

Thomas Jefferson on Shays' Rebellion (Modified)

Paris, November 13, 1787

The British have so long hired their newspapers to repeat every form of lies about our being in anarchy, that the world has at length believed them, and we have believed them ourselves. Yet where does this anarchy exist? Where did it ever exist, except in the single instance of Shays' rebellion? God forbid we should ever be 20 years without such a rebellion.

What country before ever existed without a rebellion? And what country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let the people take arms. The remedy is to present them with the facts, pardon and pacify them.

The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure. Our Constitutional Convention has [made too much of Shays' rebellion]: and in the spur of the moment [I worry they will over-react].

Vocabulary

Anarchy: chaos; confusion and disorder

Remedy: cure

Pardon: forgive

Pacify: calm down

Manure: fertilizer

Source: Thomas Jefferson was in France during Shays' Rebellion, but he wrote a letter to a friend about it.