

Author: George Washington  
Date: 1786

**Annotation:**

In a letter to his former Revolutionary war comrade General Henry Knox (1750-1806), Washington offers his view of Shays' Rebellion. This letter epitomizes the perception that severe dangers--from corruption, British intrigue, and popular discontent--threatened all that had been won during the Revolution.

**Document:**

...Lamentable as the conduct of the Insurgents of Massachusetts is, I am exceedingly obliged to you for the advice respecting them;...I feel, my dear Genl. Knox, infinitely more than I can express to you, for the disorders which have arisen in these States. Good God! who besides a tory could have foreseen, or a Briton predicted them! were these people wiser than others, or did they judge of us from the corruption and depravity of their own hearts? The latter I am persuaded was the case, and that notwithstanding the boasted virtue of America, we are far gone in every thing ignoble and bad....

There are combustibles in every State, which a spark might set fire to. In this State, a perfect calm prevails at present, and a prompt disposition to support, and give energy to the federal System is discovered, if the unlucky stirring of the dispute respecting the navigation of the Mississippi [with Spain] does not become a leaven that will ferment, and sour the mind of it....

That G[reat] B[ritain] will be an unconcerned Spectator of the present insurrections (if they continue) is not to be expected. That she is at this moment sowing the Seeds of jealousy and discontent among the various tribes of Indians on our frontier admits of no doubt, in my mind. And that she will improve every opportunity to foment the spirit of turbulence within the bowels of the United States, with a view of distracting our governments, and promoting divisions, is, with me, not less certain. Her first Maneuvers will, no doubt, be covert, and may remain so till the period shall arrive when a decided line of conduct may avail her. Charges of violating the treaty, and other pretexts, will not then be wanting to color overt acts, tending to effect the great objects of which she has long been in labour....We ought not therefore to sleep nor to slumber. Vigilance in watching, and vigour in acting, is, in my opinion, become indispensably necessary. If the powers are inadequate amend or alter them, but do not let us sink into the lowest state of humiliation and contempt, and become a byword in all the earth.