

SUMMARY OF SHAYS' REBELLION

The economic situation grew dire by 1786. Revolutionary war debt ravaged the budgets of the national government and some states. States tried a variety of measures to address the debt crisis—including debt relief. Businesses were failing, and trade suffered. And under the Articles of Confederation, the national government could do little to help.

In late 1786, farmers in western Massachusetts—facing high land taxes (and growing debt) and feeling that the economic (and governing) class in Boston didn't represent them—took matters into their own hands.

Under the leadership of Daniel Shays—a 39-year-old farmer who had fought in the American Revolution, including at Lexington and Bunker Hill—the farmers organized themselves into an armed fighting force and marched through the western part of the state. The farmers seized control of court buildings preventing the state government from taking possession of their farms. They forced debtors' prisons to close. And they attempted to commandeer the arsenal at Springfield, Massachusetts. Their plan was to march to Boston and confront the Massachusetts government.

Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress had no power to raise an army. They could ask the states for help—but they couldn't force them to raise troops. As a result, a Massachusetts militia eventually put down the rebellion. For many in the Founding generation—including George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison—Shays' Rebellion was proof that the Articles were too weak to govern the country.

They feared that this might be the first of many violent uprisings. The national government had no real power to stop future uprisings or to address the underlying problems through good policy.

Eventually, these key leaders concluded that the nation needed to hold a convention—one that might work to propose a strong national government, whether through revisions to the Articles of Confederation or even through a new constitution. Key figures like James Madison and Alexander Hamilton pushed to ensure that the nation called that convention and that America's most beloved leader—George Washington—would be there when it happened.

On February 21, 1787, the Confederation Congress did agree to call for a convention of state delegates to meet in Philadelphia for the "sole and express purpose of revising the Articles."

However, the Framers instead crafted an entirely new framework of government—the U.S. Constitution.