Whiskey Rebellion

In January 1791, President George Washington's Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton proposed a seemingly innocuous excise tax "upon spirits distilled within the United States, and for appropriating the same."[1] What Congress failed to predict was the vehement rejection of this tax by Americans living on the frontier of Western Pennsylvania. By 1794, the Whiskey Rebellion threatened the stability of the nascent United States and forced President Washington to personally lead the United States militia westward to stop the rebels.

George Washington reviewing the troops being deployed against the Whiskey Rebellion - Washington Reviewing the Western Army, at Fort Cumberland, Maryland, ca.1795. [63.201.2]. Courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

By 1791 the United States suffered from significant debt incurred during the Revolutionary War. Secretary Hamilton, a Federalist supporting increased federal authority, intended to use the excise tax to lessen this financial burden. Despite resistance from Anti-Federalists like Thomas Jefferson, Congress passed the legislation. When news of the tax spread to Western Pennsylvania, individuals immediately voiced their displeasure by refusing to pay the tax. Residents viewed this tax as yet another instance of unfair policies dictated by the eastern elite that negatively affected American citizens on the frontier.

Western farmers felt the tax was an abuse of federal authority wrongly targeting a demographic that relied on crops such as corn, rye, and grain to earn a profit. However, shipping this harvest

east was dangerous because of poor storage and dangerous roads. As a result, farmers frequently distilled their grain into liquor which was easier to ship and preserve. While large-scale farmers easily incurred the financial strain of an additional tax, indigent farmers were less able to do so without falling into dire financial straits.

President Washington sought to resolve this dispute peacefully. In 1792, he issued a national proclamation admonishing westerners for their resistance to the "operation of the laws of the United States for raising revenue upon spirits distilled within the same."[2] However, by 1794 the protests became violent. In July, nearly 400 whiskey rebels near Pittsburgh set fire to the home of John Neville, the regional tax collection supervisor. Left with little recourse and at the urgings of Secretary Hamilton, Washington organized a militia force of 12,950 men and led them towards Western Pennsylvania, warning locals "not to abet, aid, or comfort the Insurgents aforesaid, as they will answer the contrary at their peril."[3]

The calling of the militia had the desired effect of essentially ending the Whiskey Rebellion. By the time the militia reached Pittsburgh, the rebels had dispersed and could not be found. The militia apprehended approximately 150 men and tried them for treason. A paucity of evidence and the inability to obtain witnesses hampered the trials. Two men, John Mitchell and Philip Weigel, were found guilty of treason, though both were pardoned by President Washington. By 1802, then President Thomas Jefferson repealed the excise tax on whiskey. Under the eye of President Washington, the nascent United States survived the first true challenge to federal authority.

Peter Kotowski

Loyola University Chicago

Notes:

1. "28 January 1791," *Journal of the Senate of the United States of America, 1789-1793. A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation,* U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875.

2. *National Gazette*, 29 September 1792.

3. *Gazette of the United States*, 25 September 1794.

Bibliography:

Baldwin, Leland. *Whiskey Rebels: The Story of a Frontier Uprising*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1939.

Hogeland, William. *The Whiskey Rebellion: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Frontier Rebels who Challenged America's Newfound Sovereignty*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2006.

Slaughter, Thomas. *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.