

History of an early American uprising

Jonathan Keane
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The Whiskey Rebellion: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and the Frontier Rebels Who Challenged America's Newfound Sovereignty, by William Hogeland, Scribner, 2006, 302 pages

William Hogeland's well-researched book *The Whiskey Rebellion: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and the Frontier Rebels Who Challenged America's Newfound Sovereignty* is a critical narrative history of how, from 1791 until 1794, poor small farmers revolted against a federal tax placed on whiskey, prompting President George Washington to march 13,000 troops into western Pennsylvania to suppress the uprising.

The book focuses on the tax's economic impact on farmers and artisans, many of whom had just fought a war against the British over taxation without representation, and who now saw this new tax as merely serving moneyed interests by redistributing wealth to rich Eastern creditors. These creditors bought up government war bonds and were going to cash in by compelling the poorest of society to pay the war debt.

The resulting struggle pitted a wealthy elite, which controlled the central government, against a poorer section of the population, which, while perpetually warring with the Indians, scratched to making a living from the poorest plots of land not already taken by speculating absentee landowners. (George Washington, for example, was one such unpopular absentee landlord. He had managed to evade Britain's Proclamation Line and other laws limiting land speculation. The success of the American Revolution legalized his land dealings on the Western frontier.)

The subsequent rebellion revealed the social fault lines that existed at the nation's birth. The revolution begun in 1776 represented a tremendous progressive advance in the social and political development of mankind. It represented a frontal assault on bulwarks of the old social order, including monarchy and established religion. Its leaders, inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment, made a mass appeal to the entire population, and particularly the small farmers and artisans, on the basis of republicanism and equality. The reverberations of this appeal and the resulting struggle would be felt for decades to come, in the French Revolution and the subsequent revolutions of 1848.

Nonetheless, the new republic was rent by immense contradictions. The ideals of equality coexisted with the continued existence of chattel slavery, a contradiction that would erupt into civil war 80 years later. And the invocation of the rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" was belied by the development of capitalism and the resulting exploitation of an emerging working class and the dispossession of small farmers.

Hogeland pulls together the historical events that gave rise to the Whiskey Rebellion, narrating the event through the eyes of both the rebels and the leaders of the nascent political establishment, particularly Washington and Alexander Hamilton.

He also tells the story through the person of a radical Christian named Herman Husband. Although his ancestors had been indentured laborers, Husband grew up wealthy but later turned to Christian prophecy and the radical Regulator movement, which targeted the crushing taxes and corruption of the local elite more than those levied by the British government that raised the ire of the eastern merchants. Though the Regulators of 1771 battled the British governor's troops, Husband was and remained a lifelong pacifist. Hogeland describes Husband's ideas for

a more planned and democratic society. Husband would become disillusioned by the revolution, and so he would join the Whiskey rebels as an old man, dying upon his release from jail due to his mistreatment.

Hogeland describes how, in the frontier areas, settlers were increasingly compelled to give up working for themselves and go into the mills and ironworks of wealthier entrepreneurs. Eastern absentee landlords took over much of the land and hired farm laborers. Speculators hoped to sell or rent the land at higher prices once the Indians were conquered, and better canal transport opened up the West. These large landowners rented plots to poor tenants, who would clear the land. Many of the poor became squatters on tiny illegal farms.

Foreclosures on Western settlers removed families from their farms to prisons and poorhouses, while their land, tools, and livestock got auctioned off often at bargain prices to some of the same creditors who had done the foreclosing.

Veterans who had gone off to fight the War of Independence, meanwhile, had come out of the army largely unpaid. The anger of these veterans in the 1780s would result in Shays Rebellion, which frightened creditors and caused the Massachusetts legislature to repeal burdensome tax laws.

In the wake of the revolution, the value of paper currency kept depreciating because the Western regions were in a severe post-war depression. The desperation of the people made it impossible for the states to collect taxes. Thus, Congress had to print more and more money, further weakening the value of the paper currency against coin.

To enrich investors who had bought war bonds (and who didn't want to be paid in worthless paper currency), Congress would pay them using bills of exchange, which traded at the real value of metal and were guaranteed by a large cash loan from France. These bonds would now be bought by a small group of privileged investors using devalued paper currency, which Congress honored at face value.

Hogeland explains, "When \$1,000 in Continental paper was worth only \$200 in trade, [investors] could dump \$200 and pick up a thousand-dollar bond drawing 6 percent interest, in metal, on its face value. Thus was founded the '\$2.5 million of what became the domestic war debt of the United States' " (p. 32).

Behind this deal was America's richest financier and merchant, Robert Morris, whom Congress made superintendent of finance. Morris had used public funds to award contracts from which he himself benefited.

Another large amount of congressional debt was estimated up to \$95 million owed in IOUs that Congress had given to small farmers and artisans who had their goods seized to supply the army during the war. Speculators bought these IOUs from struggling or uninformed people for pennies on the dollar. Morris wanted Congress to assume these IOUs, now largely owned by speculators, at their real face value. Congress would then have to collect federal taxes from the very people who had sold off their IOUs in order to pay the speculators.

The individual states, which were more prone to popular pressure, proved less than effective at collecting taxes. States like Pennsylvania had radical state constitutions that facilitated an unusual degree of democratic influence over the government: it only had one chamber in the legislative

branch, so democratic will was not watered down by an upper house or senate. Nor were there property qualifications for voting or holding office. And district judges were elected in the counties. When the Pennsylvania Assembly passed antimonopoly regulations, it outraged the Eastern merchants and manufacturers.

Edmund Randolph, a wealthy Virginia planter and also US Attorney General, spoke at the US Constitutional Convention against “Insufficient checks against democracy” (58).

As states failed to collect taxes to send to Congress, Morris became intent on imposing a federally based tax directly on the people, payable to Congress in coin. Hogeland posits this as the origin of Hamilton’s whiskey tax of 1791, and the subsequent rebellion, declaring that it was “really a conflict between creditors and debtors.” (p. 33).

At the US Constitutional Convention in 1789, the federal government gained the power to tax and to prevent states from issuing paper currency. Hamilton achieved his goal of national financial authority regulated by a strong central state. The whiskey tax represented the first test of this authority.

Since coin currency was scarce, economic relations often revolved around bartering. Whiskey wasn’t just an alcoholic drink, whose taxation, as Hamilton claimed, would moderate consumption: it was in fact a medium of exchange in which rents and labor would often get paid. Many farmers had to convert their grain to whiskey to enable transport to eastern markets.

Thus, a tax on whiskey had a direct impact on income. And the fines for tax violation could exceed most people’s yearly earnings. Moreover, the tax was organized so smaller distillers would pay by the gallon, while larger distillers, who could produce in volume, could take advantage of a flat fee. The net effect was that big producers could undersell smaller ones. Hogeland states, “The goal was industry consolidation” (p. 68).

Petitions came to Congress against the excise, and government collectors of the tax were flogged, tarred, and feathered. In what constituted a further provocation, Hamilton and his associates imposed huge fines on tax resisters and issued court writs that would force defendants to appear in court in faraway Philadelphia rather than stand trial locally, which was the common practice. The costs for both were ruinous.

Perhaps more worrisome to the governing elite than frontier violence was the rebels’ organization of committees of correspondence with other states and associations, which, by popular vote of all able white males, gave a more direct and extreme form of democratic expression to the demands of the popular classes.

Before the tax, small farmers had already been resisting debt foreclosures that were ruining families in the countryside. Meeting near Pittsburgh, the militias formed the democratic heart of the resistance in the Mingo Creek Association, which received representatives from each of eight militia battalions (all officers were elected by the militiamen). This association of 500 men pledged to resist the tax by arms and punish anyone aiding the government.

A convention in August 1792 issued radical demands, and the moderates who tried to steer the movement back into established political channels—men like the wealthy former Pennsylvania assemblyman Henry Brackenridge and the rich Swiss-born aristocrat Albert Gallatin, who later served as a US Congressman and president of John Jacob Astor’s National Bank—were compelled to go along with the rebel demands out of fear that the insurgency would escape entirely from their control (Gallatin would later declare his regret over signing the convention’s resolutions).

Among the convention’s demands was the revoking of the whiskey tax and replacing it with a progressive tax on wealth.

When Pennsylvania’s revised constitution gave the governor the power to pick judges (previously elected) who favored creditors, the Mingo Creek Association usurped control and established itself in lieu of the

courts, following a democratic process. The Mingo Creek Association corresponded with Virginians and Kentuckians, calling on them to unite against the government and anyone who aided federal tax officials.

The actions of the whiskey rebels precipitated growing fear within the emerging American ruling elite that it could face a challenge to its power. The turn against this movement was further fueled by the reaction of the wealthy against the radical turn of French revolution, a movement that enjoyed broad support among the American masses, and particularly the Irish immigrants. Thus, Washington issued a presidential proclamation, outlawing petitioning associations and public assembly.

Calling themselves Tom the Tinker’s men, gangs of men with blackened faces resisted the government. Tom the Tinker was the name given to an invisible persona who posted notes to those cooperating and registering their stills with the government, warning that their property would be destroyed if they didn’t honor the cause. “Tom” also threatened actions against newspapers unless they printed his anti-tax messages. Those guilty of cooperation had to publicly recant their aid to the government.

By May 1794, liberty poles, the symbol of revolutionary American resistance to tyranny, were being raised. In July, the mansion of General John Neville, the wealthy farmer and distiller who became the government’s chief tax enforcer, was attacked twice. Neville shot and killed a rebel during the first attack. The next day, between 400 and 800 men surrounded and fired upon Neville’s fortified mansion, which he defended with his slaves as well as the soldiers brought from Fort Pitt (two soldiers were wounded and one died). Neville escaped, but his property was burned and two rebels were killed.

Hogeland calls the Whiskey Rebellion a “guerrilla war,” involving attacks on tax collectors and the property of the rich. It culminated in 7,000 mostly landless laborers marching on Pittsburgh, threatening its upper-class residents and expelling the tax collectors. They threatened to take the arsenal at Fort Pitt and expropriate property. Violence spread to western Maryland, where in Hagerstown liberty poles were raised as citizens marched to seize the arsenal at Frederick. Sympathetic “friends of liberty” arose in western Pennsylvania and also in the remote parts of Virginia and Kentucky to oppose the debt foreclosures that threatened to force struggling poor farmers off their lands. The resistance in the west now had its own red-and-white six-striped flag, a banner that came to express the demands for access to land, fair taxation, and a redistribution of wealth.

On August 7, 1794, Washington issued contradictory orders. He sent peace commissioners west, while at the same time, he called out the militia. Hamilton was eager to demonstrate the Constitution’s Militia Law Act against any combinations by the people and thought that marching on western Pennsylvania would set an example for other rebellious territories. The purpose of the peace commission was merely “political cover” for the military operation. The government could claim negotiations had failed and that the rebels were unreasonable, thus winning the nation’s sympathy for Washington. For this reason, Hamilton instructed the Pennsylvania governor to keep the militia mobilization secret.

The peace commission threatened that troops would invade to defeat the so-called “white Indians” (the poor frontier settlers were deemed by the elite to be savages and little different from the Indians). To avoid government repression, the commission demanded total submission by the rebels’ elected committee and unanimous support for the law through a public referendum. Tensions ran high, and the moderates encouraged a secret ballot to circumvent any rebel threats to those on the committee voting for the government.

Even with the pending government invasion and the prospect of a pardon in exchange for submission, the government only narrowly won the committee’s vote (34-23). However, this effectively divided the

resistance movement and ended the rebellion. On September 11, 1794, males 18 and older would have to take an oath to support federal law or else be arrested by the troops. Almost everyone who had committed acts of resistance fled down the Ohio River or into the countryside. An estimated 2,000 fled the approaching government forces.

In suppressing the rebellion, Washington and Hamilton disregarded the Bill of Rights' guarantees for those accused and arrested. Civilian courts were administered under military direction, and the military was empowered to arrest people at will. In short, any adult male was subject to being rounded up without the least amount of evidence (and the commanding general ignored the government's promise of amnesty). Two people died due to the army's repression. One innocent boy was killed because he was too weak to follow an officer's orders to remain standing, and the officer accidentally shot him. Another man who praised the rebels got into a scuffle with a soldier, who accidentally stabbed him to death.

In November, troops roused Pittsburgh residents from their beds at gunpoint. General "Blackbeard" White had prisoners tied and placed into the cold mud of a tavern cellar open to the winter elements for more than two days. The prisoners were denied food and water, and were told they would surely hang. The freezing and hungry prisoners were then marched 12 miles to a jail where they were held without charges for questioning by the military. The harshness of the mass arrests terrified the population. Despite the fact that Judge Peters, who had to make the rulings in these cases, could not find any evidence to detain those arrested, Hamilton and the army demanded that some prisoners be paraded back to Philadelphia to legitimize the use of force.

By Christmas 1794, the frozen and ragged suspected rebels arrived in Philadelphia for a sad display. None of the prisoners were informed of the charges against them before trial. Despite judges instructing the juries to convict the prisoners, only two were found guilty: one who was thought to be simple-minded and another, David Bradford, a poor subsistence farmer who had robbed the mails to find government communications. Since hanging these hapless individuals would have only produced sympathy for the rebels, Washington decided to pardon the condemned.

In the wake of the crushing of the rebellion, together with the defeats suffered by the Indians on the frontier, Washington saw the value of his own land leap by 50 percent. Federal authority was established and national finance flourished. The whiskey tax, though, proved difficult to collect (many settlers eluded it) and was repealed by Thomas Jefferson in 1800.

Hogeland's account of the Whiskey Rebellion reveals the conflicting social interests that exploded into crisis during the early stages of the American republic. There has been relatively little written about this event: Thomas Slaughter's *The Whiskey Rebellion*, published in 1986, is the only academic work in print on the subject; the only other book-length account of the events is Leland D. Baldwin's *Whiskey Rebels*, published in 1939 and now out of print. The reason for this relative silence is clear. Washington's and Hamilton's repression of the rebellion conflicts with the national myths of the benevolent Founding Fathers and a nation established on the basis of equality. It also reveals intense class conflicts that existed in American society from its origins, something that the ruling elite has always sought to deny or at least marginalize.

Though Hogeland's shifting back and forth from narrative history to economic or political analysis is sometimes jarring, he manages to explain complex events in a style that is refreshingly readable. His work debunks widely held myths about the rebellion, such as the conservative claim that it was a precursor of the kind of anti-tax, anti-"big government" ideology identified with the American Right. In fact, the rebels' demand was for progressive taxation, with the rich forced to bear the biggest burden.

While the American Revolution constituted a major leap forward for humanity in laying the basis for expanded suffrage and establishing guaranteed inalienable rights of men, the limits of bourgeois democracy

were soon discovered by the poor farmers. The injustices the working poor faced, as subsequent history would reveal, had their source in the reality that the revolution had placed power in the hands of a moneyed class, which would utilize the state as an instrument for consolidating its political and economic control.

Although Hogeland makes valuable observations, in this reader's view, he fails to spell out the rebellion's connection to the social contradictions that would inevitably re-emerge in an expanding US capitalist society.

Hogeland is sympathetic to Herman Husband's vision of a communally run society (where property is distributed by the state) with a three-tiered federal structure based on a unicameral senate, where power runs bottom-up rather than top-down. But, he makes no connection between these ideals and similar proposals elaborated by the utopian socialists who emerged in Europe in response to the unfulfilled ideals of the French Revolution.

He refers to Husband's vision of building a democracy not for the rich creditor class, but to defend the interests of the laboring majority as the "last battle for the American soul" (p. 244). While he goes through painstaking efforts to show how the class interests expressed in the whiskey tax were bound up with the development of capitalism, which was turning sections of small farmers into a proletariat, he fails to indicate that this "battle for the American soul" would continue and intensify. He does not hint that the development of industrial production would create the material conditions to make socialism possible, and indeed necessary. He will not name this "battle" as the inevitable class struggle resulting from the exploitation and social inequality of capitalism, which could only be resolved through socialist revolution.

That said, Hogeland's critical history of the Whiskey Rebellion is a very much needed, and strongly recommended, book. His account offers a graphic demonstration of how easily the ruling elite will dispense with civil liberties to ensure its interests, a lesson that holds intense relevance to today's crisis of bourgeois democracy in America.



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