more disciplined or well-organized than the dissidents they opposed. A curious blend of lower-class and gentlemen volunteers, the impromptu army suffered from high desertion rates, squabbles over chains of command, and persistent rumors that it was really being sent to fight Indians or seasoned British regulars.

But the militiamen's spirit was aroused when rebels derided their fighting prowess. "Brother, you must not think to frighten us," wrote one "Captain Whiskey" in a western Pennsylvania newspaper, "with . . . your watermelon armies from the Jersey shores; they would cut a much better figure in warring with the crabs and oysters about the Cape of Delaware." A "Jersey Blue" angrily retorted that "the water-melon army of New Jersey [had] ten-inch howitzers for throwing a species of melon very useful for curing a gravel occasioned by whiskey!" From then on this combined federal force would be known, both affectionately and derisively, as the "watermelon army."
General Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee, then governor of Virginia, commanded the force, whose ranks included the governors of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Revolutionary General Dan Morgan, future explorer Meriwether Lewis, five nephews of President Washington, and Alexander Hamilton himself. The southern wing of the army marched northwestward toward Pennsylvania from Virginia and Maryland, while the right flank proceeded westward from New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania.

On October 4, President Washington reviewed the northern contingent at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and his charisma greatly boosted morale. Soldiers and townspeople alike gave the hero of the Revolution a royal welcome. One observer noted that "when I saw the President lift his hat to the troops as they passed along, I thought I caught a glimpse of the Revolutionary Scene."

After traveling to Fort Cumberland, Maryland, to review the southern wing of the army, the president returned to Philadelphia. Soon after, the two contingents converged in Bedford, Pennsylvania. Although Lee was left in charge of military operations, Hamilton served as the force's unofficial civilian leader. Officers familiar with Hamilton's ambition noted that the Secretary's tent was bigger than Lee's and that he sometimes gave orders directly to soldiers.

The army's march westward during those brilliant autumn days proved part picnic and part pogrom. As the column crossed the Alleghenies, the Whiskey Rebellion seemed to evaporate ahead of it. Encountering no military opposition, the troops plundered plump chickens, butchered hogs, and imbibed generous portions of the notorious taxable liquid. The officers' diaries and letters read like tourist brochures, noting, for instance, that while Newtown was a poor place for acquiring hay it boasted "mountains of beef and oceans of whiskey."

But the army encountered--and inflicted--hardship as well. Because the huge force constantly out-marched its provisions, rations ran short. The troops' poorly made shoes disintegrated on cold, muddy roads. And the many liberty poles erected along the route served notice of the local citizens' hostility, which often manifested itself in taunts aimed at the soldiers or refusal of food or lodging.

In apprehending suspected leaders of the insurgency for interrogation, the troops could be brutal. On November 13, in what came to be known as the "dreadful night," the New Jersey cavalry dragged 150 suspects from their beds, marched them--some half-clothed and barefooted--through snow and sleet, and incarcerated them in a roofless outdoor pen. General Andrew White, dubbed "Blackbeard" for his cruelty, kept his forty captives tied back-to-back in an unheated cellar for two days without food, then herded them like animals through twelve miles of mud and rain.

Because David Bradford and as many as two thousand die-hard rebels fled westward into the wilderness, most of the suspects seized for questioning were not the ringleaders of the uprising. Hamilton and Lee, for instance, interrogated the moderate Hugh Brackenridge
intensely for hours before concluding that their prisoner had been trying to temper the rebellion rather than incite it.

In late November, twenty obscure rebels--none of whom had actually been key figures in the uprising--were shipped to Philadelphia for trial. Paraded through the capital's streets on Christmas Day, the prisoners looked so wretched that even Presley Neville, son of the besieged excise inspector, felt sorry for them. Ultimately, only two suspects were found guilty of treason, and Washington, seeking to appear magnanimous, pardoned both.

Leaving fifteen hundred troops in Pittsburgh to maintain order, the bulk of the watermelon army began its return home in late November. The entire expedition had cost $1,500,000--about one third of the revenues raised by the whiskey tax during its entire life. But cost mattered little given the principles at stake. On January 1, 1795, a "gravely exultant" Washington proclaimed February 19 as a day of thanksgiving for "the reasonable control which has been given to a spirit of disorder in the suppression of the late insurrection."

Indeed, Washington and the Federalists had much to be thankful for. With a relatively painless and largely bloodless military excursion, they had asserted the supremacy of the federal Constitution and ensured that the trans-Appalachian west would remain part of the United States.

The Whiskey Rebellion was a personal triumph for Washington as well. He had placed his political reputation and prestige on the line--and had prevailed. His actions would serve as precedent for John Adams in his handling of the Fries Rebellion in 1799, Andrew Jackson's response to the nullification crisis of the 1830s, and Abraham Lincoln's reaction to secession in 1861.

Ironically, the defeat of western Pennsylvanians in the Whiskey Rebellion brought with it the alleviation of many of the region's problems. By spending so much money during its invasion, the watermelon army seeded western Pennsylvania with enough currency to germinate a prosperous commercial economy there. And in the single year following the rebellion, the Jay Treaty reduced Great Britain's Indian agitation and interference on the American western frontier, the Pinckney Treaty secured free trade on the Mississippi from Spain, and the Treaty of Greenville reduced the threat of Indian attack.

Finally, by dramatically defining the key political issues of the day--East versus West, agriculture versus commerce, plutocracy versus democracy, order versus liberty--the Whiskey Rebellion fostered the development of a two-party system in American politics. By 1801, with the election of Thomas Jefferson as president, the Republican Party, representing many of the principles advocated by insurgents, would gain control of the national government.

Thus, when the Republican Congress in 1802 repealed the hated excise that had started all the fuss, the Whiskey Boys could hoist their first untaxed jugs in ten years and savor sweet victory.
Recommended additional reading: Two excellent book-length narratives of the events described in this article are Thomas P. Slaughter's *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1986) and *The Whiskey Rebellion: Southwestern Pennsylvania's Frontier People Test the American Constitution* by Jerry A. Clouse (Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1994).

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