**Shays’ Rebellion Textbook Excerpt: *The American Vision***

The property owners’ fears seemed justified when a full-scale rebellion, known as

**Shays’ Rebellion**, erupted in Massachusetts in 1786. The rebellion started when

the government of Massachusetts decided to raise taxes instead of issuing paper

money to pay off its debts. The taxes fell most heavily on farmers, particularly

poor farmers in the western part of the state. As the recession grew worse,

many found it impossible to pay their taxes as well as their mortgages and other

debts. Those who could not pay often faced the loss of their farms.

Angry at the legislature’s indifference to their plight, in late August 1786, farmers

in western Massachusetts rebelled. They closed down several county

courthouses to prevent farm foreclosures, and then marched on the state

supreme court. At this point, Daniel Shays, a former captain in the Continental

Army who was now a bankrupt farmer, emerged as one of the rebellion’s leaders.

In January 1787, Shays and about 1,200 farmers headed to a state arsenal

intending to seize weapons before marching on Boston. In response, the

governor sent more than 4,000 volunteers under the command of General

Benjamin Lincoln to defend the arsenal. Before they arrived, Shays attacked,

and the militia defending the arsenal opened fire. Four farmers died in the

fighting. The rest scattered. The next day Lincoln’s troops arrived and ended the

rebellion. The fears the rebellion had raised, however, were harder to disperse.

**A Call for Change**

People with greater income and social status tended to see the rebellion, as well

as inflation and an unstable currency, as signs that the republic itself was at risk.

They feared that as state legislatures became more democratic and responsive

to poor people, they would weaken property rights and vote to take property from

the wealthy. As General Henry Knox, a close aide to George Washington,

concluded: “What is to afford our security against the violence of lawless men?

Our government must be braced, changed, or altered to secure our lives and

property.”

These concerns were an important reason why many people, including

merchants, artisans, and creditors, began to argue for a stronger central

government, and several members of the Confederation Congress called on the

states to correct “such defects as may be discovered to exist” in the present

government. The confederation’s failure to deal with conditions that might lead to

rebellion, as well as the problems with trade and diplomacy, only added fuel to

their argument.

*Source: Excerpt from* The American Vision*, a high school U.S. History textbook*

*published in 2003.*

**Shays’ Rebellion**

**Thomas Jefferson on Shays’ Rebellion (Modified)**

Paris, November 13, 1787

The British have so long hired their newspapers to repeat every form

of lies about our being in anarchy, that the world has at length

believed them, and we have believed them ourselves. Yet where

does this anarchy exist? Where did it ever exist, except in the single

instance of Shays’ rebellion? God forbid we should ever be 20 years

without such a rebellion.

What country before ever existed without a rebellion? And what

country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from

time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let the

people take arms. The remedy is to present them with the facts,

pardon and pacify them.

The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood

of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure. Our Constitutional

Convention has [made too much of Shays’ rebellion]: and in the spur

of the moment [I worry they will over-react].

**Vocabulary**

Anarchy: chaos; confusion and disorder

Remedy: cure

Pardon: forgive

Pacify: calm down

Manure: fertilizer

*Source: Thomas Jefferson was in France during Shays’ Rebellion, but he*

*wrote a letter to a friend about it.*

**Shays’ Rebellion**

**Guiding Questions: Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

*Sourcing*

1. Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence. Do you think

he wanted to see America form a strong central government? Why or why

not?

*Contextualization*

2. According to Jefferson, have the colonies been peaceful or chaotic?

Support your answer with evidence from the document.

3. Jefferson thinks the people at the Constitutional Convention are overreacting

to Shays’ Rebellion. What does he worry they might do as they

write the new Constitution? *(Note: this answer is not in the document; you*

*need to think).*

*Close Reading*

4. What does Jefferson mean when he says, “The tree of liberty must be

refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants?”

*Corroboration*

5. How does this document challenge or expand the information you read in

the textbook?