Shays’s Rebellion and the Constitution: A Study in Causation

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HISTORIANS have generally assumed, implied, or stated explicitly that there was a causal relationship between Shays's Rebellion and the writing and ratification of the Constitution of the United States.\(^1\) Some historians have come to this conclusion by seeing that Shays's Rebellion generated extensive discussion and, in certain quarters, deep concern during the fall and winter of 1786-1787 and by an assumption of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. Other historians have relied upon statements by political leaders such as George Washington, by successful merchants such as Stephen Higginson, and by various members of the Constitutional Convention, statements in which people claimed that Shays's Rebellion had made them and their friends and acquaintances aware of the need for constitutional reform.\(^2\)

But, there has never been a careful analysis of the evidence to see in what way Shays's Rebellion influenced the Constitution or whether, in fact, the Constitution might have been written and ratified when and as it was even if Shays's Rebellion had not occurred. Robert MacIver, aware of the difficul-


\(^2\) For references to these frequently quoted statements, see below, notes 11, 15, and 38.
ties which beset the historian and the social scientist dealing with causation, suggests that one way of attempting to analyze causal relationships is to ask what would have happened if the alleged causative event had never occurred. Accordingly, to determine whether Shays's Rebellion was a cause of the Constitution—by which we presumably mean whether Shays's Rebellion was one of the factors without whose presence the Constitution would not have been written and ratified when and in the form in which it was—we might ask what would have happened if the Rebellion had not occurred. Would the Constitution have emerged when it did and in the form in which it did if Shays's Rebellion had not taken place in the winter of 1786-1787?

The convention which met in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787 was the culmination of years of effort to remodel the federal government. From 1781 on, hardly a month passed without amendments to the Articles being proposed or a constitutional convention being suggested. As Jefferson reported from Boston in 1784 on the eve of his departure for France, "I find the conviction growing strongly that nothing can preserve our Confederacy unless the band of Union . . . be strengthened." In 1785, the Massachusetts General Court proposed a convention of delegates from all states to consider "how far it may be necessary, in their opinion, to alter or enlarge" the Articles of Confederation. A year before Shays's Rebellion broke out, Nathan Dane reported that the members of the Massachusetts General Court hoped that the power of the federal government to suppress rebellions within the states would be increased. Early in 1786, there was already some

3 "It may be said, for example, that the appeal of a leader turned the tide of opinion in the direction of his policy, but to validate the statement it is not enough to show that the tide actually turned after his appeal. It must be shown, as being at least highly probable, that the prevailing conditions of public opinion were such that, but for the act of the leader, the tide would not then—or soon thereafter—have changed in this direction. . . . We ask: How would the situation have developed if this law had not been passed? Or we ask: What did happen because X intervened which but for its intervention would not have happened? . . . How would the situation have developed had it not been for the event?" Robert M. MacIver, Social Causation (Boston, 1942), 180, 258, 264.
sentiment in Congress in favor of expanding the federal government's power to raise troops. In June, Louis-Guillaume Otto, the French chargé d'affaires in the United States, reported that "the most important members of congress" had proposed plans to prohibit the states from issuing paper money and to divide Congress into two branches "to prevent an eloquent and ill-intentioned member from carrying away the majority." In August, 1786, a Congressional committee recommended a plan to authorize Congress to compel local tax collectors to levy and collect federal assessments whenever the states failed to meet federal requisitions and to give to Congress the exclusive power of defining treason against the United States.4

By 1786, when twelve states had approved an amendment to the Articles of Confederation to give the United States government a revenue from tariffs, many people were momentarily convinced that a solution to the problems of the central government was at hand. The approval of only one more state was needed, and all eyes were turned to New York, whose action would make the amendment part of the Articles. But New York dashed the hopes of many people and convinced them that thorough-going revision was the only alternative to national collapse. As Henry Jackson wrote to Secretary of War Knox on April 23, 1786, "Every liberal good man is wishing New York in Hell."5

Meanwhile, the groundwork for the Philadelphia Conven-


tion was being laid at Annapolis before Shays's Rebellion spread its gloom over the eastern seaboard. Arrangements for the Annapolis convention had been made during the winter and spring of 1785-1786, and nine states eventually chose delegates. The purpose of the convention, as described in Virginia's invitation, was "to take into consideration the trade of the United States" and "to consider how far a uniform system in their commercial relations may be necessary to their common interest and their permanent harmony." New Jersey's delegates, moreover, had been authorized to consider not only commerce but "other important matters . . . necessary to the common interest and permanent harmony of the several States." Even before the Annapolis convention met, however, many men saw it as nothing but the preliminary to a larger convention to be attended by more prominent delegates with broader powers of revision. William Grayson, a Virginia politician who was a member of the Continental Congress, feared that partial amendment of the Articles would blunt the demand for extensive revisions and would therefore be worse than nothing. He hoped that the forthcoming Annapolis convention would fail and that Virginia would then propose a convention "to comprehend all the grievances of the Union and to combine the commercial arrangements with them and make them dependent on each other." Monroe, attending Congress in New York, reported to Madison that men from the eastern states intended to use the Annapolis convention to accomplish more "than the object originally comprehended." And Madison himself had written to Jefferson three weeks before the scheduled opening of the Annapolis convention that he and many others "both within and without Congress, wish

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to make this Meeting subservient to a plenipotentiary Convention for amending the Confederation.”

The delegates were slow to arrive, and by September 11, 1786, one week after the date set for the opening of the convention, the twelve delegates who were on hand from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Virginia decided to issue a call for another convention, to meet in Philadelphia on the second Monday in May, 1787. The invitation proposed that the states extend “the powers of their deputies to other objects than those of Commerce.”

The decision at Annapolis not to wait for the delegates from other states, even though it was known that some of them were on their way, was taken with an impatience which seems unusual for the eighteenth century and lends some credence to the claim of Louis-Guillaume Otto, a perceptive French diplomat in the United States, that the Annapolis convention was purposely killed by its organizers so that they would have an excuse to call a convention with broader powers of revision and with a greater chance of success. Although the records of the Annapolis convention and correspondence dealing with it are meager, it may be that Madison and Hamilton, both of whom were at Annapolis and both of whom had hoped for a convention authorized to consider more than simply the commercial powers of the Confederation, talked the delegates into adjourning. The convention had already served part of its purpose by focusing public attention upon the need for change, and now that the public had traveled this far along the path of constitutional revision, they would go all the way.


8 Bancroft, Formation of the Constitution, ii, 399-401. For Madison’s awareness that states which were not yet represented had appointed delegates, see Hunt, editor, Writings of Madison, ii, 262. For notification that Massachusetts and Rhode Island commissioners were en route, see Harold C. Syrett, et al., editors, The Papers of Alexander Hamilton (New York and London, 1961-1967), iii, 685.
the next time they ventured forth. And so, the Annapolis convention adjourned on September 14, having failed of its immediate and ostensible purpose of commercial revisions, but having succeeded in laying the groundwork for a thorough overhauling of the federal government.

The refusal of New York to ratify the Congressional impost scheme and the failure of the Annapolis convention to provide commercial regulations showed many Americans the hopelessness of strengthening the government by partial amendment to the Articles. The movement for a convention to reorganize the federal government was, thus, well under way by late in the summer of 1786. How was it affected by Shays’s Rebellion?

There is no evidence that state legislatures moved one whit faster to choose delegates to the Philadelphia Convention because of Shays’s Rebellion. Virginia, the first state to decide to send delegates, was prodded into rapid action by two of its leading citizens, Washington and Madison, both of whom were veterans in the movement for constitutional revision. Five states, including Massachusetts, did not act until after Shays’s Rebellion had been all but suppressed. These five states delayed in choosing delegates partially because the proposed Convention smacked too much of the sort of extra-legal conventions which the Shaysites were using. The Articles of Confederation specified that amendments were to be proposed by Congress and to become operative when approved by the states. There was no provision for by-passing Congress and holding a constitutional convention. States such as New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts refused to appoint delegates until Congress had sanctioned the Convention, thereby giving it the color of legality and removing from the shoulders of state officials the burden of explaining why they opposed extra-legal conventions when the Shaysites called them but sup-

9 For the dates on which states acted to send delegates to the Philadelphia Convention, see: Warren, Making of the Constitution, 808-809; Max Farrand, editor, The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787 (New Haven, 1911-1937), iii, 559-586.
ported extra-legal conventions when their own friends summoned them.\textsuperscript{10}

While the delegates were laboring in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787, Shays's Rebellion did not weigh heavily upon their minds. During the eighteen weeks that elapsed from the first meeting of the Convention to the last, only nine speakers mentioned Shays's Rebellion, and most of these spoke of it only once. Weeks went by without the Rebellion being mentioned, and most of the fifty-five delegates never spoke of it at all.\textsuperscript{11}

Many of those who did speak of the Rebellion on the floor of the Convention were by no means pushed into a more nationalistic mood by the uprising in Massachusetts. Rufus King, one of the delegates who mentioned Shays's Rebellion, remained relatively limited in his nationalism. As King informed his fellow delegates, he believed that "The most numerous objects of legislation belong to the states" and that the national legislature should have few concerns other than commerce and revenue. Two delegates turned Shays's Rebellion into a warning against excessive centralization. Oliver Ellsworth, who had been convinced since at least 1783 that the country could not survive unless it were given a revenue independent of the states, offered Shays's Rebellion as evidence of the instability of large governments and therefore of "the necessity of maintaining the existence of the States." Elbridge


\textsuperscript{11} Farrand, editor, Records of the Federal Convention, i, 18-19, 48, 132, 263, 285, 316-318, 406, 437, 463, ii, 317, 332, 627-628. Joseph R. Strayer, editor, The Delegate From New York or Proceedings of the Federal Convention of 1787 from the Notes of John Lansing, Jr. (Princeton, 1939), 90. Since the records do not provide word by word transcripts of the debates, it is possible that references were made to Shays's Rebellion for which evidence has not survived. But, records are sufficiently detailed that few, if any, important discussions of Shays's Rebellion have been lost.

Elbridge Gerry, who is known to have mentioned Shays's Rebellion, may also have made a few comments which contemporaries would have understood as oblique references to the Rebellion. Farrand, editor, Records of the Federal Convention, i, 123, 154-155, ii, 4-5.
Gerry expressed the same thought when he said, "More blood would have been spilt in Massts in the late insurrection, if the Genl. authority had intermeddled." Similarly, when a provision authorizing the United States "To subdue a rebellion in any State, on the application of its Legislature" was being discussed, Gerry used Shays's Rebellion to show that the central government must have no such power. Gerry, who spoke of the Rebellion more frequently than anyone else, retained his faith in the democracy of annual elections and refused to sign the Constitution when the Convention finished its labors. Altogether, four of the nine speakers known to have invoked the shades of Shays's Rebellion on the floor of the Convention failed to sign the Constitution, and two of these became active opponents of ratification.

Several of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention deserve special attention to see what role Shays's Rebellion played in shaping their attitude toward constitutional revision and in causing them to attend the Convention.

George Washington, of whom one historian has said that "Shays's Rebellion frightened him out of retirement and into politics," said little at the Convention but used his prestige to keep the delegates at their labors and to assure ratification. If it can be shown that without Shays's Rebellion Washington would not have attended the Convention or have lent his name to the Federalists on behalf of ratification, then the Rebellion did help to produce the Constitution.

Washington was, indeed, deeply troubled by news of the Rebellion. As he wrote to Madison, "No day ever dawned

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13 Ellsworth, Gerry, Martin, Randolph. Ellsworth left the Convention early to attend to other matters, but supported ratification. William C. Brown, The Life of Oliver Ellsworth (New York, 1905), ch. IV. Randolph was dissatisfied with the Constitution as it emerged from the Convention, but eventually supported ratification. For Gerry's Anti-Federalist writings, see Paul L. Ford, editor, Pamphlets on the Constitution of the United States, Published During Its Discussion by the People 1787-1788 (Brooklyn, 1888), 1-23. For Luther Martin, see his The Genuine Information . . . in Farrand, editor, Records of the Federal Convention, III, 172-232.
14 Jensen, New Nation, 250.
more favorably than ours did; and no day was ever more clouded than the present. . . . We are fast verging to anarchy and confusion!” The only hope was to support the forthcoming convention in Philadelphia and to work for a “liberal, and energetic Constitution.” Such statements taken out of context and quoted by many writers seem convincing evidence that Shays’s Rebellion did influence Washington’s view of good government.  

But, in fact, such language was not new to Washington during the winter of 1786-1787. He had been warning that the government was verging to collapse for almost a decade. Ever since the middle years of the Revolution he had been convinced that the central government was inadequate to its responsibilities and that amendment was absolutely essential. As early as March, 1779, he feared that “we seem to be verging . . . fast to destruction,” and before long he was convinced that it was “indispensably necessary” that the central government be given more power and that an executive branch separate from Congress be established. In the following years, there was a constant stream of letters from Mount Vernon urging that the Articles be amended. “Something must be done, or the fabrick must fall, for it certainly is tottering.” As he wrote emphatically in May, 1786, he entertained “no doubt” that the Articles had to be amended. The weakness of the central government he considered “truly shocking.” On the eve of the Rebellion, still too early for his mood to have been affected by Massachusetts insurgents, Washington was convinced “that our affairs are drawing rapidly to a crisis,” and he was no longer as optimistic as he had once been about man’s ability to cooperate for the good of all. “We have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation,” he wrote to John Jay. “Experience has taught us, that men will not adopt and carry into execution measures the


16 See works cited in Note 1, above.
best calculated for their own good, without the intervention of a coercive power."

Even after receiving news of the Rebellion, however, Washington was hesitant about returning to active political life. For several months he was unwilling to accept his appointment as one of Virginia's delegates to the Constitutional Convention. Although he was convinced that revision was essential, he did not want to become personally involved in a convention the legality of which he doubted. But, even if he were willing to suppress his doubts about the legality of the Convention for the sake of expediency, he was still unwilling to risk his reputation by involvement in a political movement which might prove abortive. And besides, he had already rejected an invitation to appear at the triennial convention of the Society of the Cincinnati in Philadelphia, and it would be embarrassing for him to appear there at the same time on another matter. Washington wrestled with the problem in his usual slow and ponderous fashion during the winter and early spring of 1787, and it was not until late in March that he decided to attend. By the time he made up his mind to go to Philadelphia, he had known for several weeks that the Massachusetts government had suppressed Shays's Rebellion and that that particular threat to the United States had passed. Instead, other factors weighed heavily upon him when he decided to accept the appointment, among them the rejection of the federal impost scheme by New York, which finally cut off any hope of governmental reform without a convention, and the possibility that the controversy over paper money in neighboring Maryland might move from the legislature to the battle field.18

As with Washington, Madison was disturbed by Shays's Rebellion.19 But, the Rebellion did not teach him anything that he did not already know. One of Madison's contemporaries

19 Hunt, editor, Writings of Madison, ii, 289.
said of him, "He is well versed in public life, was bred to it, and has no other profession. . . . It is rather a science than a business with him." Madison had, indeed, been making a "science" of government for several years prior to Shays's Rebellion. He read avidly on the history of confederacies and commissioned his friend Jefferson to send him any books which would help to clarify his thinking on the nature of confederacies in general and of the Articles of Confederation in particular. Madison had become convinced that the central government must have greater power to regulate commerce and must have an independent income. Moreover, the "present crisis" which the nation faced in 1785 was so severe that commercial regulation would not be enough. As Madison put it in one of those felicitous phrases with which the eighteenth century abounded, "Congress have kept the Vessel from sinking, but it has been by standing constantly at the pump, not by stopping the leaks which have endangered her." Prior to Shays's Rebellion, Madison had several ideas in mind for thorough reform. Executive officers should have greater independence of Congress. Congress itself should be reorganized. The powers of the central government should be increased, not only to regulate commerce and to levy taxes, but to issue a uniform currency, to regulate weights and measures, and, he hinted, to suppress "internal contention" and to prevent the states from issuing paper money.

By the spring of 1787, when Madison wrote detailed letters to his friends outlining the ideas which eventually became the "Randolph" or "Virginia" plan on the floor of the Convention, he knew that Massachusetts had succeeded in putting down Shays's Rebellion, and other problems weighed on his mind. New York had recently rejected the impost scheme of 1783, thereby dashing whatever slight hope there had been of strengthening the federal government without a general convention. If the federal government did not settle the con-

trovery with Spain over the navigation of the Mississippi River to the satisfaction of frontiersmen in the southwest, the Union might be torn asunder. His long-standing hatred of paper money was still with him, and he feared that several states, including his own Virginia, might adopt paper money if not prevented from doing so by the central government. 22

Madison's colleague on the road to constitutional reform, Alexander Hamilton, had been convinced even before the Articles of Confederation had been ratified that they were inadequate, and after they had been in operation for a time he wrote that "Every day proves more and more the insufficiency of the confederation." In his speeches to the New York legislature, in his newspaper articles, and in his letters to his friends, he continually urged that the federal government be strengthened. His proposals for a new government prior to Shays's Rebellion were many. Executive officials should be independent of Congress and a federal judiciary should be established. The government must have the power to regulate commerce and to raise money directly by tariffs and by land and poll taxes. The central government must maintain a standing army in peacetime to protect the country against its foreign and domestic enemies. He was even willing to change the basis of representation in Congress so that the small states could not prevent Congress from acting. As early as 1782, Hamilton had written to a friend, "Experience is a continued comment on the worthlessness of the human race." 23 Anyone taking such a view of human nature in the summer of 1782 was not likely to be taught anything new by Shays's Rebellion in the winter of 1786-1787.


We can safely assume that Hamilton disapproved of Shays's Rebellion at the time that it occurred despite the absence of contemporary evidence. Although two recent biographers of Hamilton claim that he evidenced his opposition to Shays's Rebellion while it was in progress, the earliest statements which in fact have survived appear in *The Federalist*, written several months after the Rebellion had been suppressed.
James Wilson, who took an active part on behalf of a powerful federal government on the floors of both the Constitutional Convention and of the Pennsylvania ratifying convention, had also become strongly federal long before the Rebellion. As a member of Congress, Wilson spoke in favor of giving the Confederation the power to collect tariffs and land and excise taxes directly. Wilson joined Madison and Hamilton and other members of a Congressional committee in recommending that Congress maintain a permanent army, fortifications, arsenals, and foundries, "as well for military and political reasons." In defending the United States charter of the Bank of Pennsylvania in 1785, Wilson virtually blotted out the provision in the Articles of Confederation which retained for the states all powers not expressly given to Congress. He argued that since no one state had ever had the power to charter a bank for the entire United States, this was not a power which the individual states retained. Therefore, under Article 5 of the Articles of Confederation which stated that "for the more convenient management of the general interests of the United States, delegates shall be annually appointed to meet in Congress," Congress could charter a national bank even though this power was not expressly given to the federal government. Such a broad theory of implied powers, Wilson himself realized, would have enabled Congress to legislate on virtually any subject of national concern. "Whenever an object occurs," he said, "to the direction of which no particular state is competent, the management of it must, of necessity, belong to the United States in congress assembled." This would have meant a grant of power at least as broad as the Supreme Court in the twentieth century has interpreted the commerce clause of the Constitution to give to the federal government.

Rufus King, the only delegate from Massachusetts to sign

the Constitution, had also been convinced of the need for strengthening the federal government long before Shays's Rebellion. At first, he pinned most of his hopes on the impost scheme of 1783, but he became increasingly alarmed at the weakness of the Confederation and increasingly dismayed at New York's obstinacy. When France attempted to encourage her own fishing industry at the expense of America's, King regretted that Congress did not have sufficient power to retaliate. During the early months of 1786, his correspondence was filled with lamentation over the "dangerous situation," "the deranged condition of the confederacy," and "the humiliating condition of the Union." To his friend Theodore Sedgwick, King confided that the federal government was a sorry mess. "There is no money in the federal Treasury—the civil list is in arrear—the Troops in Service mutinous for pay—the loans abroad exhausted—the foreign Ministers destitute of Funds to draw on for their Daily support—and the payments made by the four Eastern and three Southern States for 15 months past not equal to 4 thousand Dollars."27

But, until February, 1787, King opposed the Philadelphia Convention as the means of effecting Constitutional reform. When the invitation for the Convention arrived in Massachusetts, King appeared before the General Court and spoke against the proposal. Why did King finally decide to support the forthcoming Convention? If, as some have alleged, King supported the Convention because of Shays's Rebellion, it is strange that several weeks after the Rebellion had started King urged the Massachusetts General Court not to send delegates and that he did not show genuine interest in the Convention until after the rout of the insurgents at Petersham. Rather, although Congress had been weak and ineffective for a long time, King believed that the situation was now worse than usual, and he had to admit that it was futile to hope that Congress would or could take the lead in effecting reform.

Congress had deteriorated so far that the members themselves were not much interested in attending. "Congress is not yet organized," King wrote in despair, "and it is uncertain when it will be." King had continued to hope that New York would join the other states in supporting the impost scheme of 1783, but at last he realized that this, too, was hopeless. Most important of all in accounting for his support of the Constitutional Convention, King saw that the Convention was likely to be held whether he liked it or not, and that it would be far wiser to accept the inevitable and to try to channel it into directions of which he approved than to be overwhelmed in a futile attempt to block it. He knew that six states had already appointed delegates—including the two large and influential states of Virginia and Pennsylvania—and that others were likely to act soon. Southern states, of which King was intensely suspicious, were sure to attend, and Massachusetts men had better be on hand to keep an eye on the southerners. And what better man was available for the job than Rufus King himself? King's decision to support the Convention was likely facilitated by the fact that early in February people in his home state were talking about choosing King as a delegate if Massachusetts sent anyone.28

28 This was not the first time that King let his attitude toward a constitutional convention be shaped by expediency. In 1785, he had relaxed his dislike of conventions temporarily when he thought that the Annapolis Convention might succeed in establishing the federal power over commerce for which he so ardently wished—not that he really approved of the convention, but if it were going to be held anyhow and if it could do some good, then Massachusetts ought to send delegates. King's opposition to conventions, his temporary surrender in the face of the Annapolis Convention, and the factors which ultimately caused him to endorse the Philadelphia Convention, albeit without much enthusiasm, are illuminated in many of King's letters and speeches and in the correspondence of several of his contemporaries. King, editor, Correspondence of King, 1, 59-60, 144, 201, 215, 218. "Letters of Higginson," American Historical Association Report 1896, 1, 747-748. Burnett, editor, Letters of Members of the Continental Congress, viii, 459, 526-527. Humphreys, Humphreys, 1, 404. Bancroft, Formation of the Constitution, 1, 466-467. Boston Magazine, Sept.-Oct., 1786, 405-407. Journals of the Continental Congress, xxxii, 71-74. Gerry, Holten, and King to Bowdoin, Sept. 3, 1785, Emmett Papers, No. 9529, New York Public Library, printed with minor changes in orthography in King, editor, Correspondence of King, 1, 60-66. Rufus King to Elbridge Gerry, Feb. 11, 1787, French Commission Manuscripts, Morgan Library, New York.
In other words, King's decision to support the Constitutional Convention was the act of a practical politician who realized that, although he did not like a convention, it would be held anyhow and that it might somehow effect the changes in the government for which he hoped. King went to Philadelphia because of a long-standing desire to strengthen the federal government and because of the conviction that it would be more pleasant to ride on the bandwagon, and perhaps even drive it himself, than to be run over by it.

Once Washington, Madison, Hamilton, Wilson, and King and their fellow delegates finished their work at the Convention, the proposed Constitution was sent to the states. In the newspaper and pamphlet battles during the long winter of 1787-1788, the Federalists mentioned Shays's Rebellion only occasionally.\(^{29}\) Luther Martin, the Maryland Anti-Federalist who attempted to answer virtually every significant and in-

One wonders to what extent King's eventual support of the Constitutional Convention was determined by his distrust of John Hancock. A month before King gave his first qualified endorsement of the Convention, he wrote to Elbridge Gerry, who was a member of the General Court, "If Massachusetts should send deputies for God's sake be careful who are the men." Burnett, editor, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, viii, 527. As with most Massachusetts politicians, King disliked and distrusted Hancock and, once he realized that the Convention was likely to be held, he may have wanted to put himself in a position to counter any influence that Hancock might exert upon the Massachusetts delegation.

\(^{29}\) This statement is based upon extensive research in contemporary newspapers and pamphlets. For examples of occasional references to Shays's Rebellion, see: *Independent Chronicle* [Boston], Oct. 4, 1787; *Connecticut Courant*, Oct. 22, 1787; Oliver Ellsworth, "Letters of a Landholder," Paul L. Ford, editor, *Essays on the Constitution of the United States, Published During its Discussion by the People 1787-1788* (Brooklyn, 1892), 157. Of the eighty-five Federalist papers, only six mentioned Shays's Rebellion: Hamilton, with his almost pathological fear of popular uprisings, spoke of it in five of his articles; Madison made an oblique reference to it in one of his; and Jay ignored it. Benjamin F. Wright, editor, *The Federalist by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay* (Cambridge, 1961), numbers 6, 21, 25, 28, 43, 74, pp. 110, 113, 187, 212, 223, 313, 474. See also extensive material collected in Ford, editor, *Pamphlets on the Constitution* and Ford, editor, *Essays on the Constitution*. Although the vigorous Federal pamphlet, [Jonathan Jackson?], *Thoughts Upon the Political Situation of the United States of America, In which That of Massachusetts Is More Particularly Considered . . .* (Worcester, 1788), drew many of its Federalist arguments from Massachusetts and although the author seriously doubted the ability of "the people" to make rational decisions, he mentioned Shays's Rebellion in only one passage in a book of more than 100 pages (pp. 50-51).
significant Federalist argument in his *Genuine Information*,
did not consider Shays's Rebellion sufficiently prominent in
the Federalist arsenal of weapons to require any attention.\textsuperscript{30}
Whatever slight aid and comfort the Federalists might have
derived from talking about Shays's Rebellion was neutralized
when the Anti-Federalists occasionally introduced the Rebel-
lion as an argument against ratification. Having come through
Shays's Rebellion unscathed, American society must be so
stable and healthy that a stronger government was unnecessary
—or so a few of the Anti-Federalists said, at any rate.\textsuperscript{31} In the
ratifying conventions themselves, the Rebellion was anything
but prominent. In states for which detailed reports of debates
have survived, the Rebellion was mentioned only occasionally,
and sometimes as often by Anti-Federalists as by Federalists,
at that.\textsuperscript{32}

Although a majority of Federalists had probably disappro-
ved of Shays's Rebellion, there is no evidence that they
took their stand in support of the Constitution because of the
Rebellion. There seems to be no meaningful correlation be-

\textsuperscript{30} Martin's failure to mention Shays's Rebellion could not have been be-
cause he thought it would be strategically unwise to publicize a potent Fed-
eralist argument. He did not hesitate to cite and then explain away other
Federalist arguments, such as the fact that Washington and Franklin, the two
universal heroes, were in favor of ratification. Luther Martin, *Genuine Infor-

the Constitution*, 22.

\textsuperscript{32} In the Massachusetts convention, Federalist speakers mentioned Shays's
Rebellion in two speeches and Anti-Federalists in three. Jonathan Elliot, editor,
*The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal
Constitution* . . . (Philadelphia, 1836; reprinted, 1901), ii, 15, 28, 102-103, 137,
144-146. In New York, one Anti-Federalist speaker touched upon it. Elliot, ii,
335. James Wilson, who dominated the Pennsylvania convention on behalf of
the Federalists, referred to the Rebellion three times. Elliot, ii, 462, 474. 520-
521. In Virginia, the Rebellion was mentioned three times by Federalist speak-
ers and twice by Anti-Federalists. Elliot, iii, 82, 180, 275, 397, 493. Two North
Carolina Federalists mentioned it, Elliot, iv, 20, 96, 112. In South Carolina,
Charles Pinckney, who had referred to the Rebellion in the Constitutional
Convention, brought up the subject on behalf of the Federalists. Elliot, iv, 326-
327. In some of these states, especially Pennsylvania and South Carolina, the
reporter slighted Anti-Federalist speakers and if references were made to
Shays's Rebellion which have not survived they were more likely by Anti-
Federalist than Federalist speakers. For other states, records of the debates in
state ratifying conventions are too fragmentary to rely upon.
tween attitudes on the Rebellion and, later, on the Constitution: some of those who had opposed the Rebellion in the winter of 1786-1787 became Federalists a year later, while others became Anti-Federalists. Elbridge Gerry, for instance, refused to sign the Constitution and voiced fear at giving the federal government the power to maintain a standing army.\textsuperscript{33} Governor George Clinton of New York cooperated with Massachusetts to capture Shaysites who fled across the state line, but, later, as an outspoken Anti-Federalist, he argued against the Constitution on the grounds that the Rebellion demonstrated the instability of governments which covered too large a territory.\textsuperscript{34} Samuel Osgood, a wealthy merchant, was convinced, as he put it to his friend Samuel Adams, that the Constitution was needlessly complicated so that only "The Scribes and Pharisees"—by whom Osgood meant lawyers—would be able to understand it.\textsuperscript{35} James Winthrop, erstwhile librarian of Harvard College who had joined the troops against the Shaysites, wrote Anti-Federalist articles for the Boston papers.\textsuperscript{36}

In Massachusetts, it was the Federalists' political shrewdness rather than Shays's Rebellion which produced the votes for ratification. Federalist Theodore Sedgwick won his election to the Massachusetts ratifying convention by reminding the voters that his opponent had previously taken an unpopular stand on the purely local issue of where to locate a new meetinghouse in the town of Stockbridge. Samuel Adams had been intensely hostile to the insurgents, but he let it be known that he was unhappy about the proposed Constitution. The Federalists finally managed to capture him by arranging to have Boston tradesmen, upon whom Adams depended for political


\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Journal of the Assembly of the State of New York At their Tenth Session... 1787} (New York, 1787), 62. Ford, editor, \textit{Essays on the Constitution}, 243-278, esp. 257-258.

\textsuperscript{35} Samuel Osgood to Samuel Adams, Jan. 5, 1788, Samuel Adams Papers, New York Public Library.

support, adopt resolutions in favor of the Constitution. The Federalists brought John Hancock into their camp by promising to support him for reelection to the governorship and dropping broad hints that he might become Vice-President under the new Constitution, or even President if Virginia failed to ratify or Washington refused to serve. As the Massachusetts convention wore on and the western delegates became anxious to collect their pay and return home, the Federalists spread word that the state treasury was empty and would remain empty unless the Constitution was ratified. The Federalist leaders were so busy making deals and offering political bribes that some of them developed pangs of conscience. As one of the Federalist delegates tried to reassure his friends, "We are not idle by Night or Day—and sacrifice everything but moral Honesty to carry our point."

Stephen Higginson, whom historians have frequently quoted as evidence that Shays's Rebellion produced a surge of support for Constitutional reform in Massachusetts, points up the danger of accepting contemporary statements about causation at face value. Higginson claimed late in the fall of 1786 that it was Shays's Rebellion which had convinced him and others that a stronger central government was necessary. "I never saw so great change in the public mind, on any occasion, as has lately appeared in this State as to the expediency of increasing the powers of Congress..." But, as early as April, 1784—two and a half years before Shays's Rebellion—Higginson had written that he had believed for "a long time" that a stronger central government was essential and that he was delighted to observe that "many are daily coming over to my Opinions, among which are some of our leading Politicians." Moreover, several months after the Rebellion, Higgin-

\[37\] King, editor, Correspondence of King, 1, 265, 311-312, 319. "The Thatcher Papers," Historical Magazine, vi, 2nd Ser., 263 (1869). Eben F. Stone, "Parsons and the Constitutional Convention of 1788," The Essex Institute Historical Collections, xxxv, 94-95 (1899). Minot Diary, 1788, Minot Papers, M.H.S. See Main, Antifederalists, 203-204 for other examples of the use of economic and family pressures to compromise would-be Anti-Federalists into either withdrawing from the ratifying convention or switching their votes.
son wrote that he expected the Philadelphia Convention to fail because there had not yet been any cataclysm sufficiently intense to convince people of the need for a stronger central government. "Much must be our suffering from the obvious weakness of the present system before competent powers will be delegated by the States. Sad experience alone will fully satisfy the body of this people that the Sovereignty of the Several States must in a degree be transferred to the Union." 38

In other words, Higginson's statement in the fall of 1786 can be used as evidence of the impact of Shays's Rebellion upon Constitutional reform only if his earlier and later words are ignored.

Shays's Rebellion might have helped to make the United States government more centralized and less democratic if the state government had not dispersed the insurgents so quickly. By mid-February of 1787, word was spreading up and down the Atlantic coast that the insurgents had been routed, and many people breathed a sigh of relief and perhaps even felt a bit ashamed of themselves for having been worried. As Edward Carrington, an ardent Federalist during the ratification controversy, put it to Jefferson in June of 1787, the fact that the Address issued by the Massachusetts General Court in the fall of 1786 and a few simple military measures had ended the Rebellion proved "that full intelligence of the public affairs not only would keep the people right, but will set them so after they have got wrong." 39 And, as the Connecticut Federalist Jeremiah Wadsworth complained to Henry Knox, Shays's Rebellion had ended too quickly to be of use. "If the Massachusetts Rebellion had continued," the Constitution would have a better chance of success in Connecticut. 40

The Federalists also had other reasons for saying little about the Rebellion, such as the doubts which many eighteenth-

40 Jeremiah Wadsworth to Rufus King, Sept. 23, 1787, King, editor, Correspondence of King, i, 13. For a similar suggestion by George Richards Minot
century Americans harbored about the feasibility of maintaining a stable and democratic government over a large area. Shays’s Rebellion, because it had thrown one of the "large" states into confusion, seemed to show that a strong government covering the entire United States could not survive and remain democratic. Americans knew about the Greek city-states and several ancient confederations, and they cited these frequently during the debate over the Constitution, but the idea of a successful republic on a scale as large as the United States was a novelty. "The States that please to call themselves large, are the weakest in the Union," Luther Martin, fresh from little Maryland, pointed out at the Constitutional Convention. "Look at Mass. Look at Virga. Are they efficient states?" he shrewdly asked.  

The Federalists found it difficult to answer this argument because so many of their own number suspected that there might be something to this relationship between being territorially large and politically weak. Oliver Ellsworth, the Connecticut Federalist, had argued at the Constitutional Convention in favor of having the Senate elected by state legislatures rather than directly by the voters. This, he believed, would keep the states strong and would, in turn, strengthen the central government. Without cooperation of the states, he insisted, "it would be impossible to support a Republican Govt. over so great an extent of the country." "The largest States are the Worst Governed," he continued. "Virga. is obliged to acknowledge her incapacity to extend her Govt. to Kentucky. Mas[achuset]ts can not keep the peace one hundred miles from her capitol and is now forming an army for its support. How

that the Rebellion had ended too soon to satisfy the Federalists, see Minot to Nathan Dane, Boston, March 3, 1787, Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, XLVII, 430 (Boston, 1915).

41 Farrand, editor, Records of the Federal Convention, II, 4. Madison was so well aware of how deeply the problem of geographic size troubled people that he felt the need to devote considerable space in The Federalist to arguing that large governments, by diversifying and weakening the power of interest groups within the society, were actually more likely to survive than a small government which might fall prey to a single interest group. But, in all of the essays which he wrote for The Federalist, he considered Shays's Rebellion worth only a single oblique reference.
long Pena. may be free from a like situation can not be foreseen. If the principles & materials of our Govt. are not adequate to the extent of these single states; how can it be imagined that they can support a single Govt. throughout the U. States."

As long as Federalists themselves suspected that Shays's Rebellion showed the weaknesses of big countries, they could hardly use the Rebellion as an effective argument for ratification.

Standing armies also troubled the late eighteenth-century American mind. Hostility to standing armies had been a theme of patriotic orations ever since the Boston Massacre, and the Anti-Federalists did all they could to take advantage of such fears. In Stockbridge, for example, John Bacon went from door to door in his campaign for election to the Massachusetts ratifying convention warning people that adoption of the Constitution would mean a standing army and an end to personal freedom. Even the Federalists realized the danger of moving from the Scylla of rebellion to the Charybdis of military might with which to crush rebellions. Madison, one of the strongest nationalists at the Constitutional Convention, admitted that "armies in the time of peace are allowed on all hands to be an evil." Such being the case, Federalists hesitated to use Shays's Rebellion as an argument in favor of strong central power partially because they themselves were uneasy about some of the implications of the argument.

Moreover, as the Federalists looked around they saw so many serious problems still confronting the country that the Rebellion, as it receded into history, also receded into insignificance. Shays's Rebellion was a thing of the past, but not so the unwillingness of New York to pay its federal requisitions or to grant adequate power over commerce to the United States, and not so the threat of paper money in such states as


43 Theodore Sedgwick to Henry Van Schaack, Nov. 28, 1787, Sedgwick Papers, M.H.S.

Maryland, Virginia, and Rhode Island. While Federalists could hardly find words to describe their contempt for Rhode Island, they frequently used Massachusetts as an example of a government which should be copied—her Senate, her executive, her method of appointing judges were all worthy of imitation!  

Thus, although people talked about Shays’s Rebellion and some were momentarily frightened by it, there is no evidence that it changed in any significant way the thinking of the people who drew up and ratified the Constitution. The movement for Constitutional revision, including plans for the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, was well under way prior to Shays’s Rebellion. The Philadelphia Convention succeeded where the Annapolis convention had failed not because the Rebellion intervened, but because, in the interim, other efforts at Constitutional reform collapsed, especially the rejection of the federal impost, and because of Madison’s and Hamilton’s careful planning; these two men, before either one had heard of Shays’s Rebellion, realized that Annapolis would not produce a constitution but that it would lay a foundation upon which Philadelphia could successfully build. The Rebellion was referred to at the Constitutional Convention and during the ratification struggle, but far less frequently than has sometimes been claimed and not always as an argument in favor of ratification, at that. Moreover, by the winter of 1787-1788, other issues seemed more important than Shays’s Rebellion.

Historians can say little, if anything, with complete certainty, least of all in the realm of causation. But, in all likelihood, the Constitutional Convention would have met when it did, the same document would have been drawn up, and it would have been ratified even if Shays’s Rebellion had not taken place. If by a “cause” we mean something necessary to the occurrence of a particular event, Shays’s Rebellion was not a cause of the Constitution of the United States.