# *Albany Gazette*, 21 June 1787

*Extract of a letter from a gentleman in Washington county to his friend in Albany.*

"Where is SHAYS?—Is he in Canada, Vermont, or White-Creek?—I have been asked these questions a thousand times, and a thousand times have I declared myself unable to gratify the curiosity of the inquirers.

"But what in the name of common sense is this *Shays*? A mere tool of faction—a puppet which some political mountebank has play'd off upon the populace—an idol, void of intrinsic merit, to which a thoughtless multitude have bent the knee.—Supposing that he was taken and gibbetted to day—how soon would the prevailing rage of excessive democracy—this fashionable contempt of government—of public and private faith, raise up another Shays, as mad and audacious as the present! It was to little purpose that Moses destroyed the molten calf of Aaron, the gods of the Ashtorites and other surrounding nations soon afforded a rich supply of successors.

*Manet causa, manet quoque effectus.*

When people are once thoroughly prepared for political idolatry, it is curious, and degrading to human nature, to think what slight qualifications are necessary to compose the object. Not only the meanest of the human race, a *Jack Straw*, a *Wat Tyler*, and a *Massinello*, have acquired this honor, but even brutes and inanimate objects have had their turn. The horse of Caligula was promoted to the consulship at Rome, and probably received the same honors from the croud, which, in a happier period of the republic, were paid to Cicero. The hat of *Griesler*, hoisted on a pole in *Switzerland*, was saluted with respectable conges by every passenger, excepting *Tell*, a whimsical old patriot, who thought proper to withhold his homage—Nor did the Peruvians ever bend with more reverence to Capac, than to the artillery of *Cortez*.

"It is *Shayism* (if I may use the term) and not Shays, that is the object of my apprehensions.

"Some enterprising partizan will, doubtless, have the good fortune to apprehend this Massachusetts outlaw, and impartial justice will inflict that punishment his crimes deserve: But who can demolish the *continental obliquity* of Shays? You smile at this expression—In indictments for felony it is always asserted, that the crime was perpetrated *instigatione diaboli*—but the devil will appear in one instance to have been *rum*—in another *whiskey*—in a third *jealousy*—in a fourth *hunger*.—Let Shays then, like this legal instigator, be *nomen generalisium*—substitute the essence for the mode, and we have a most extraordinary character.

"It is not alone, my dear sir, at the head of an armed banditti in Berkshire, in the forests of Canada or Vermont, or the cliffs of Sandgate, we are to look for Shays—*Shays* is essentially the same, whether acting in the character of a soldier, or sitting in magisterial importance in the form of the gubernatorial *Jack Tar—mutato nomine* is all the difference.—Where there is the mock semblance of government, without its energy—there is Shays—Where the shrewd eye of

villainy peeps through the seemly mask of justice—there is Shays—Where a base regard to private interest acts in obstinate opposition to the general welfare—there is Shays—He lives in the depreciated currency of one state—he triumphs in the tender-act of another.

"Immortal honors would be due from mankind to that political genius who could propose a law compatible with civil liberty, by which every grave intriguer, who, under the specious terms of *virtue*, *liberty* and *public spirit*, inculcates opinions infinitely more dangerous to government than the arms of an avowed rebel—who, under the cover of distorted law, saps the foundation of public justice—might be dragged from behind the thick curtain dissimulation wove, and consigned to that vengeance which awaits the traitor.

"But this perfection of policy can never happen, till mankind cease to be amused with sounds and dazzled with appearances—till then the most potent enemies of states will lie concealed—unwhipp'd of justice, perhaps loaded with popular honors—while the tools of their ambition—the puppets of policy, are placed as the ostensible objects of vengeance, and sentenced to the gibbet.

"Many startle at the name of rebellion, but are surprizingly calm at sedition. These choose for their motto, 'Be temperate in all things'—prate very learnedly of grievances—of the rights of the people—and the necessity of some popular commotions to secure I know not what to the public.—Does a man whisper treason? he is angry, he will think better when he gets calm.—Does another defy the authority? he is a young fool, age will teach him wisdom—Does a formidable mob collect, and demolish half a dozen buildings? it is a *mere brush*, a frolic of *apprentices* and *negroes*.

"At length, to the infinite surprize of these *moderate people*, sedition, which at first makes its appearance in a tavern club—grows in a town meeting—swells big in a county convention—in a formidable army acquires the name of rebellion—Happy fruits of moderation! when the treasures of a state must be exhausted, and the arms of a *Lincoln* exerted, to extirpate monsters, which the well timed interference of a single justice of the peace, might have crushed in its infancy! *Prepostera sunc frugalitas seware vitreum et perdere gemmas!*

"Is it not time, my dear sir, for politicians to begin to consider mankind *as they are* and not *what they ought to be*?—If I mistake not, this is the rock upon which many of our best writers on government have split.—*Locke* and many others have written very excellent treatises on this subject—almost every one admires the theory, but experience shews it can only be reduced to practice in *Eutopia*—Had mankind continued in the golden age, they would have been happy in systems of this kind, and men like Locke might have diffused their liberal, their noble sentiments with success—But *we are what we are*, in the gross, blind and inconsistent—naturally averse to government—born 'like *the wild ass's colt*.' To beings of this description, the arbitrary sentiments of a James the first are scarcely more prejudicial than those of visionary writers, who, with the steady temper of Portius,

> 'Can look on guilt, rebellion, *fraud* and Cesar,
> In the calm light of mild philosophy.'

"Let no one suppose that I am an enemy to freedom—I am a friend to liberty, and to secure it inviolate to the people, would wish to banish licentiousness.—But let them know, that without a sacred regard to the laws—a reverential submission to authority—an impartial and sometimes

a severe administration of justice—this invaluable jewel, this boasted liberty will be inevitably lost—For when the laws are vague—when the administration of justice becomes feeble and irregular—when political empirics, ever courting popularity, give to a distempered multitude whatever their depraved appetites may crave—when the people are wallowing in the superfluity of liberty—then, unless their eyes were darkened, would they see tyranny in his horrid form, brandishing the bloody scourge and entering the door—then, unless they were deafer than adders, would they hear the chain of slavery clanging in their ears.

"I shall conclude this tedious train of reflections in the words of an old ballad,

> 'If we can learn from other's ills,
> Then we shall do full well.'"

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XIII: Commentaries on the Constitution, Public and Private [1] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1981), 141–44.