

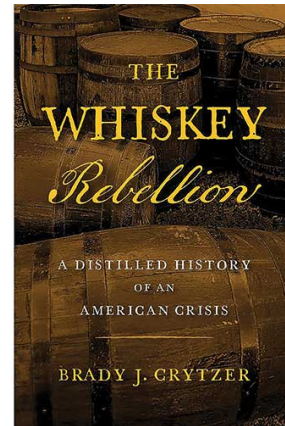


Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on August 22, 2023

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Frontier Rebels Challenge Tax on Spirits

While imbibing too much whiskey might leave an unwary man reeling, the federal taxing of that liquor can stagger and dispirit an entire region of a nation. That is what happened to the then-western frontier of the young United States when Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton directed the effort that led to an excise tax on distilled spirits. This sparked what was at the time generally called “the Western Insurrection.”



At its core, as the author of this first-rate book makes clear, the ensuing events were not actually centered on whiskey, per se, as much as the “direct challenge to the sovereignty of the federal government in the emerging west.” There were certainly licit arguments for what became known as the “Whiskey Act,” and Federalist stalwart Hamilton made them. Nonetheless, as even Hamilton’s celebrated biographer Ron Chernow acknowledged in his eponymous book, that tax “was doomed to be unpopular, inevitably reminding Americans of the Stamp Act and the whole hated apparatus of British tax collecting.”

Keep in mind the time. In Samuel Johnson’s 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, the word *excise* was defined as “a hateful tax levied upon commodities and adjudged not by the common judges of property but wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid.”

True, it might be viewed as a luxury or sin tax, but for those communities in the Appalachian backcountry, whiskey was a way of life. It even served as currency. For them, it might as well have been called a tax on trade and money, in large part because geography cut the producers from their market. Meanwhile, though the new tax was also unpopular in western regions from South Carolina to Massachusetts, its enforcement became selective.

The federal government, recounts the author, “had steadily given up enforcement in those distant areas. Partly because of its history of violence and primarily due to the proximity to the capital, the Washington Administration was determined to bring western Pennsylvania to heel as a symbolic show of force.”

Divide Between West, East

While allusions to the political atmosphere of our own time is not a major theme of the author, he does point out that the western peoples increasingly distrusted their eastern coastal counterparts — such as those in then-capital Philadelphia. To some, Hamilton was seen as an ally and protector of the monied elite. This dichotomy, as he says, is not so different from today’s “red states” and “blue states.”

More fundamentally, the author asks rhetorically, how do we modern Americans “commemorate the Whiskey Rebellion without glorifying the rebellious passions that fueled it?” He does that well, largely letting his marshalling of the facts do the job. Adding to the book’s scrupulousness, characters that might seem minor are given their proper due.



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A specialist in frontier history with several books to his credit, award-winning author Brady J. Crytzer teaches history at Robert Morris University, which is located near Pittsburgh. *The Whiskey Rebellion: A Distilled History of an American Crisis* was listed this year as one of “Ten Books to Read” by *The Wall Street Journal*. This book features a valuable map as well as numerous photographs (mostly from the author’s collection), and a peppering of “traveler’s notes,” some depicting existing sites and buildings, with directions for would-be visitors.

Tax Seen as Shot in the Gut

Subsistence farmers weren’t looking at the national picture. After all, they were in the bullseye of the measure. In the initial version of the tax (Hamilton later adjusted it, upward), the treasury secretary included aggressive tactics for efficacy and compliance. As noted in *The Whiskey Rebellion*:

For those who lived in the depths of the frontier, the law imposed a major fine of \$250 for any still that was not registered with the federal government. By the standards of the 1790s this fine was enormous, far more than the value of a single farmer’s annual income. To add teeth to the penalty, the law also stipulated that said fine must be paid in cash, a rare and precious commodity in the barter-driven economy of the American West.

For the people who lived there, recounts Brady Crytzer, there was a “very real sense” that the

federal government directly attacked them through their new fiscal policy. When the total number of operational stills was tallied in 1791, it was determined that a full 25 percent of domestic whiskey was produced in western Pennsylvania, with the vast area surrounding the city of Pittsburgh. With whiskey’s strong economic tie to a single place like the Forks of the Ohio, it seemed that this new national tax targeted a specific region with very local implications.

It was quickly clear that being in favor of the new tax in such environs was sufficient to ruin a man. And, as we do read (in some detail), unfortunate excisemen were (literally, not figuratively) tarred and feathered — and worse.



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Brady Crytzer (facebook.com/bradyjcrytzer/)

Resistance and Rifts

As events get nastier and the potential repercussions become more apparent, we watch the rebellion dividing into those seen as moderates and those who were more clearly radical. A few had feet in both camps. As Crytzer summarizes at one point, “While men with political ambitions or genuine representative experience hoped to navigate familiar legislative waters to tamp down the effects of the excise, others seemed more inclined toward the sword than the pen.”

We see sundry cruelties. Tax collectors get whipped and burned with hot irons. Houses are ransacked and burned down. Extralegal courts are established. Bands roam the countryside, with some being identified with a Robin Hood-type leader called “Tom the Tinker.” Should a federal officer visit a still seeking its registration, this is often followed by a mob of agitators that threaten vengeance against those who dare to register.

While his emphasis is largely local, the author does take note of, among others, the impact of the “Democratic Society of the County of Washington in Pennsylvania” — with its president James Marshel and vice president David Bradford — that was “modeled by the democratic societies that had become so prevalent in France and [were] recently en vogue in the United States.” Moderates among the Pennsylvania rebellion, as the author notes, did what they could to “circumvent Marshel and Bradford’s plans for further violent tactics.” As the resistance grew, we read, Marshel “delivered a fiery speech and proposed a ‘committee of public safety’ in the model of the French Revolution.” We also see how Bradford wanted to go “national” with his plot to steal mail as well as to weed out dissidents — taking a page, as the author recounts, “from the French revolutionaries whom he admired so much.”

At the “high-water mark” of the rebellion, at Braddock’s Field, a large force of rebel militias led by David Bradford demanded that the federal forces from Pittsburgh join them to support a new American West.

Militias From Four States Mobilize

Meanwhile, we also see countervailing forces gathering in the nation’s capital. We watch Hamilton —



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an aide-de-camp to General George Washington in the Revolutionary War — push for President Washington to personally quash the uprising, even as the president seeks less extraordinary solutions. Hamilton had already, as the author recounts, “made it clear that military intervention would be the most expedient way of subjecting the rebels at the Forks, and President Washington reluctantly admitted that such a dramatic response, however unlikely, remained an option of last resort.”

Pennsylvania state officials declined to take military action, and federal forces in the area were largely ineffectual. The resistance spread.

Eventually, Washington found it necessary to use the Militia Act of 1792 to call up state militias, with the approval of one Supreme Court justice (which happened via an ally of Hamilton on the Court). The secretary of war was ordered to request a total of 13,000 men from the governors of Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and New Jersey. A proclamation from the president explained the reason for the mobilization, including actions that were described as “odious,” “criminal,” and “vindictive.” This produced more rebel anger.

When the time for mobilization came, the president’s announcement pointed to, among others, the contest “being whether a small portion of the United States shall dictate to the whole union, and at the expense of those, who desire peace, indulge a desperate ambition.”

Each governor led the troops from his state into the field: Thomas Lee (Maryland) with 2,350; Thomas Mifflin (Pennsylvania) with 5,200; Richard Howell (New Jersey) with 2,100; and Henry “Light Horse Harry” Lee (Virginia) with 3,300 — for a total of 12,950. Washington placed himself at the head as commander in chief.

Applying a Heavy Hand

Washington’s long trip (with Alexander Hamilton) across eastern Pennsylvania began on September 30, 1794. It was made not on horseback, but by carriage — the 62-year-old Washington had a nagging sprained back. There were several stops as the two wings of the force moved west. “The Susquehanna River was nearly a mile across and strewn with piles of smooth rocks, as one commander noted, ‘General Washington, forded the river in a coach — drove it himself.’”

When it was time for the president to attend to his duties in the capital, he prepared to

hand the army over to Governor Lee and the administration of civilian affairs to Alexander Hamilton. He held council with the two men all morning and verified their marching routes as well as the objectives of the campaign itself. After careful deliberation, the commander in chief decided and affirmed that the army would be an instrument of law enforcement, not a hostile invasion force.

Hamilton saw it otherwise, as the author explains, believing “the uniqueness of the rebellion required an especially heavy hand in resolving it.”

One of the ugliest sections of the book involves the actions attributed to the officer in charge of most of the New Jerseyans after their governor turned east — one Andrew “Blackbeard” White. Described as having a “vicious and vindictive personality,” White and his actions “would tarnish the reputation of the army more than any other in its ranks,” in the author’s words.



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The nighttime raids in Mingo Creek on November 13 became known as “The Dreadful Night” in Washington County, Pennsylvania. Families were pulled from their bedrooms into the cold, snowy night, with the men then being driven barefoot through an icy creek for eight miles. At last, they were stuck in a tavern’s mud-floored basement. The “torment continued” there as “‘Blackbeard’ White had the men tied in pairs, back-to-back, and delivered strict orders ‘to give them neither victuals nor drink.’” There’s considerably more in that vein.

A judge in Pittsburgh indicted 17 men, and “Blackbeard” White got three more on the way to Philadelphia. White ordered them to walk 300 miles to the capital in late November 1794. If someone tried to free them, “Blackbeard” told his accompanying troops, then “the heads of the prisoners should be cut off and brought to Philadelphia.”

Pardoned by Washington

On Christmas Day in 1794, more than 20,000 Philadelphians were waiting to view the infamous rebels when 20 sorry, shoeless, and broken men were paraded into the city following 30 miserable days in snow and mud. Evidence against them not being available, and subpoenas being ignored, only 12 were even tried.

Just two were found guilty — one a simple farmer and another said to be suffering from mental illness; the latter had kept his word and surrendered as he promised (many others did not) in Pittsburgh. Judged treasonous, the two were sentenced to be hanged. However, many Philadelphians, in the midst of penal reform, beseeched the president to intercede. Both men were granted a stay of execution in June and fully pardoned in November. By the end of 1795, “the incarcerated westerners were all released.”

As the author points out, when Thomas Jefferson ran for president in 1796 (unsuccessfully that time), “much of his foundational platforms sounded eerily familiar to the argument of anti-excise moderates at the Forks first spouted five years earlier.” After being elected, Jefferson repealed the Whiskey Act in 1802.



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