Benjamin Lincoln to George Washington 4 December 1786 (excerpt)

. . . I cannot leave this part of the state at present, for notwithstanding the resolutions I had formed ever to decline entering again into public life, I was persuaded by my friends to take the command of the first division of militia in this state. I am now busily employed in organizing it &c. This business, which would at all times be a duty, is especially so now, when the State is convulsed, and the bands of government, in some parts of it, are cast off.[1]

I cannot therefore be surprized to hear your Excellency enquire "are your people getting mad? are we to have the goodly fabric, that eight years were spent in raising, pulled over our heads? what is the cause of all these commotions? when and how will they end" Altho' I cannot pretend to give a full and compleat answer to them, yet I will make some observations which shall involve in them the best answers to the several questions in my power to give.

"Are your people getting mad?" Many of them appear to be absolutely so, if an attempt to annihilate our present constitution and dissolve the present government can be considered as evidences of insanity.

"Are we to have the goodly fabric, that eight years were spent in rearing, pulled over our heads?" There is great danger that it will be so, I think; unless the tottering system shall be supported by arms, and even then a government which has no other basis than the point of the bayonet, should one be suspended thereon, is so totally different from the one established, at least in idea, by the different States that if we must have recourse to the sad experiment of arms it can hardly be said that we have supported "the goodly fabric." In this view of the matter it may be "pulled over our heads." This probably will be the case, for there doth not appear to be virtue enough among the people to preserve a perfect republican government.

"What is the cause of all these commotions?" The causes are too many and too various for me to pretend to trace and point them out. I shall therefore only mention some of those which appear to be the principle ones. Among those I may rank the ease with which property was acquired, with which credit was obtained, and debts were discharged in the time of the War. Hence people were diverted from their usual industry and œconomy. A luxuriant mode of living crept into vogue, and soon that income, by which the expences of all should as much as possible be limited, was no longer considered as having any thing to do with the question at what expence families ought to live, or rather which they ought not to have exceeded. The moment the day arrived when all discovered that things were fast returning back into their original channels, that the industrious were to reap the fruits of their industry, and that the indolent and improvident would soon experience the evils of their idleness and sloth. Very many startled at the idea, and instead of attempting

to subject themselves to such a line of conduct, which duty to the public, and a regard to their own happiness evidently pointed out, they contemplated how they should evade the necessity of reforming their system and of changing their present mode of life, they first complained of Commutation, of the weight of public taxes, of the insupportable debt of the union, of the scarcity of money, and of the cruelty of suffering the private creditors to call for their just dues. This catalogue of complaints was listened to by many. County conventions were formed, and the cry for Paper Money, subject to depreciation, as was declared by some of their public resolves, was the clamour of the day. But notwithstanding instructions to members of the General Court and petitions from different quarters, the majority of that body were opposed to the measures. Failing of their point, the disaffected in the first place, attempted, and in many instances succeeded, to stop the courts of Law and to suspend the operations of government. This they hoped to do untill they could by force sap the foundations of our constitution, and bring into the Legislature creatures of their own by which they could mould a government at pleasure, and make it subservient to all their purposes, and when an end should thereby be put to public and private debts, the Agrarian law might follow with ease. In short the want of industry, œconomy, and common honesty seem to be the causes of the present commotions.

It is impossible for me to determine "when and how they will end," as I see little probability that they will be brought to a period, and the dignity of government supported without bloodshed. When a single drop is drawn, the most prophetic spirit will not, in my opinion, be able to determine when it will cease flowing. The proportion of debtors run high in this State. Too many of them are against the government. The men of property, and the holders of the public securities are generally supporters of our present constitution. Few of these have been in the field, and it remains quite problematical whether they will in time so fully discover their own interests as they shall be induced thereby to lend for a season part of their property for the security of the remainder. If these classes of men should not turn out on the broad scale with spirit, and the insurgents should take the field and keep it, our Constitution will be overturned, and the fœderal government broken in upon by lopping off one branch essential to the well being of the whole. This cannot be submitted to by the United States with impunity. They must send force to our aid: when this shall be collected they will be equal to *all* purposes.

The insurgents have now every advantage. If we move in force against them, we move under the direction of the civil authority, and we cannot act but by the direction of it. After the riot-act has been read and one hour elapsed they may disperse if they think proper; and the next day assemble again in another place. So they may conduct themselves in perfect security from day to day untill a favorable moment shall offer, after the well affected to government are worn out, for them to commence the attack. Had the last General Court declared the disaffected counties in a state of Rebellion, they would have placed the contest upon a different footing, and the Rebels might have been soon crushed. They did not do it. What they will do at their next session, which will be in February next, is quite uncertain, and must remain, "with the time when and the manner how these commotions are to end," concealed from me in the unturned pages of futurity.

1. Lincoln received his appointment as the senior major general of the Massachusetts militia in December 1785, with the request that he make recommendations regarding the military establishment of the state.

CITE AS: W. W. Abbot, Dorothy Twohig et al., eds., *The Papers of George Washington: Confederation Series* (Charlottesville, Va., University Press of Virginia, 1987–), IV, 419–22, 435.