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1986

THE WHISKEY REBELLION

Frontier Epilogue
to the American Revolution

Thomas P. Slaughter

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1986

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland

and associated companies in
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Nicosia

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.,
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Slaughter, Thomas P. (Thomas Paul)
The Whiskey Rebellion.

Bibliography: p. Includes index.

1. Whiskey Insurrection, 1794. 2. Pennsylvania—
History—Insurrection of 1794. I. Title.

E315.S59 1986 973.4'3 85-30975

ISBN 0-19-503899-1

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

But the nation was still not safe from internal disorder, and Washington thought he knew the cause of unrest. "My mind is perfectly convinced," he wrote, "that if these self-created [democratic] societies cannot be discountenanced . . . they will destroy the government of this country." The President believed that these societies had sowed the seeds of distrust in the minds of citizens, attempted to bring about a violent revolution, and fomented the western disturbances. Grievances articulated by the westerners seemed only a front for the real designs of anarchists and rebels. "Their malevolence was not pointed merely to a particular law," he told Congress, "but . . . a spirit inimical to all order . . . actuated many of the offenders." Fortunately for the country, these "enemies of order" had showed their hand too soon, and the "army of the Constitution" had ably defended the laws. The eyes of all well disposed people should now be opened to the evil designs of those who opposed his administration. This misfired Rebellion should convince all true friends of order, as it had the President, that diligence was the order of the day.³⁹

Not everyone was convinced, and the House refused after much debate to endorse the President's attack on "self-created societies." Washington himself, his opponents observed, belonged to the Order of the Cincinnati, a self-created society by any reasonable definition of the term. Friends of liberty offered instead an explanation of the Rebellion just as cynical as Washington's, placing the entire blame on the government. "We have been accused of wearing the mask of conspirators," Benjamin Franklin Bache reported in the Philadelphia *Aurora*. "As well we might say . . . that the pretended friends of law and order had secretly fomented the insurrection that they might borrow another argument against republicanism and be furnished with a stronger evidence in favor of a standing army." To James Madison it seemed that Washington's attack on the democratic societies was "the greatest error of his political life." To Thomas Jefferson, the President's denunciation of the societies appeared to be "one of the extraordinary acts of boldness of which we have seen so many from the faction of monocrats. It is wonderful [i.e., full of wonder] indeed," Jefferson continued, "that the President should have permitted himself to be the organ of such an attack on the freedom of discussion, the freedom of writing, printing, and publishing."⁴⁰

The Rebellion and the government's response thus exacerbated rather than cured the political conflict that rent America in the 1790s. It contributed as much as any single event to widening the breach between self-styled friends of liberty and friends of order, and to the birth of the Republican and Federalist parties in the years following 1794. And this was only one effect of the Rebellion on the transforming political scene. It was only one of the consequences of this last violent battle over the meaning of the Revolution.