

2. Jefferson Deplores Undue Force (1794)

Hamilton was accused of deliberately aggravating the Whiskey Rebellion so that he might strengthen the prestige of the new government with an overpowering show of might. At all events, he marched out to the disaffected region with an army of some thirteen thousand militiamen. Resistance evaporated before such a force. Jefferson was appalled that these extravagant measures should have been taken against "occasional riots," and charged that Hamilton was merely pursuing his "favorite purpose of strengthening government and increasing public debt," all under "the sanction of a name [Washington] which has done too much good not to be sufficient to cover harm also." From his luxurious home, Monticello, Jefferson wrote indignantly as follows to James Madison, his friend and neighbor. Six years later these same backcountry rebels, who had incurred Hamilton's upper-class scorn, helped elect Jefferson president. Hamilton's show of sledgehammer force no doubt helped the prestige of the national government, but in the light of Jefferson's letter, how did the government probably hurt itself?

²P. L. Ford, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1895), vol. 6, pp. 518-519 (December 28, 1794).

The excise law is an infernal one. The first error was to admit it by the Constitution; the second, to act on that admission; the third and last will be to make it the instrument of dismembering the Union, and setting us all afloat to choose which part of it we will adhere to.

The information of our militia, returned from the westward, is uniform, that though the people there let them pass quietly, they were objects of their laughter, and places of the Allegheny; that a thousand men could have cut off their whole force in a thousand places of the Allegheny; that their detestation of the excise law is universal, and has now associated to it a detestation of the government; and that separation, which perhaps was a very distant and problematical event, is now near, and certain, and determined in the mind of every man.

I expected to have seen justification of arming one part of the society against another; of declaring a civil war the moment before the meeting of that body [Congress] which has the sole right of declaring war; of being so patient of the kicks and scoffs of our [British] enemies,* and rising at a feather against our friends; of adding a million to the public debts and deriding us with recommendations to pay it if we can, etc., etc.