

American uprisings

America is a land of diverse thought, speech and actions, but one of the most typically *American* of them all is our willingness to protest anything and everything and to rebel against injustices, real or imagined. The first and most historically significant is, of course, our own American Revolution, but other known instances of rebellion against the Crown have largely succumbed to the flat lifeless pages of history books. One was the 'Pine Tree Riot' that resulted from an English decree that ordered the preservation of suitable timber to be used in making the Royal Navy's masts. The New Hampshire General Court passed a law in 1722 making it illegal to cut down "any white pine tree of the growth of 12 inches of diameter" or face a fine of £5 to £50, depending upon the diameter of the tree and whatever lumber was unlawfully cut down.

Surveyors/inspectors were sent out to sawmills to inspect their materials. Several were not in compliance with the new law and were fined. One such mill owner, Ebenezer Mudgett of the Weare Mill was arrested and later released by the Sheriff of Hillsborough County, Benjamin Whiting. This didn't set well with the townspeople. Twenty townsmen paid the Sheriff an unpleasant and unwelcomed visit. They broke into his room at a local inn and thrashed him with tree branches, one lash for every tree being contested. The 'Pine Tree Riot' was an early test of King George's authority in the New Colonies and left a lasting impression, most assuredly on Whiting.

This was followed some 65 years later by 'Shays' Rebellion' when American Revolutionary War veteran, Daniel Shays, led four thousand men on a protest against economic and civil rights injustices against Massachusetts that was attempting to levy burdensome taxes on individuals and their trades. The group marched on the Springfield Armory and tried to seize weapons and overthrow the government. The shock of this unsuccessful attempt actually brought General George Washington back into private life and led to his two terms as President.

American whiskey drinkers had a strong sense of what constituted appropriate taxation of their spirits. A three-year long 'Whiskey Insurrection' ensued after the whiskey tax had proven to be very unpopular. The farmers who grew the grain for the distilled spirit and who were accustomed to using their excess grain to distill their own whiskey weren't happy. According to an account, "throughout Western Pennsylvania counties, protesters used violence and intimidation to prevent federal officials from collecting the tax. Resistance came to a climax in July 1794, when a U.S. marshal arrived in western Pennsylvania to serve writs to distillers who had not paid the excise. The alarm was raised, and more than 500 armed men attacked the fortified home of tax inspector General John Neville. Washington responded by sending peace commissioners to western Pennsylvania to negotiate with the rebels, while at the same time calling on governors to send a militia force to enforce the tax. Washington himself rode at the head of an army to suppress the insurgency, with 13,000 militiamen provided by the governors of Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The rebels all went home before the arrival of the army, and there was no confrontation. About 20 men were arrested, but all were later acquitted or pardoned."

The first recorded Black slave rebellion occurred in 1811. It was called the, 'German Coast Uprising' and it happened in the Territory of Orleans when up to 500 slaves from sugar plantations marched to the City of New Orleans in protest of their enslavement. Their actions were met with great brutality, and about 95 slaves were either killed in skirmishes or later executed, their severed heads put up on pikes for all to see. (Read the whole terrible story on Wikipedia).

Closer to home was the 'Taos Revolt' that happened in 1847 by Hispano and Puebloan allies who protested the U.S. occupation of present-day Northern New Mexico. The rebels, who wanted better representation fought three engagements against U.S. troops and militia and were finally defeated. This eventually led to the formation of the New Mexico Territory that gave them better representation and later to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Civil War was the bloodiest and most consequential 'revolt,' this time pitting American against American, and we all know its outcome... upwards of 700,000 dead. It began a new chapter in American uprisings that unleashed many more revolts of a civil, societal and economic nature. Among them were the 'Coal Wars', the 'Green Corn Rebellion,' the 'San Juan (Puerto Rico) Nationalist Revolt' and in the mid-20th century, the 'Black Power' movement and the 'Red Power Movement'.

We've experienced many more moderate 'uprisings' over the years, most of which were benign in terms of violence, but which all shared one important common denominator...demands for equality and justice. Today, our uprisings are mostly fought with words, lawsuits and politics, but given our long and sometimes bloody history, we should not expect them to disappear without significant push back anytime soon. We can only hope that we all will remember Abraham Lincoln's words, "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

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