Benjamin Lincoln to George Washington 22 February 1787 (excerpts)

Thus far I had written as early as December, and should have forwarded the letter at that time, but had some hopes that the Governour and Council would take some measures for crushing the Insurgents. This however hung in suspence untill the beginning of January. It was then agreed to raise two thousand men in the Counties of Suffolk, Essex, and Middlesex, and four companies of Artillery; twelve hundred men in the County of Hampshire; and twelve hundred men in the County of Worcester. The command of the troops was to be given to me being the first Major General in the State. At this moment, when every part of the system was digested, and nothing remained but the offering the order to raise the men, and carry it into execution, information was received from the Commissary General that the necessary supplies could not be obtained without a considerable sum in cash, which was not within the power of the Treasurer to borrow. On my hearing this from the Governour, I went immediately to a club of the first characters in Boston who met that night, and layed before them a full state of matters, and suggested to them the importance of their becoming loaners of part of their property if they wished to secure the remainder. A Subscription was set on foot in the morning, headed by the Governour. Before night the cloud which twenty four hours before hung over us disappeared as we had an assurance of obtaining the sum we wanted.

Orders were then issued for raising the men. They were directed to rendezvous at different places on the 18th and 19th of January. The objects to [be] embraced by the force called into the field, your Excellency will learn from . . . Instructions from the Governor. . . .

We commenced our march in the morning of the 20th for Worcester, where the Court of Common Pleas, and Court of the general Session of the peace were to set on the 23d, which Courts we were ordered to protect. They opened and compleated their business Thursday morning.

Shays did not point his force to any object untill the 24th. Then he took a post from which he could suddenly strike the Public Magazine which seemed to be his object. He covered his men at Wilbraham six miles south of it, while Day remained with his at West Springfield. They were jointly to have made an attack on the Magazine at 4 oClock P.M. January 25th, one of the Letters from Day to Shays was intercepted which would have delayed Shays's movements. He came on in open column, was repeatedly warned of his danger by General Shepard, and finally if he progressed in any degree farther he would fire upon him. He moved, and the General fired over him, hoping to deter him from proceeding, but to no effect. He then fired two pieces into his column which he attempted to display. By these shots three men were killed, and a number

wounded. His people were thrown into the utmost confusion, and dispersed for a time but soon collected as they were not followed by General Shepard, who could have destroyed a great proportion of them had he been disposed to do it.

Shays' dispersion led me to make a very rapid march for the relief of Shepard, who was apprehensive for the safety of the stores, and for the Inhabitants, and for the town of Springfield. I threw one regiment and some Horse into his camp in the night of the 26th. Shays having filed off about six miles to right, I arrived with the main body of the troops at noon the 27th. The men were immediately quartered, and took some refreshment. In this time: I had an opportunity of learning the situation of the Insurgents. Part of them were on the East and part on the West side of Connecticut River: those on the East were commanded by Shays, and those on the West by Day, who had placed his guard on the West bank of the River, and another at Agawaam River. Shays had placed his guards on the East bank of the River so that they had cut off all communication to the town of Springfield from the North and the West in the common routs. It was with the greatest difficulty that new ones could be formed as the snow was very deep. Hereby many of our supplies fell into their hands. In this situation I could not think of remaining one night. I ordered the troops under arms at 3 oClock, tho' many of them had been so from one in the morning. Part of them with the light Horse, I moved up the River on the ice with an intention to prevent the junction of Shays and Day; and if that was not attempted, to cut off Day's retreat. With the other part of the troops I moved across the river in front of his guard. They soon turned out and retreated to his main body. They retreated before us about half a mile, then made some disposition to attack, but soon left that post and retreated to a high peace of ground in their rear where they were met by the light Horse. Thence they fled in every direction, but most of them the same evening reached Northampton. This left Shays' right uncovered and induced him to move the same night to Amherst about 20 miles North of Springfield. At 3 oClock of the morning of the 29th we moved towards Amherst, where Shays had been joined by Day. On our arrival in the borders of the town the rear of Shays' force left it; some few fell into our hands. He then took post at Pelham East from Amherst: We filed off to the left, and took post in Hadley and Hatfield, on the River. He had now taken a very strong position. The ground he was well acquainted with, being the town in which he lived. On the morning of the 30th I sent him [an] address. . . .

This was delivered by General Putnam and two other Gentlemen, all of whom were of my family; and brought the same day [an] answer. . . .

I had constant applications from Committees, and Selectmen of the several towns in the Counties of Worcester and Hampshire, praying that the effusion of blood may be avoided; while the real design, as was supposed, of these applications was to stay our operations untill a new Court should be elected. They had no doubt if they could keep up their influence untill another choice of the Legislature and the Executive that matters might be moulded in General Court to their wishes. This to avoid was the duty of Government. As all these applications breathed the same spirit, the same answer was given to them. . . .

I received [an] application from Shays and others. . . .

I returned [an] answer. . . .

In this position I remained refreshing the troops who had suffered very severe fatigue. This also gave time for the several Towns to use their influence with their own people to return, if they thought proper to use it: and to circulate among Shays' men that they would be recom-

mended for a pardon if they would come in, and lay down their arms. The 2d of Febuary I was induced to reconnoitre Shays' post on his right, left, and rear. I had recieved information by General Putnam before, that we could not approach him in front. I intended to have approached him on the 3d inst. This reconnoitreing gave him an alarm. At 3 oClock in the morning of the 3d, I recieved an application from Wheeler, that he wished to confer with General Putnam. His request was granted.[1] He seemed to have no object but his personal safety. No encouragement being given him in this head, he returned a little after noon. In the evening of the same day, I was informed that Shays had left his ground, and had pointed his rout toward Petersham in the County of Worcester, where he intended to make a stand as a number of Towns in the vicinity had engaged to support him. Our troops were put in motion at 8 o Clock. The first part of the night was pleasant, and the weather clement; but between two and three o Clock in the morning, the wind shifting to the Westward, it became very cold and squally, with considerable snow. The wind immediately arose very high, and with the light snow which fell the day before and was falling, the paths were soon filled up, the men became fatigued, and they were in a part of the country where they could not be covered in the distance of eight miles, and the cold was so increased, that they could not halt in the road to refresh themselves. Under these circumstances they were obliged to continue their march. We reached Petersham about 9 o Clock in the morning exceedingly fatigued with a march of thirty miles, part of it in a deep snow and in a most violent storm; when this abated, the cold increased and a great proportion of our men were frozen in some part or other, but none dangerously. We approached nearly the centre of the Town where Shays had covered his men; and had we not been prevented from the steepness of a large hill at our entrance, and the depth of the snow from throwing our men rapidly into it we should have arrested very probably one half this force; for they were so surprized as it was that they had not time to call in their out-parties, or even their guards. About 150 fell into our hands, and none escaped but by the most precipitate flight in different directions.

Thus that body of men who were a few days before offering the grossest insults to the best Citizens of this Commonwealth and were menacing even Government itself, were now nearly dispersed, without the shedding of blood but in an instance or two where the Insurgents rushed on their own destruction. That so little has been shed is owing in a measure to the patience and obedience, the zeal and the fortitude in our troops, which would have done honour to veterans. A different line of conduct which Shays flattered his troops would have been followed, would have given them support, and led them to acts of violence, whilst it must have buoyed up the hopes of their abettors, and stimulated them to greater exertions.

At this time I recieved the proceedings of the General Court. They have acted with a degree of decision and firmness which do them honour. I think your Excellency will be pleased to have their doings added.[2]

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Having distressed the main body of the insurgents, our next attention was so to disseminate our force thro' the disaffected Counties, as to break the little knots of those in arms which were collected in various parts of the Counties, and were taking up, confining, and plundering all who fell into their hands who in their opinion were "freinds to government," as they called them. A body of troops were retained in the County of Worcester; a regiment left in the County of

Hampshire, besides a guard to the public Magazine at Springfield. With three regiments I came on to this place. I found the people in general had been in arms, or had been abettors of those who were, and that their obstinacy was not exceeded by anything but by their ignorance of their own situation. I at once threw detachments into different parts of the County, for the purpose of protecting the freinds to Government and apprehending those who had been in arms against it. This business is pretty fully accomplished, and there are no Insurgents together in arms in the State.

There are many parties in the neighbouring States lurking near the borders of this. They are poisoning the minds of a class among them. It is now time for those States to exert themselves in apprehending such characters, for they fan the coals, and will kindle the flame of rebellion whereever they go.

The time for which the Militia engaged to serve expires with this day. We are raising two regiments to remain in service for four months in obedience to the following resolves.[3]

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. . . Although I revere the doings of our General Court, yet I think in one instance or two they have gone too far. The following observations on one of their laws, I have submitted to the consideration of a private Friend in Boston, and they are added to this letter, by which nothing more is intended, than as the reading it may serve as an hour of amusement to your Excellency.

When a State whose Constitution is like ours, has been convulsed by intestine broils; when the bands of Government have in any part of it been thrown off, and Rebellion has for a time stalked unmolested: when the most affectionate neighbours become in consequence hereof, divided in sentiment on the question in dispute, and warmly espouse the opinions they hold; when even the Father arms against the Son, and the son against the Father, the powers of Government may be exerted; and crush the Rebellion, but to reclaim its citizens, to bring them back fully to a sense of their duty, and to establish anew those principles, which lead them to embrace the Government with affection, must require the wisdom, the patience & the address of the Legislature.

Love and Fear are the bonds of civil Society. Love is the noblest incentive to obedience; a Government supported hereon is certainly the most desireable, and ensures the first degrees of happiness which can be derived from civil compact. Such a Government as this is always wounded, when any thing shall exist which makes it necessary to apply to the fears of the governed. This never will be done by a wise administration, unless the General Good renders it indespensible, and it will be removed the first moment it can be, consistently with the common safety.

The spirit of Rebellion is now nearly crushed in this State, and the opposition to Government is hourly decreasing. This therefore is the most critical moment yet seen. Punishment must be such, and be so far extended as thereby others shall be detered from repeating such acts of outrage in future, and care must be taken that they do not extend beyond a certain degree the necessity of which must be acknowledged by all. In her right hand Government must hold out such terms of mercy in the hour of success, with such evident marks of a disposition to forgive as shall apply to the feelings of the delinquents, beget in them such sentiments of gratitude and love by which they will be led to embrace with the highest cordiality that Government which they have at-

tempted to trample under foot. This example in Government will have its influence upon Individuals, and be productive of the best Effects among contending Neighbours & divided Families.

These are sentiments which I suppose have their foundation in truth; and in the belief of them, I have been led to examine with some attention the late Act of the General Court, by which certain Characters are for a time disfranchised. Although I think the conduct of the Legislature will make a rich page in History, yet I cannot but suppose, that if the number of the disfranchised had been less, the public peace would have been equally safe, and the general good promoted.

The Act includes so great a description of persons that in its operation many Towns will be disfranchised. This will injure the whole, for multiplied disorders must be experienced under such circumstances.

The people who have been in Arms against Government and their Abettors, have complained, and do now complain that grievances do exist, and that they ought to have redress. We have invariably said to them, you are wrong in flying to Arms; you should seek redress in a Constitutional way, & wait the decision of the Legislature. These observations were undoubtedly just, but will they not now complain, and say, that we have cut them off from all hope of redress, from that quarter, for we have denied them a representation in that Legislative body, by whose Laws they must be governed.

While they are in this situation, they never will be reconciled to Government, nor will they submit to the terms of it, from any other Motive than fear excited by a constant military armed force extended over them. While these distinctions are made, the subjects of them will remain invidious, and their will be no affection existing among Inhabitants of the same Neighbourhood, or Families, where they have thought and acted differently. Those who have been opposers to Government will view with a jealous eye, those who have been supporters of it, and consider them as the cause which produced the disqualifying act, and who are now keeping it alive. Many never will submit to it, they will rather leave the State than do it. If we could reconcile ourselves to this loss, and on this account make no objection, yet these people will leave behind them near and dear connections who will feel themselves wounded through their Friends.

The influence of these people is so fully checked that we have nothing to apprehend from them now, but their Individual Votes. When this is the case, to express fears from that quarter is impolitic. Admit that some of these very people should obtain a seat in the Assembly the next year, we have nothing to fear from the measure: so far from that I think it would produce the most salutary Effects.

For my own part I wish, that those Insurgents who should secure a pardon, were at liberty to exercise all the rights of good Citizens; for I believe it to be the only way which can be adopted to make them good Members of Society, and to reconcile them to that Government under which we wish them to live. If we are now afraid of their weight and they are for a given time deprived of certain privileges, they will come forth hereafter with redoubled vigour. I think we have much more to fear from a certain supiness which has seized on a great proportion of our Citizens, who have been totally inattentive to the exercise of those rights conveyed to them by the Constitution of this Commonwealth. If the good people of the State will not exert themselves in the appoint-

ment of proper Characters for the Executive and Legislative branches of Government, no disfranchising acts will ever make us a happy & a well governed people.

I cannot therefore on the whole but think, that if the opposers to Government, had been disqualified, on a pardon from serving as jurors on the trial of those who had been in sentiment with them, that we should have been perfectly safe. For as I observed before these people have now no influence as a body, and their individual votes are not to be dreaded, for we certainly shall not admit the idea, that the Majority is with them in their political sentiments; if thus, how, upon republican principles, can we justly exclude them from the right of Governing.

1. Rufus Putnam, who had been Daniel Shays' commanding officer during the Revolution, met with Shays in early January 1787.

2. Lincoln includes here three documents: the senate's response of 4 Feb. to Governor Bowdoin's message to the General Court at the opening of its session on 3 Feb., and two senate resolutions regarding Shays' Rebellion, adopted on 4 February. In its letter, the senate expressed approval of the steps the governor had taken to oppose the insurgents and promised him continuing support for his policies. In the first of the senate's resolutions, it was "Resolved that this Court approve of General lincoln's conduct in his overtures of recommending certain descriptions of Insurgents to the clemency of Government, and that the Governor be, and he hereby is authorized and empowered in the name of the General Court to promise a pardon under such disqualifications as may hereafter be provided, to such private Soldiers, and others who act in the capacity of non-commissioned Officers, as have been, or now are in arms against the Commonwealth, with such exceptions as he, or the General Officer commanding the troops may judge necessary—provided they shall deliver up their arms, and take and subscribe the oath of allegiance to this Commonwealth, within such time as shall or may be limited by his Excellency for that purpose." The second resolution spelled out the misdeeds of the insurgents and "solemnly" declared "that a horrid and unnatural Rebellion and War has been openly and traiterously raised and levied against this Commonwealth."

3. Lincoln inserted here two senate resolutions, one of 8 Feb. and the other of 17 February. The first authorized "the Commander in Chief of this Commonwealth . . . to give immediate orders for the enlistment of such a number of men as he shall judge necessary . . . , not exceeding fifteen hundred, to serve for the space of four months . . . ." The one of 17 Feb. requested the governor to send General Lincoln £300 with which to recruit the men authorized in the resolution of 8 February.

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