



Wars cost money ... lots of money. To pay for wars, countries tax their citizens.

Sometimes "the people" agree with the wars ... and ... sometimes times they don't. Either way, "the people," who often disagree with the tax amounts, foot the bill.

When the United States was a young country, and George Washington was still President, the country was in debt. America's Revolutionary War had been costly, both in money and lives.

How would the country get rid of the debt?

In 1791, Alexander Hamilton, who was Washington's Secretary of the Treasury, had an idea. Why not put an excise tax on "spirits distilled within the United States?" In other words, have the federal government put a tax on the production of whiskey.

Hamilton, who strongly favored increasing federal control over the country's law and politics, was opposed by people like Thomas Jefferson. Those Anti-Federalists, who favored the right of states to make political decisions, opposed Hamilton's idea of a whiskey tax.

Despite opposition, Congress passed the tax on "distilled spirits," then imposed it on "the people." It did not go over well.

Farmers in frontier areas (like western Pennsylvania and other states) who grew crops (like grain, corn and rye) had trouble shipping their harvests east. Roads, at the time, were either non-existent or poor (at best). Then there was the added expense of storage areas.

Instead of trying to ship products which could spoil or be stolen as they traveled from America's frontier, these farmers used some of their harvests to "distill spirits." Shipping whiskey was easier than shipping non-processed farm crops.

Hamilton's idea, now the law of the land, directly impacted such farmers (many of whom were barely making a living before the federal tax). Believing the federal government was abusing its authority, farmers fought back by refusing to turn over any money when the tax collectors came by. (The tax was payable in cash.)



Frontier farmers also believed the tax was indiscriminately applied to them. After all, why should the farmers who made the liquor be taxed and not the people who consumed it? The National Park Service tells us that, among other things, people viewed it as:

...a tax upon liquors which are the common drink of a nation operates in proportion to the number and not to the wealth of the people, and of course is unjust in itself, and oppressive upon the poor.

In the outlying areas, also known as America's "back country," the government couldn't get people to serve as tax collectors. As a result, farmers in places like the frontier of Virginia, Maryland, North/South Carolina and the whole state of Kentucky fought back by not paying the tax at all (because no one came round to collect it). Farmers in western Pennsylvania simply refused to pay.

President Washington, America's only unanimously elected President, got involved. In 1792, he issued a Presidential Proclamation admonishing the non-tax-paying farmers for opposing "operation of the laws of the United States for raising revenue upon spirits distilled within the same."

People loved their President, but the farmers were unimpressed with his proclamation. They still refused to pay the tax.

By 1794, around 400 "whiskey rebels" were so angry about the law that they set fire to the home of John Neville (the regional tax-collection supervisor). They also tarred-and-feathered tax collectors (reminiscent of Revolutionary-War activities against British tax collectors), making them "ride the rail" out of town.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge, a Scottish-born American who became a Justice of Pennsylvania's Supreme Court, opposed the tax but tried to calm the angry farmers. He described the uprising, in *The Pittsburgh Gazette*, as:

...a stand of the Democratic, poverty-ridden West against the encroachments of the aristocratic Money Bags of the East; of a people who feel themselves taxed in order to fasten the yokes of Plutocrats about their necks.

Hamilton urged Washington to take military action against the farmers who would not pay the tax. The President agreed. Leading a federalized militia force of 12,950 men, Washington made his way towards Western Pennsylvania.

Before setting out on his journey, the President warned supporters not to help the farmers (whom the government called "Insurgents"). On the 25th of September, 1794, a notice appeared in the *Gazette of the United States*. It included these words, telling people not to:

...abet, aid, or comfort the Insurgents aforesaid, as they will answer the contrary at their peril.

By the time the militia reached Pittsburgh, the whiskey rebels had dispersed. About 150 of them were arrested, then tried for treason.

Not everyone approved of the federal government's action against the whiskey rebels, some individuals seeing it as a "war on our own citizens." Those attitudes did not help the government's case against the 150 defendants. All but two cases crumbled by a lack of evidence (including people who refused to testify against the farmers).

Two men - John Mitchell and Philip Weigel - were found guilty of treason, but President Washington pardoned both.

A few years later came the election of 1800, sometimes called America's "Second Revolution." At issue, among other things, was how much power people were willing to give the U.S. federal government.

John Adams, a Federalist and sitting President, lost the election to Thomas Jefferson, an Anti-Federalist (who was strongly supported by the frontier states). Once close colleagues, their political differences had separated the two men for many years. Only later in their lives, when both were old men, did they resume their correspondence.

Meanwhile ... the excise tax on whisky met its end. President Jefferson repealed it after he won the 1800 national election.

Credits:

Image of rebels tarring-and-feathering a tax collector, after burning his home, by "artist Everett." The incident is fully described in a contemporary account by Hugh Henry Brackenridge (a founder of the academy which would become the University of Pittsburgh and a Pennsylvania Supreme Court justice), entitled Incidents of the Insurrection published, in Philadelphia, during 1795.

In-text image, "The Whiskey Rebellion, 1794," from "The Chronicles of American motion picture Alexander Hamilton." Online via New York Public Library Digital Gallery, digital image 92131 (Record ID 131492). Source: "The Pageant of America" Collection / v.3 - Toilers of land and sea / (Published photographs).

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/American-Anarchy-Whiskey-Rebellion>

Questions 2 Ponder

How Do Countries Get Out of Debt?

Revolutionary America was a country in debt. When Congress passed a tax on "distilled spirits" such as whiskey, to raise money, people who produced distilled-spirit products rebelled.

The tax, which was imposed when George Washington was President, directly impacted farmers (many of whom were barely making a living before the federal tax).

Believing the federal government was abusing its authority, farmers fought back by refusing to turn over any money when the tax collectors came by. The tax was payable in cash, and receipts—like the one depicted at the top of this page—were given to the farmer who paid his tax.

Pick any part of this "Whiskey Rebellion" story and compare it to today's world, explaining both similarities and differences.

If you had been alive at the time of this rebellion, on whose side would you have been? Why?

Are Taxes Ever Class-Based?

People don't like turning-over their hard-earned money to government tax collectors. The Whiskey Rebellion is just one example of a tax rebellion.

When taxes seem to be indiscriminately applied, such as the tax on “distilled spirits” which was imposed on farmers who made the liquor but not on people who consumed it, people get even more upset.

In other words ... it's easy to support a tax which is imposed on someone else and, in the case of the “distilled spirits” tax, that someone else was the farmer who made the whiskey (not the person who drank it). The farmers rebelled; the whiskey consumer had no reason to be upset.

Do you think the rebels had a point by asserting a tax on whiskey should have been imposed on the consumer, not on the producer? Why, or why not?

If the government wasn't favoring one side over the other, why not impose a tax on both consumer and producer?

Was the tax on just the farmers class-based? Why, or, why not?

Who are Insurgents?

In the 21st century, “insurgents” are people who rebel against a constituted authority, but this is not a new concept. When George Washington was America's President, he faced down insurgents during the Whiskey Rebellion.

Before setting out on a journey to deal with farmers who opposed a tax on “distilled spirits, the President warned supporters not to help the farmers (whom the government called “Insurgents”). On the 25th of September, 1794, a notice appeared in the Gazette of the United States. It included these words, telling people not to:

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Do you think the insurgents, during the Whiskey Rebellion, were correct in their position? Why (or, why not)?

Media Stream



Whiskey Rebellion

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Tarred and Feathered Taxman Rides the Rail

Image from "Our first century: Being a Popular Descriptive Portraiture of the One Hundred Great and Memorable Events of Perpetual Interest in the History of Our Country." (Springfield, Mass. : Nichols, 1882) Devens, R. M. (Richard Miller), Author. Image online, via NYPL Digital Gallery.

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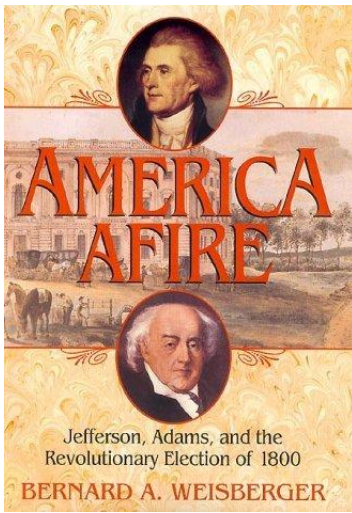
George Washington and the Whiskey Rebellion

Image, described above, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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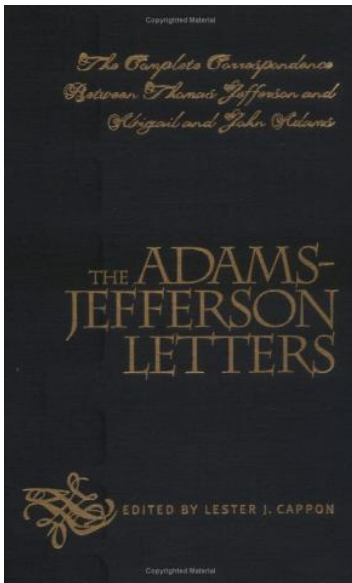


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