

Washington and the Whiskey Rebellion

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Vocabulary

- ▶ snuff
- ▶ peacefully
- ▶ colonist
- ▶ overthrow
- ▶ unfairly
- ▶ marshal
- ▶ treason

This is a point-counterpoint essay. In this style of essay, a question is discussed from two opposing points of view. In this case, the question is: *Was the Whiskey Rebellion a justified revolt by farmers who opposed taxation or did the Washington administration act appropriately to enforce constitutional rule of law?*

Claim A

The Whiskey Rebellion as Protest Against Unfair Government Power

The Whiskey Rebellion was a justified revolt by farmers who felt like the government was acting unfairly. They believed the taxes were like what Britain had passed before the Revolutionary War, which Americans had united against.

Longstanding Grievances Against Central Authority

The Whiskey Rebellion was a protest by farmers who thought the government was treating them unfairly. They said the new taxes were just like the British taxes that led to the American Revolution. The farmers had a long history of fighting against taxes from the central government. When President Washington used the military to stop the rebellion, many thought he used too much force. When the rebellion ended peacefully, Washington pardoned the rebels, which showed that he understood their suffering.

The Burden on Western Farmers

The trouble began when Alexander Hamilton suggested a tax on whiskey in 1790 to help pay back money borrowed during the Revolutionary War. Hamilton wanted most government money to come from taxes on goods brought into America, and he thought more taxes would help pay back loans faster. The new tax would be collected when whiskey was made. The farmers didn't want to pay this tax because it made their whiskey more expensive and more difficult to sell.

Methods of Resistance

Congress approved the tax in 1791. People in the western parts of America quickly began protesting the whiskey tax, and their protests grew stronger each year. The British had used similar taxes in the 1760s, and Americans had always hated them. The new taxes hurt western farmers the most, and these farmers were already poor. In western Pennsylvania, making whiskey was how many farmers earned their living. People even used whiskey as money when trading with each other. The state of Pennsylvania was already taxing whiskey makers, so the new tax meant farmers had to pay even more. The whiskey rebels wondered why they had to pay these taxes when other workers didn't.

Washington's Strong Response

In 1794, Congress added new taxes on other things like snuff, sugar, and carriages, which made people protest even more. The rebels used the same methods people had used during the Revolution. They attacked tax collectors, wrote letters to government officials, held meetings to plan their protests, and refused to do business with people who supported the tax. After trying to talk with the protesters and failing, Washington and Hamilton put on their military uniforms and led an army of nearly thirteen thousand soldiers to stop the rebellion. While the rebels may have damaged some property and threatened public safety, Washington's response was overblown. He led thousands of troops to the areas in rebellion in order to stop the disorder. It wouldn't be until Thomas Jefferson's presidency that the unjust tax was repealed in 1803.



Kemmelmeyer, Frederick, attributed. *The Whiskey Rebellion*. c. 1795. Painting. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This painting shows President George Washington and his troops near Fort Cumberland, Maryland, preparing to march west to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania.

Claim B

The Whiskey Rebellion as a Test of Federal Authority

The Whiskey Rebellion was an unjustified uprising. It threatened the new Constitution, and Washington upheld the rule of law with his actions.

A New Nation with New Problems

In the early 1790s, Americans were hopeful about their new country. They had a new Constitution and George Washington as president. But they still faced big problems. The country needed to pay back money it had borrowed during the Revolutionary War and make the economy stronger. This meant the government had to collect taxes. America's future depended on having good credit and showing that the federal government was in charge.

Hamilton's Tax Plan and Frontier Opposition

Alexander Hamilton suggested taxing whiskey made in America.. Farmers made whiskey to drink and to turn their corn and wheat into something easier to transport and trade. Western farmers, especially in Pennsylvania, thought this tax would hurt their way of life. The Constitution gave Congress the power to pass taxes and Congress serves to represent the interests of Americans. In 1791, when Congress passed the whiskey tax, it was a constitutional action that carried out what was in the best interests of the country.

Escalating Violence and Rebellion

At first, Washington let people protest peacefully. But by 1794, protesters were becoming more violent toward tax collectors. The protests spread beyond western Pennsylvania to other frontier areas. Protesters attacked tax collectors and people who supported the tax, just like colonists had done during the Revolution. Washington was worried because a similar rebellion called Shays' Rebellion under the Articles of Confederation had shown how weak the government could be.

Washington's Duty to Enforce Federal Law

In summer 1794, protesters burned a tax collector's house and killed a federal marshal's nephew. More than seven thousand angry protesters took control of what is now Pittsburgh. They threatened people, wanted to take over the place where weapons were stored, and even talked about taking Fort Pitt. There were rumors that the protest leaders were trying to form their own country with help from Britain and Spain.

Lasting Impact on Government Power

As president, Washington had to uphold the rule of law by enforcing the whiskey tax. He gathered an army of almost thirteen thousand men from different states and marched

toward Pittsburgh. Washington hoped that showing such a large force would make the protesters go home. He warned people not to help the rebels. His plan worked - when his army arrived, the protesters had left. The army arrested 150 men and put them on trial for treason. Only two were found guilty, and Washington quickly used his power as president to pardon the two in a show of moderation.

Washington had protected the country from the first direct challenge to federal authority. His actions upheld the rule of law and demonstrated the effectiveness of the new Constitution.

