



Student Reading: A Small Rebellion Now and Then

During the Civil War, President Lincoln dealt with a massive challenge to federal constitutional authority, but even before then there were several occasions when groups of citizens questioned the legitimacy of the national government. Read the scenarios below, and then, working in groups of three, complete the accompanying activity.

The Whiskey Rebellion

When the new constitutional government was formed in 1789, control was primarily in the hands of the Federalists. One of those Federalists, Alexander Hamilton, as secretary of the treasury, was responsible for the financial policies of the new government. He proposed two methods for raising money to support the funding and debts of the national government: one was a tariff on imports, and the other was an excise tax on distilled liquor. At that time, the United States didn't have many industries extensive enough to be worth taxing. Liquor was chosen along with snuff, loaf sugar, and what was then considered a real luxury, carriages. In 1794, farmers in western Pennsylvania challenged federal authority when they refused to pay a whiskey excise tax and began terrorizing tax collectors. One man, John Lynn, who agreed simply to sublease a portion of his dwelling to the tax collector, John Neville, was dragged from his house in the middle of the night. Taken to a remote section of the forest, his head was shaved; he was stripped naked, then tarred and feathered. After making him swear on pain of death not to reveal their names, the protesters lashed him to a tree and left him there for the remainder of the night. When word got back of these and similar acts, President George Washington knew he had to do something. He called out the militias of four states and raised an army of nearly 15,000. Furthermore, he *personally* accompanied the troops as far as Bedford, Pennsylvania, the first and the last time a president of the United States marched with an army. When the militiamen arrived in Pittsburgh - - -

The Hartford Convention

New England Federalists had been angry at the national government since Thomas Jefferson became president. For one, he purchased Louisiana, a region from which many western states could be carved and whose inhabitants would most likely become Democratic-Republicans. Furthermore, Jefferson, in an effort to keep the young United States out of European wars, had imposed an embargo, forbidding American ships from leaving port with their lucrative cargoes. At that time some of the Federalists talked of seceding and forming the Northern Confederacy. Now, they opposed the War of 1812, especially since the United States had invaded Canada, a move, that, if successful, would bring even more "western-like" republican states. Furthermore, New England Federalists

felt that once more commerce with Europe was being interrupted by war. In their view, the war aims of the Democratic-Republican President James Madison were favorable to the development of the West and the South, but detrimental to New England. Finally, the idea that the war was being fought for "Freedom of the Seas" was bogus—or so they said. The more vocal members of the New England Federalists wanted to call a convention to draft a new federal constitution, with clauses to protect New England interests, and present it to only the *original* thirteen states. If these were accepted, good; if not, New England just might make a separate peace with Great Britain and go it alone. Delegates from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, with scattered representations from New Hampshire and Vermont, held the secret Hartford Convention from December 15, 1814 to January 5, 1815. Among other things, the convention did propose seven amendments to the Constitution http://www.whitehousehistory.org/04/subs/activities_03/c01_01.html designed to protect their geographic region from the growing influence of the South and the West. Some attending actually suggested secession from the Union. Unfortunately for these Federalists, their timing could not have been worse! For just as they were bringing their report to Washington - - -

The Tariff Crisis

In 1828, Congress passed what southerners came to call the "Tariff of Abominations," a high protective tax levied on goods coming into the country from abroad. In the South, particularly South Carolina, the people protested. It was an important part of their economic life to sell their cash crops to England and use the profits to purchase items from Europe, especially Britain. A high tariff meant they had to pay more for these goods. Further, in retaliation, Britain might, in the future, decide to impose its own tariff. John C. Calhoun, vice president under John Quincy Adams, had thought through the constitutional means by which the "plantation" states could refuse to obey that law. Building on the nullification doctrine put forth in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, Calhoun argued that individual states, acting together, had made the national government, limiting its scope through the framing of the Constitution. What happened, then, if the people believed the national government overstepped its bounds? According to Calhoun, the states had the power to decide. He argued that the Supreme Court couldn't accurately judge, since that body was a part of the national government. Each state, then, acting through a constitutional convention, could decide if Congress had gone too far. If the state (meeting in convention) so voted, it could refuse to obey this law until three-fourths of all the states ratified an amendment making legal this "overstepping" of authority. If three-fourths of all the states allowed this overstepping by adding this amendment, then the state in question would have to obey the law, or exercise its right to secede from the Union. In 1828, South Carolina published Calhoun's approach as *The South Carolina Exposition and Protest*²

When in 1832, Congress passed a tariff almost as high as the 1828 tariffs, South Carolinians called a state convention and promptly agreed to "nullify" both tariffs. That meant they would not allow the collection of the tariff in the port cities of their state. They were refusing to obey a federal law. President Andrew Jackson privately swore to "hang them all," but publicly he - - -