

The Whiskey Rebellion



One element of Hamilton's policy had been the establishment of an excise tax on domestically produced whiskey. Americans, who consumed an average of six gallons of hard liquor per person each year, did not take kindly to this tax, which amounted to 25 percent of the retail value of Whiskey. Nowhere was the effect of this tax felt more than in western Pennsylvania, where whiskey was distilled and transported east. The excise tax was enforced most stringently and cruelly in western Pennsylvania, as opposed to most other areas of the

country where it was more or less ignored. Additionally, anyone charged with tax evasion was sent to trial in federal court, which meant small family farmers had to travel hundreds of miles to Philadelphia, to be tried by men who knew little of their situation.



Popular opposition to the Whiskey tax mounted, and episodes of violence against tax collectors broke out in many areas of western Pennsylvania. Large-scale resistance began in late July 1794 in what became known as the Whiskey Rebellion. During a short period of time, over a hundred men attacked a US Marshall, the chief revenue officer for Allegheny County saw his house and stables burned to the ground, and organized, militant farmers threatened to form a separate country. President George Washington responded swiftly, calling 13,000 militiamen from Mid-Atlantic States to march with him to western Pennsylvania. Washington led the march into Pennsylvania himself, crushing the rebellion convincingly and returning order to the land. However, Washington was shaken by the experience of the rebellion. The whiskey tax was reduced and trials for tax evasion became the jurisdiction of federal courts as a result of the public outcry, even before full-fledged rebellion began.

The one positive result of the Whiskey Rebellion for the Washington administration was the effectiveness of Washington's response. The Whiskey Rebellion was the first major test of the national government's ability to enforce its laws within the states. This it did, and in inspiring fashion. George Washington led the troops himself, symbolizing the broad reach of the national government, and its commitment to dealing with the states on a close, rather than remote, basis.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Why did Hamilton place an "excise" tax on Whiskey? How did Americans in western Pennsylvania respond?
2. How did Washington respond to the Whiskey Rebellion?
3. What was the one positive result of the rebellion?