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Boston's Response to Disorder in the Commonwealth 1783-1787

Myron F. Wehtje

The American Revolution produced an atmosphere of instability and uncertainty that remained in Boston long after the British evacuation of March 1776. When peace was concluded in 1783, Bostonians longed for the reestablishment of order as well. A full generation of turmoil was enough for even the heartiest of revolutionaries. In an orderly republican society based on law, Bostonians expected to enjoy liberty for their persons and security for their property. Partly because of their knowledge of classical history, some of them worried from the beginning of the Confederation period about the new nation's ability to establish and preserve order. The history of ancient republics seemed to testify to a republic's inherent susceptibility to disorder. And beyond disorder, of course, lay anarchy. Even in the lexicon of revolutionaries, anarchy was a frightening word. In a circular letter sent to the towns of Massachusetts in 1786, the Boston town meeting declared that a "state of anarchy is to be dreaded above all other calamities because there is no evil which it does not involve." Two years earlier a writer in the *Massachusetts Centinel* had suggested that the nation was already in a state of anarchy. In the spring of 1786 another writer, noting the "general clamors" in the country, said that it was "upon the brink of ruin." By the summer of 1786 such sentiments were being expressed more frequently. A writer in the *Independent Chronicle* expected that anarchy would "soon sap the present system." Another of that paper's correspondents believed that America was on the path to ruin that ancient republics had followed. "The present crisis is critical in the extreme," he concluded.¹

Anarchy itself was bad enough, but a number of Bostonians regarded it as the precursor of something even worse: tyranny. The possibility that tyranny might arise was especially alarming because for the past generation Americans had been opposing what they chose to call the "tyranny" of Great Britain. They were now independent of that "tyrannical" power. If tyranny were to emerge in the new nation, it would represent a direct and total betrayal of the American Revolution. To some Bostonians, the danger of tyranny was real, for they believed that it must inevitably follow anarchy, as it had done throughout history. Writing in late February 1783, "Probus" was fearful that the nation would be weak and

confused, leaving it prey to tyranny. Such apprehensions were heightened in the next several years. In the spring of 1786 the readers of the *Chronicle* were reminded that anarchy would prepare the way for the “enterprises of a modern Cromwell” and “perhaps establish a dreadful despotism of public freedom.” The printer of the *Massachusetts Gazette*, Samuel Hall, was concerned about the crisis he detected in the summer of 1786 because he thought that most people would prefer tyranny to anarchy. As the Shaysite insurrection gained momentum, another writer thought that Americans would lose their liberty unless there were a “thorough revolution in the temper, manners, and principles of the times.” And if liberty were to be “exiled from the New World, as she has long been from the Old,” he wrote, echoing Thomas Paine, “there is not a spot upon the face of the earth, where the sole of her foot can find a resting place.”²

Boston itself was comparatively orderly during the 1780s, but its residents worried about unrest elsewhere, especially in other parts of Massachusetts. In early 1784 there was agitation in some of the other towns of Suffolk County against the commutation of pay for officers of the Continental army and against the proposed Congressional impost. When Boston was invited to send one or more delegates to a county convention to discuss these matters, the town meeting chose a committee to draft a response and report to the town. On March 15 the committee’s letter of response was accepted by the town meeting. The letter expressed the “sorrow of the town that, at a time when we have a constitution of our own choosing, and which has been approved of by the world, there should yet remain any uneasy persons in the community who could form the fruitless design of disturbing the tranquility of the state by proposing the unnecessary measure of meeting by counties.” It was conceded that there had been a time when a “redress of grievances could be had in no other way.” However, the letter stated that that time was “gone forever, unless the baneful influence of a few restless spirits should induce the people at large by county meetings and irregular assemblies to raise such commotions as might eventually overturn the constitution and again leave us a prey to foreign power, or what is worse, intestine convulsions.”³

If people in the other Suffolk towns were unhappy with the policies of the Congress or the General Court, they were admonished to seek changes by electing new officials. In the view of the Bostonians, annual elections provided the proper means of redressing grievances in the new nation. In his private correspondence, Samuel Adams also argued that there was no longer any need for extralegal committees and conventions. The American people were now under legitimate governments, and free elections enabled them to change those governments. Men who acted outside of government “would lessen the weight of government lawfully exercised.” Adams regarded such men as “enemies to our happy Revolution and the common liberty.” In spite of Boston’s opposition, the county convention met at Dedham. Soon after that meeting, Milton and other Suffolk towns proposed the division of the county to separate themselves from Boston. Boston sent delegates to a meeting in Dedham on April 22, 1784, to consider this proposal. In a long report on the question, a town committee later argued that the division of Suffolk County would be unnecessary and unwise. The committee noted that because the “people” had “thrown off their ancient

principles" during the Revolution and did not yet understand the new principles of "one of the best and most equal governments," they were "restless, uneasy, and unhappy." After hearing the report, the town voted unanimously against the division of the county. Nevertheless, the plan went to the General Court, where Bostonians were able to block it. But the turmoil in the county did not end. In the fall of 1784 there was a new confrontation when many of the Suffolk towns pushed for repeal of legislation allowing Boston to collect fees from their residents for the use of its market facilities.⁴

During the following year, 1785, Bostonians became interested in separatist agitation in Maine. For several reasons, including the considerable distance of Maine from the state capital of Boston, many of the people in Maine wished to separate from Massachusetts. Separatist sentiment in Maine finally led to the meeting of a "separation convention" at Falmouth in 1786. As Robert Levine has observed, "To Boston the Falmouth Convention was odious, fraught with evil and danger." It seemed to be an ominous threat to the fragile order of the Commonwealth. A writer in the *Independent Chronicle* warned that a rebellion had begun in Maine. He feared that its worst result would be to throw Maine under the control of Great Britain.⁵

Another convention met in Maine in 1787 to consider separation, but by that time Bostonians had become preoccupied with a far more important challenge to the public order.⁶ Few developments had as profound an effect upon Confederation Boston as did Shays' Rebellion. A brief summary of the rebellion will facilitate discussion of its effect on the thinking of the people of Boston.⁷ Mounting discontent in the central and western parts of Massachusetts led to a general insurrection by the late summer of 1786. One of the most important events of the summer was a convention of fifty towns in the western county of Hampshire. The convention, which opened in Hatfield on August 22, 1786, composed a long list of grievances. Item number twelve read: "The General Court sitting in the town of Boston." In the weeks ahead, Bostonians anxiously read and listened to reports of other conventions, mob actions in disrupting the courts, and other evidence of unrest to the west.

The insurrection came closer to home for Bostonians when a convention for Worcester County met at Paxton in late September, and especially when a convention opened in nearby Concord on October 23. Both conventions placed the legislature's meeting in Boston on their lists of grievances. In fact, that was the first item on the list prepared in Concord. While Daniel Shays was assembling a sizable force at Worcester in November and December, Boston filled with rumors that this force would invade the capital. These rumors reached a peak after a volunteer cavalry unit from Boston under the command of Colonel Benjamin Hitchbourn captured Job Shattuck and other Shaysite leaders and brought them back to Boston. While a larger number of spectators watched in Boston on December 1, 1786, the prisoners were placed in the Suffolk County jail on Court Street.

It was soon rumored that Shays and his force were planning a march on Boston to free Shattuck and the other prisoners. Others thought that the Shays-



ites might take the Bank of Massachusetts or even stage a coup d'état while in the capital. In any event, guards were placed at the jail and at the approaches to the town. Marion Starkey writes that in early December "Boston lived like a city besieged." The threat to the town seemed so serious that plans were generated to raise money to enable the impoverished state government to organize a force sufficient to crush the insurrection. However, the supposed danger to Boston quickly subsided, and so the plan for a subscription fund was dropped. The plan was revived in late December, after separate forces led by Shays and Luke Day converged on Springfield, threatening a smaller force guarding the arsenal there. As Governor James Bowdoin decided to make an all-out effort to end the rebellion, he placed General Benjamin Lincoln in command. Lincoln soon learned that the state lacked the money to supply an expedition to western Massachusetts. Undaunted, the general asked a group of the "first characters in Boston" to loan the necessary money to the state. In the first week of January 1787 more than £5,000 was subscribed in amounts ranging from £30 to £300. The governor himself subscribed £250. With this support, Lincoln was able to rout the insurgents in the Springfield area. By the end of February the rebellion was over. In March all of the rebels except Shays and three other leaders were pardoned. However, even though the uprising was over, the animosity between the Bostonians and people in western and central counties continued. In the course of the insurrection, Boston had been a symbol to people in those counties of their grievances. As Starkey writes, Boston had replaced Great Britain as "the enemy." As the rebellion ended, it remained difficult for people to the west of Boston to forgive the town for what they perceived as its insensitivity to their grievances.⁸

While these events were taking place, Bostonians were freely expressing their attitudes toward them. County conventions were the targets of a number of writers in the early months. Just as the convention at Hatfield was opening in late August, one writer charged that such meetings aimed at the destruction of "our present happy government." It seemed to him that "American liberty" was in danger of turning into "licentiousness." Samuel Adams, writing as "Republicus," agreed that county conventions had a "manifest tendency to overthrow the state." He challenged both the legality and the efficacy of county conventions.⁹ In a letter to Adams, James Sullivan wrote that he too wished that the "idea of a county convention being a legal body could be exploded." A writer in the *Independent Chronicle* wanted the towns of Massachusetts to seek redress of their grievances by instructing their representatives in the General Court. Another writer was confident that the government would "redress with cheerfulness" any "real grievances" presented in a "constitutional way."¹⁰

By early September there was widespread concern in Boston over the increasing unrest in the interior counties. "The present is an alarming crisis," wrote "Publicus." He thought it would determine "whether we shall exist any longer as a free people, or whether we shall forfeit, by a single cast, the public blessings which we have so dearly purchased." On September 8, 1786, a special town meeting convened to consider the developing crisis. At this meeting a committee of seven, headed by Samuel Adams, was selected to prepare an address to the governor and a circular letter to be sent to the other towns in Massachusetts.

When the town met again three days later, it approved of the address to the governor and requested the committee to present it on behalf of the town. The town meeting also accepted the circular letter and directed the selectmen to send it to the other towns. The two documents left no doubt about the sentiments of Boston. They stated the town's "united testimony" against the recent "illegal steps" taken by people in the disaffected areas. The Bostonians found those "commotions" to be "equally repugnant to the constitution as they are destructive of the peace and order of society." Redress of grievances must be sought only in a "constitutional and orderly way." They reminded the other towns that the state government had been founded by "our own voluntary consent." Under that government, the "voice of the people may be taken without flying to arms." In their view, the writing of instructions for a town's representatives was "our great remedy against any ills we suffer." Besides condemning the insurrection, the people of Boston avowed their "unvaried determination to cooperate in support of constitutional government."¹¹

In its circular letter, probably written by Samuel Adams, the town attributed the unrest in Massachusetts in part to the influence of "British emissaries residing among us." This notion was a popular one among Bostonians. In an earlier letter to the *Massachusetts Gazette*, Adams had blamed "British emissaries" and even the "Ministry of England."¹² "Publicus" thought that the county conventions were "excited, supported, and encouraged" both by British agents and desperate debtors; and "A Citizen" also claimed that "vile emissaries of haughty Britain" were among the troublemakers. One Boston gentleman said that he had personally heard a "lurking" British agent say that he would, if necessary, lead a mob against the tax collectors. Another writer in the *Massachusetts Gazette*, who subscribed to the same theory, thought that if anyone in the state deserved the gallows, it was the "vile incendiary and traitor" who had tried "to destroy us as a nation" in the recent war and who now "continues his endeavors to disturb the peace of our government by exciting insurrections of the people to overturn the constitution." When George Brock, described as a "native of Britain," was arrested in Attleborough and jailed in Boston in late October of 1786 on a charge of sedition, the charges of British influence seemed to be confirmed.¹³

As autumn came, it became increasingly evident that the insurrection was becoming stronger. Boston's admonitions had not been sufficient to defuse the uprising. The author of a weekly chronicle in the *Exchange Advertiser* referred to the "fabric of our government falling to the ground—and every species of anarchy ushering in space." James Sullivan favored pardoning all or nearly all of the insurgents and then declaring that any future insurrections would be high treason, against which the state government would use force. Most writers, however, opposed any further temporizing. A correspondent of the *Chronicle* reproached the legislature in mid-October 1786 for allowing two months to pass since the beginning of trouble without taking action. "Jonathan of the Valley" called for "decision and firmness" to establish the authority of the government. Another writer urged immediate action: "In the present crisis the rashest of all counsels is to do nothing." He was one of several Bostonians who argued the necessity of putting down the uprising before undertaking any reforms: "Call

the engines; extinguish the fire; when that is done, enlarge or alter the house to your taste." "Civis" preferred this course because he believed that "firmness and decision" were "much more necessary to a young government, like ours, whose character is not yet formed, than to those which are old and well established."¹⁴

The apparent danger to Boston from a Shaysite invasion further galvanized public opinion in late November and early December 1786. The *Continental Journal* was encouraged by the "zeal manifested by the inhabitants of this town for the support of constitutional government." It was time for decisive action, "Publicus" thought. "Shays and his party have passed the Rubicon." The concentration of insurgents in the Springfield area in late December and the governor's decision to finally put down the insurrection with military force produced another surge of patriotism in Boston. Buoyed by the support of the capital, Governor Bowdoin was determined to move against the insurgents with the "utmost" perseverance. In early February he assured General Lincoln of the "universal good wishes of the people" of Boston. These sentiments resulted in part from duress. An observer of the legislature noted that there were some who disliked the "vigorous measures which have been adopted," but they "dare not speak out." James Sullivan found that the "powers of government are so united in the metropolis that [it] is dangerous even to be silent. A man is accused of rebellion if he does not loudly approve every measure as prudent, necessary, wise, and constitutional." And, indeed, the *Centinel* did judge that "those who are not decidedly in favor of present exertions are against the constitution."¹⁵

Although Shays' Rebellion was over a number of weeks before the gubernatorial election of 1787, it was nevertheless entangled with the contest for governor. Several writers urged the reelection of Bowdoin, as "A Republican" expressed it, "to convince the insurgents that the voice of the people is against them." If Bowdoin were defeated in the election, what conclusions would people draw? Others believed that Massachusetts was still in great difficulty even though the uprising had ended, and as one put it, ships ought not to change pilots during storms.¹⁶ Such individuals as these generally favored strict punishment for the rebels. "A plenty of hemp," wrote "Q. X." in the *Independent Chronicle*, "would certainly cause terror to evildoers, and would have a direct tendency to promote good order in the community." "Euphranor" agreed that the execution of convicted rebels would have a salutary effect on the people of the state. After four condemned men in Hampshire and Berkshire Counties were reprieved, one writer was apprehensive that this act might be considered a "mark of timidity." Now, however, some Bostonians were daring to place the recent unrest in a different perspective. The election of John Hancock as governor and significant numbers of reform-minded legislators both revealed and helped to produce a change of climate. "A Citizen," for instance, could now point to "heavy and injudicious" taxation as the "great origin of our present troubles." "Honestus" was also critical of "our present impolitic mode of taxation." He hoped for changes under the new administration. In his letter to the *Chronicle*, he said that the time had come for the healing of wounds. "Honestus" thought that lenient treatment of the Shaysites would be a "more eligible mode to restore our public tranquility than a severity of punishment."¹⁷

As Benjamin Austin, Jr., writing as "Honestus," considered what Massachusetts had experienced in the past year and was confronting in the spring of 1787, he came to a conclusion that was forcing itself upon many Bostonians: "The grand difficulty with us is a want of *national sentiments*." Many developments of the mid-1780s, but particularly Shays' Rebellion, had caused Bostonians to think seriously about the nation and the union of states. By the spring of 1787 many of those townspeople who were interested in matters of state felt keenly the lack of order in the new nation. They were becoming convinced that without order the fruits of the Revolution would be lost. But order could not be achieved by the separate efforts of the thirteen states. Probably few of them realized the extent to which the causes of Shays' Rebellion and unrest in other states were bound up with the desperate efforts of the states to pay for the Revolution. However, they sensed that many of their goals, including the achievement of order, could be achieved only by a stronger union of the states under a truly national government.¹⁸

NOTES

1. *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Town Records, 1784 to 1796*, vol. 31 of the Reports of the Record Commissioners of Boston (Boston, 1903), XXXI:128; hereafter cited as *Town Records*; *The Massachusetts Centinel*, June 19, 1784; *The Exchange Advertiser*, May 11, 1786; *The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser*, June 1 and Aug. 31, 1786.
2. *Indep. Chron.*, Feb. 20, 1783, June 1 and Aug. 31, 1786; *The Massachusetts Gazette*, July 24, 1786.
3. *Town Records*, XXXI:12-14.
4. Samuel Adams to Noah Webster, April 30, 1784, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. by Harry Alonzo Cushing (New York, 1968 reprint), IV:303-306; *Town Records*, XXXI:13, 26-29, 38-40, 49-51.
5. Robert Levine, "The Separation of the District of Maine from Massachusetts, 1785 to 1820," (Ph.D. diss., Clark Univ., 1933), pp. 2, 89, 99; "Jonathan of the Valley," *Indep. Chron.*, Nov. 3, 1785.
6. Levine, "Separation of the District of Maine from Massachusetts," p. 107.
7. The standard authority is David Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst, 1980).
8. Besides Chapter 5, "The Ideology and Politics of Suppression," in Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion*, see the following: Joseph Parker Warren, "The Shays Rebellion: A Study in the History of Massachusetts," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard Univ., 1900), pp. 81-84, 187; Van Beck Hall, *Politics Without Parties: Massachusetts, 1780-1791* (Pittsburgh, 1972), pp. 190-226; Marion L. Starkey, *A Little Rebellion* (New York, 1955), pp. 10, 49-126; *Indep. Chron.*, Nov. 30, 1786; *Exch. Adver.*, Dec. 7, 1786; Benjamin Lincoln to George Washington, Feb. 22, 1787, in Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Life and Times of Stephen Higginson* (Boston, 1907), pp. 96, 97; "Statement and List of Subscribers," ms in Edward Payne Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

9. *The Massachusetts Gazette*, Aug. 22 and Oct. 24, 1786. On the identification of Adams as the author, see James Karl Somerville, "Patriot Moralists: An Intellectual Portrait of Samuel Adams" (Ph.D. diss., Western Reserve Univ., 1965), p. 63.
10. James Sullivan to Samuel Adams, Oct. 12, 1786, James Sullivan Papers, MHS; *Indep. Chron.*, Dec. 21, 1786; *Exch. Adver.*, Dec. 7, 1786.
11. *Indep. Chron.*, Sept. 7, 1786; *Town Records*, XXXI: 124-132.
12. *Town Records*, XXXI: 131. On Adams' authorship of the circular letter, see Somerville, "Patriot Moralists," pp. 55, 56. The same writer identifies Adams as "Another Citizen," in *Mass. Gaz.*, Aug. 25, 1786.
13. *Indep. Chron.*, Aug. 31, 1786; *Mass. Gaz.*, Aug. 22, Sept. 15 and Nov. 3, 1786.
14. *Exch. Adver.*, Oct. 12, 1786; James Sullivan to Samuel Adams, Oct. 12, 1786, James Sullivan Papers, MHS; *Indep. Chron.*, Oct. 5, 19, and 26, 1786; *Mass. Gaz.*, Oct. 6, 1786.
15. *The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, Nov. 30, 1786; *Indep. Chron.*, Dec. 21, 1786; *Cont. Jour.*, Jan. 11, 1787; James Bowdoin to Benjamin Lincoln, Jan. 27 and Feb. 7, 1787, in Keith Papers, MHS; Benjamin Lincoln, Jr., to Benjamin Lincoln, Feb. 5, 1787, in Benjamin Lincoln Papers, MHS; James Sullivan to Rufus King, Feb. 25, 1787, in James Sullivan Papers, MHS; *Mass. Cent.*, Jan. 27, 1787.
16. *Indep. Chron.*, March 23 and 29, 1787.
17. *Indep. Chron.*, March 29, April 19 and 26, May 24, 1787; *Mass. Cent.*, May 2, 1787.
18. *Indep. Chron.*, April 19, 1787; H. James Henderson, *Party Politics in the Continental Congress* (New York, 1974), p. 400.