

[Letter from George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, September 7, 1792]

The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745- 1799. John C. Fitzpatrick, Editor.--vol. 32 Mount Vernon, September 7, 1792.

Sir: The last post brought me your letter of the 1st instant, with the enclosures respecting the disorderly conduct of the Inhabitants of the Western Survey of the District of Pennsylvania, in opposing the execution of what is called the Excise Law; and of the insults which have been offered by some of them to the Officers who have been appointed to collect the duties on distilled spirits agreeably thereto. Such conduct in any of the Citizens of the United States, under any circumstances that can well be conceived, would be exceedingly reprehensible; but when it comes from a part of the Community for whose protection the money arising from the Tax was principally designed, it is truly unaccountable, and the spirit of it much to be regretted. The preliminary steps taken by you in ordering the Supervisor of the District to repair to the Survey where these disorders prevail, with a view to ascertain in person "the true state of the Survey; to collect evidences respecting the violences that have been committed, in order to a prosecution of the offenders; to ascertain the particulars as to the Meeting which appears to have been held at Pittsburg; to encourage the perseverance of the officers in their duty, and the well disposed inhabitants in discountenancing such violent proceedings &c. &c."46 are prudent and proper, and I earnestly wish they may have the desired effect. But if, notwithstanding, opposition is still given to the due execution of the Law, I have no hesitation in declaring, if the evidence of it is clear and unequivocal, that I shall, however reluctantly I exercise them, exert all the legal powers with which the Executive is invested, to check so daring and unwarrantable a spirit. It is my duty to see the Laws executed: to permit them to be trampled upon with impunity would be repugnant to it; nor can the Government longer remain a passive spectator of the contempt with which they are treated. Forbearance, under a hope that the Inhabitants of that Survey would recover from the delirium and folly into which they were plunged, seems to have had no other effect than to increase the disorder.

From Alexander Hamilton to Henry Lee, 25 August 1794

To Henry Lee¹

War Department
August 25. 1794

Sir

In place of The Secretary at War, who is absent,² I am instructed by The President to signify to you his wish and request that you will come forth in the command of the Militia, which is to be detached from Virginia against the Insurgents in the Western parts of Pennsylvania;³ in which case You will have the command of the whole force that may be employed upon that Enterprise.

The President anticipates, that it will be as painful to you to execute, as it is to him to direct, measures of coercion against fellow citizens however misled. Yet he needed not the assurance you have already given him of the sense you entertain of their conduct and its consequences to be convinced that he might count ever on your zealous personal service,⁴ towards suppressing an example fatal in its tendency to every thing that is dear and valuable in political society.

With the greatest respect & attachment I have the honor to be Your Excellency's Most Obedt & humble servant

Alex Hamilton

His Excellency Henry Lee Esqr
Governor & Commander in Chief
of Virginia

ALS, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

1. For background to this letter, see "[Deposition of Francis Mentges,](#)" [August 1, 1794, note 1](#); H to George Washington, [August 2, 5, 1794](#).

2. See [Washington to H, August 12, 1794, note 1](#).

3. See "[Minutes of a Meeting Concerning the Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania,](#)" [August 24, 1794](#).

4. On August 17, 1794, Lee wrote to Washington: "Your late orders for a detachment of militia & proclamation give birth to a variety of sensations & opinions. All good citizens deplore the events which have produced this conduct on your part, & feel but one determination to maintain inviolate our happy government at the risk of their lives & fortunes. There are some among us from the influence of party spirit & from their own ambitious views who rejoice in national adversity & gladden when they hear of governmental embarrassments.

"I am gratified in telling you that the great body of this State will excel themselves in whatever way you may direct to the utmost of their power & I am persuaded that you may count with certainty on their zeal & determination. The awful occasion demands united efforts & I beg leave to offer to you my services in any way or station you may deem them proper...." (ALS, George Washington Papers, Library of Congress.)

On August 26, 1794, Washington replied to Lee's letter as follows: "Your favor of the 17th. came duly to hand.... it gives me sincere consolation amidst the regret with which I am filled, by such lawless & outrageous conduct, to find by your letter above mentioned, that it is held in general detestation by the good people of Virginia; and that you are disposed to lend your *personal* aid to subdue this spirit, and to bring those people to a proper sense of their duty" (ALS, George Washington Papers, Library of Congress).

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<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-17-02-0110>

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From Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 28 December 1794

To James Madison

Monticello Dec. 28. 94.

DEAR SIR

...—And with respect to the transactions against the excise-law, it appears to me that you are all swept away in the torrent of governmental opinions, or that we do not know what these transactions have been. We know of none which according to the definitions of the law, have been any thing more than riotous. There was indeed a meeting to consult about a separation. But to consult on a question does not amount to a determination of that question in the affirmative, still less to the acting on such a determination: but we shall see I suppose what the court lawyers, and courtly judges and would-be Ambassadors will make of it.—The excise-law is an infernal one. The first error was to admit it by the constitution. The 2d. to act on that admission. The 3d. and last will be to make it the instrument of dismembering the Union, and setting us all afloat to chuse which part of it we will adhere to. The information of our militia returned from the Westward is uniform, that tho the people there let them pass quietly, they were objects of their laughter, not of their fear, that 1001men could have cut off their whole force in a thousand places of the Alleganey, 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 some justification of arming one part of the society against another, of declaring a civil war the moment before the meeting of that body which has the sole right of declaring war, of being so patient of the kicks and scoffs of our enemies, and rising at a feather against our friends, of adding a million to the public debt and deriding us with recommendations to pay it if we can... Present me respectfully to Mrs. Madison, and pray her to keep you where you are for her own satisfaction and the public good, and accept the cordial affections of us all. Adieu.

RC (DLC: Madison Papers); unsigned. PrC (DLC); at foot of first page in ink: "Madison James." Enclosure: enclosure to [Madison to TJ, 30 Nov. 1794](#).

1. Figures written over partially erased "thous."