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Shays' Rebellion Week and Day, 1987

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

This year, Americans celebrate the bicentennial of many events relating to the drafting of our Constitution. One of those events was Shays' Rebellion.

After the War of Independence, Americans continued to live under the Articles of Confederation. Problems of economic recovery and sluggish international trade clouded the horizon. In this climate of economic difficulties and the recent memory of a bitter struggle for freedom, Shays' Rebellion took place.

Unlike many other States, Massachusetts had not passed debt relief laws. In the fall of 1786, some Massachusetts debtors tried to stop court-ordered confiscation of land and property by using force to prevent the courts from sitting. Governor Bowdoin responded by calling out the State militia and asking other States for help.

Although the Continental Congress lacked the power and resources to assist, the uprising eventually was suppressed. On January 25, 1787, Daniel Shays, a captain during the Revolution, led a group of debtors who sought to stop the State Supreme Court from meeting. They attacked the courthouse at Springfield and the Federal arsenal. The State militia repelled this assault, and soon the uprising was over. A new State legislature granted some of the insurgents' demands and pardoned or gave lenient sentences to their leaders. This judicious policy and the return of prosperity soon restored harmony in Massachusetts.

Thomas Jefferson believed that the rebels' activities were motivated by "ignorance, not wickedness." He pointed out that the majority of the people of Massachusetts had sided with the government, and he concluded that "the good sense of the people will always be found to be the best army." Although many Americans were satisfied with the Articles of Confederation and were wary of a strong central government, Shays' Rebellion did give impetus to the Federalists' call for the establishment of what George Washington termed "a more efficient general government."

At the Annapolis Convention of 1786, Federalists had publicized commercial disputes among the States. Now they cited the insurgency to bolster their claim that a Federal charter was needed in place of the Articles of Confederation. On February 21, 1787, the Continental Congress called for a Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in May to amend the Articles. Fresh in the minds of the assembled delegates, Shays' Rebellion was to have a profound and lasting effect on the framing of our Constitution and on our subsequent history.

To recognize the influence of Shays' Rebellion on the movement for our Federal Constitution, the Congress, by Public Law 99-629, has designated the week beginning January 19, 1987, as "Shays' Rebellion Week" and Sunday, January 25, 1987, the two hundredth anniversary of the defense of Springfield, as "Shays' Rebellion Day" and authorized and requested the President to issue a proclamation in observance of this event.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, RONALD REAGAN, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim the week beginning January 19, 1987, as Shays' Rebellion Week and Sunday, January 25, 1987, as Shays' Rebellion Day. I call upon all Americans to observe these occasions with appropriate ceremonies and activities.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this thirteenth day of January, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-seven, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and eleventh.

Ronald Reagan