THE FRIES REBELLION: SOCIAL VIOLENCE AND THE POLITICS OF THE NEW NATION

BY PETER LEVINE

PRESENT interest in the study of mass violent behavior is yielding a variety of provocative hypotheses and concepts potentially useful for understanding the significance of collective violence to American development. In terms of American colonial and early national growth, the works of Bernard Bailyn, Jesse Lemisch, Pauline Maier, and Gordon Wood have advanced the level of analysis by examining certain of these ideas against the record of specific events. In general, their efforts indicate the prevalence of mob violence in late eighteenth century America, the correspondence of such activity in the colonies to similar phenomena in Europe, and the relationship of collective violence to political and social change.¹

A major emphasis in these studies concerns the nature of the participants in colonial mobs and their proclaimed motives and justifications. Jesse Lemisch, for instance, views the participation of seamen in impressment riots as evidence of purposeful, radical action on the part of lower class elements. Commenting on other colonial mobs, Gordon Wood and Pauline Maier indicate the degree to which upstanding, socially responsible segments of colonial society formed mobs to defend community interests in the absence of effective action by established authority. Drawing heavily on George Rude's analysis of European pre-industrial crowds, Wood suggests that participants in American colonial mobs represented groups gaining in economic

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power that were intent on securing their share of authority in a polity not designed to include them. Their demonstrations, he argues, may well have been "a form of political protest made both necessary and possible by the increasing democratization of a society lacking the proper institutions for either the successful expression or the swift repression of that protest."²

Although concerned with different groups, these studies illustrate the willingness of particular individuals to engage in collective violence in order to secure new rights in a society undergoing fundamental political change. Except for some speculations, however, they do not include evaluations of how specific manifestations of group violence in post-revolutionary America related to the process of change. This essay purports to extend the investigation of early American violence by examining this question in terms of a domestic violent encounter important to Americans of the 1790s: the Fries Rebellion. Analysis of the reaction of a particular social group to the development of the national state will aid in defining the dimensions and the consequences of political change accompanying the transformation of the American colonies into the American nation.

The Fries Rebellion or the Hot Water War occurred during the first three months of 1799, when German residents in the Pennsylvania counties of Bucks and Northampton offered open and at times violent opposition to federal tax laws—opposition deemed serious enough by the Adams administration to call out state militia and federal troops to restore order and to apprehend the participants in the resistance.³

Responsible for provoking this unrest were two related measures enacted by Congress in July, 1798, designed to finance expected naval operations against France. Together, these acts

³ My account of the Fries Rebellion is drawn primarily from Thomas Carpenter (stenographer), The Two Trials of John Fries on an Indictment for Treason; Together with a Brief Report of the Trials of Several Other Persons, for Treason and Insurrection (Philadelphia, 1800) and Francis Wharton, ed., State Trials of the United States During the Administrations of Washington and Adams With References Historical and Professional and Preliminary Notes on the Politics of the Times (n.p., 1849). Also useful were W. W. H. Davis, The Fries Rebellion (Doylestown, 1899); Russel B. Nye, A Baker’s Dozen, Thirteen Unusual Americans (East Lansing, 1956), 3–26; and Louis Weinstein, "The Fries Rebellion" (unpublished Master’s Thesis, Teachers College, Temple University, 1939).
provided for the levying of a graduated, direct tax on all land, houses, and slaves in the United States. The first measure, approved on July 9, established a bureaucracy, complex for its time, to make assessments. Specific instructions concerning how this work was to proceed were included in the act. Each state was divided into several tax districts. District tax commissioners, appointed at a fixed salary by the President of the United States, were given the responsibility of choosing a principal assessor and as many assistants as necessary to carry out assessments. Assessors were required to compile lists that defined clearly the nature of all recorded property. With respect to houses, for instance, it was necessary to note the dimensions, the building materials, and the number and the size of all windows for every dwelling examined.4

According to the second act, approved within five days of the first, these lists were to serve as the basis for levying the tax. Graduated tax rates were provided. For instance, a tax of forty cents would be levied on the owner of a house on less than two acres of land valued at $200 while a maximum tax of $300 would be levied on the owner of a house and lot worth more than $30,000. Pennsylvania's share of the tax approximated $237,000. Altogether the federal government expected a total revenue of $2,000,000 from the tax.5

As a consequence of their resistance to these laws, John Fries, a vendue crier from Bucks County and the acknowledged leader of the movement, along with twenty-eight of his comrades were arrested and brought to Philadelphia for trial during April, 1799, by a force of 500 state militiamen and federal regulars. Three individuals, including Fries, were indicted and convicted of treason while others were found guilty of lesser crimes. Sentenced to death, Fries escaped punishment when on May 21, 1800, President Adams responded favorably to petitions of mercy and pardoned all individuals convicted of crimes stemming from the disturbances in Pennsylvania.6

1 U. S. Congress, Annals, 5th Cong., 3758-3770.
2 Ibid., 3777-3785.
3 Resistance to the house tax laws occurred primarily in Bucks and Northampton Counties, with scattered opposition in Montgomery County as well. Fries actually had two trials. The first ended on May 15, 1799. Fries was found guilty of treason, but a legal technicality voided the trial and he was awarded another one. The second trial took place a year
Contemporary response to the initial events in this sequence—the actual opposition to the tax law and the deployment of federal troops to quell unrest—proceeded along partisan lines. In blaming each other for the affair, Federalists and Republicans offered numerous statements capable of supporting a variety of hypotheses concerning collective violent behavior that have engaged the attention of sociologists, social psychologists, and historians since the late nineteenth century.

Leaders of both parties, for instance, emphasized the role of conspiring, malicious agitators in the affair. Federalists focused on “the movement of the French party in the United States” in attempting to define the Fries Rebellion as part of an organized, general conspiracy to overthrow the government. Republicans for their part, pointed to the machinations of Jacob Eyerly, the principal assessor for Northampton, and Samuel Sitgreaves, a federal attorney involved in the prosecution of Fries, for precipitating unorganized, spontaneous protest against the tax. The Philadelphia Aurora alleged that Eyerly sought “secret revenge on the people” for refusing to elect him to Congress. Thus he “exaggerate[d] every circumstance [and] conceive[d] plots and combinations to provoke the government to rigorous measures.” Sitgreaves, supposedly for personal reasons involving “money projects,” also was implicated.

Presaging the theories of mob psychologists of another era, articulate Federalists and Republicans agreed that the participants in the Hot Water War were part of the common rabble. References to these individuals as “ignorant,” “uncultivated,” “drunken,” “mulish,”—“impudent miscreants,” as one editor put it, appeared with similar frequency in the presses of both parties.

later, and once again, on May 3, 1800, Fries was found guilty and sentenced to death. Adams’s pardon followed.

7 New York Daily Advertiser, March 22, 1799.
8 Philadelphia Aurora, March 23, 1799. See also the March 28, April 24, 1799, editions of the same paper.
9 Ibid., March 30, 1799.
10 References to the character of the participants include U. S. Congress, Annals, 6th Cong., 12-13; Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 105; Oracle of Dauphin and Harrisburg Advertiser, April 10, 1799; Porcupine’s Gazette, March 12, April 4, 1799; Robert G. Harper to James McHenry, March 26, 1799, in Bernard C. Steiner, The Life and Correspondence of James McHenry (Cleveland, 1907), 433-434; James McHenry to George Washington, March 31, 1799, in John Fitzgerald, ed., The Writings of George Washington From the Original Manuscript Sources (Washington, 1940), 158 n.
Although the involvement of state and federal troops provoked the harshest contention between Federalists and Republicans, no commentator condoned the opposition to federal law by the German residents of Bucks and Northampton. Agreement on this latter point serves as useful fodder for those theorists who accept the unqualified right of legitimate, established authority to intervene in and to bring an end to public disorder.

To be sure, Federalists vigorously supported the decision to send in federal troops. Responding to a request from Secretary of War James McHenry for regular troops to go into Pennsylvania, Alexander Hamilton encouraged the use of large numbers of soldiers. "Whenever the government appears in arms," he warned, "it ought to appear like a Hercules and inspire respect by the display of strength." In similar fashion, Federalist newspapers, following the lead of the Gazette of the United States, applauded the government's action. Nothing but praise and commendation were pronounced on a military expedition believed to be "hourly produc[ing] the most salutary effects upon the minds of the people."

Predictably, Republicans viewed the use of the standing army in a domestic matter where there was "not the smallest appearance of disturbance" as an ominous portent for the maintenance of free institutions in the United States. The Aurora's columns frequently published letters allegedly written by soldiers who had been ordered into Pennsylvania. These letters emphasized the unnecessary use of force on the part of the government to restore compliance with the law. Indeed, according to the Republican press, the army's main functions involved the cutting down of liberty poles and the harassment of innocent German farmers. Stories describing the beating of children by soldiers, the public whipping of a Northampton newspaper editor, and the inhumane treatment of prisoners also appeared.

12 Carlisle Weekly Gazette, April 24, 1799. For other examples see Gazette of the United States, April 19, 1799; Oracle of Dauphin and Harrisburgh Advertiser, May 22, 1799.
13 Philadelphia Aurora, March 28, 1799. See also March 16, April 6, 1799, issues of the same paper.
14 For instance see Philadelphia Aurora, April 16, 1799. Davis, Fries Rebellion, 95, 96 cites other examples.
15 Reading Adler Eagle, April 9, 16, 1799.
In damning the use of the army, William Duane, editor of the *Aurora*, even suggested that the affair demonstrated the existence of a "despotic government where there are not citizens but . . . slaves . . . where force and not reason is the alphabet of instruction."\(^{16}\)

Despite partisan disagreement over the seriousness of the turbulence in Pennsylvania and over the necessity of employing federal and state troops to terminate activity, spokesmen on both sides agreed that all those who had violated federal law be brought to justice. Although Republicans consistently denied that events in these counties were treasonous in nature, no effort was made to contest the right of established authority to apprehend those who had challenged the federal government.\(^{17}\)

Emphasis on the ability of a few conspiring men to precipitate riotous mob action; depictions of such events as spontaneous, unplanned, and destructive; characterization of rioters as deviant creatures belonging to the lowest elements of society; and approval of legitimate authority to stifle mass unrest, all present in accounts of the Fries Rebellion, together define an anti-democratic conception of collective behavior theory long popular among social scientists. First pronounced by theorists such as Gustav Le Bon and E. D. Martin, these ideas still persist among modern students of mass behavior who, by implication, assume that acts of collective violence are both destructive and inappropriate in a democratic society. Collective violence here is understood to encompass both actual injury to persons or property by groups to secure particular ends as well as the threat of such action by groups willing and capable of using force if necessary to achieve specific objectives.\(^{18}\)

This conservative theoretical framework, apparently supported by superficial contemporary judgments of the Fries Rebellion, is neither accurate nor useful in explaining activities in Bucks and

\(^{16}\) *Philadelphia Aurora*, March 22, 1799.

\(^{17}\) *Ibid.*, March 12, 1799. Fries's attorneys, led by Alexander Dallas, the leading Republican politician in Pennsylvania, argued during the first trial that their client, although not guilty of treason, had incited a riot. Time and again they argued that he should be tried under the Sedition Act for his crimes. See Carpenter, *Two Trials of John Fries*, 99, 107, 117, 135.

Northampton in 1799. Instead, developments in these Pennsylvania counties, similar to instances of pre-industrial European and American colonial mob violence, suggest the relevancy of ideas that emphasize an appreciation of violent action as a rational form of political behavior utilized by those whose role in ordinary politics appears threatened. Although not the response of American colonial mobs out to claim new rights and to extend political power, the experience of the participants in the Hot Water War reveals the rational, organized, political reaction of a geographically, ethnically distinct group to encroachments on its authority and its autonomy by a growing federal government.

Claims that the opposition to the house tax law in Pennsylvania was unorganized, spontaneous, and destructive are not substantiated by the actual events that occurred in Bucks and Northampton. The single-minded, discriminating choice of targets related clearly to the nature of particular grievances so evident in George Rudé’s study of pre-industrial European crowds. Jesse Lemisch’s analysis of colonial impressment riots and Pauline Maier’s investigation of colonial mobs characterize as well the activities of the Pennsylvania Germans who challenged federal authority in 1799. In all cases the manner of resistance suggests a response rationally conceived by the participants to meet specific objectives unobtainable in their minds by other means.

Opposition to the tax laws in Bucks and Northampton manifested itself by the intimidation of assessors and by the forcible release of prisoners arrested by a federal marshal for refusing to comply with the law. The intimidation of assessors happened at various places and at various times while the release of the prisoners was accomplished in the town of Bethlehem in the course of one day. In virtually every instance, some measure of planning and organization preceded actual resistance.

Harrassment of assessors included verbal threats, brief physical confrontations, and occasional drenchings with hot water. Although the German hausfraus who scalded assessors’ heads

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19 George Rudé, *The Crowd in History* (New York, 1964), *passim*, is a brilliant example of how the study of popular disturbances can illuminate changes taking place within a given society. Increasingly, investigations of social violence, such as the ones by Rudé, Lemisch, Maier, and Wood, indicate that such disturbances are well-organized and directed activities.

20 The trial accounts contain abundant testimony on this point. I have cited only a few examples in the text of this essay.
with hot water as they measured window panes may not have planned their actions carefully, evidence of organized efforts to prevent property assessments is plentiful. As early as December, 1798, public township meetings were held to protest the tax and to discuss possible ways of opposing it. Local militia leaders, including John Fries, took active roles in advertising and supervising these sessions as well as in circulating petitions requesting the repeal of the tax. At one of these gatherings a document proclaiming the determination of the citizens of Bucks County to unite in efforts to oppose the execution of the tax laws was composed by Fries and signed by fifty persons.22 On other occasions local committees were elected to inform individual assessors to discontinue their labors.23

Often assessors found themselves confronted by organized groups, verbally abused, and physically molested. In one instance Cephas Childs, an assessor for Bucks, upon being recognized in a tavern, was grabbed from behind, beaten, and warned not to perform his duties. Childs was also cautioned that if he persisted in making assessments, he would be forced to “go to the liberty pole and dance around it.”25 On another occasion an assessor was warned in more bizarre fashion. He was told that, if he continued his work, he would be “committed to an old stable and . . . fed rotten corn.”26

Further intimidation of assessors manifested itself at public meetings called by them to explain the necessity and the mechanics of the tax law. The disruption of one such meeting involved the appearance of eleven men in militia uniform accompanied by another comrade in similar dress carrying a flag with the word “LIBERTY” emblazoned on it. The speaker’s attempts to read the law were interrupted by one of the twelve who declared, “We don’t want any of your damned laws, we have laws of our own.” Thrusting his musket in the speaker’s

22 Philadelphia Aurora, March 12, 1799; Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 185.
23 Davis, Fries Rebellion, 16, 17, 43; Wharton, State Trials, 514, 523; the testimony of George Mitchell, William Rawle Papers, p. 102, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).
24 Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 64.
25 Davis, Fries Rebellion, 21, 43. Also see the statement of John Shinier, William Rawle Papers, HSP.
26 Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 75.
27 Ibid., 21.
face, he warned, "This is our law and we will let you know it."  
At another session called to hear testimony concerning resistance to the law, proceedings were marred by the appearance of a uniformed company of lighthorse. The purpose of this array simply was to intimidate the assessors by demonstrating the determination and strength of the opposition.

The organized nature of what a defense attorney for Fries referred to as a "system of intimidation" also appears in the release of the prisoners. Although the federal marshal from whom the prisoners were taken testified that he did not expect organized opposition and although Fries's attorneys argued that the episode was "a sudden affray," it is clear that the action was premeditated rather than spontaneous; a planned, orderly activity with a specific objective in mind, rather than the achievement of a disorderly, riotous mob.

The seizure of the prisoners from the Sun Tavern in Bethlehem where they were being detained prior to their transfer to Philadelphia for trial was effected by militia units from Bucks and Northampton mustered specifically for that purpose. In both counties meetings were held on the night of March 6, 1799, to organize forces. A troop of lighthorse commanded by one Henry Jarrett and a rifle company led by a Captain Staehler comprised the contingent from Northampton while Fries headed another rifle company from Bucks.

Starting from different points on the morning of March 7, the two county groups met on the south side of the Lehigh River outside of Bethlehem around mid-day. Accompanied by fife and drum, dressed for the most part in militia uniforms, hats adorned with tri-colored cockades, armed with an assortment of swords, rifles, and clubs, and led by John Fries, this combined force of some 140 men entered the town in orderly military fashion. Upon arriving at the tavern, the men deployed in single rank around the building and maintained regular order until the prisoners were released.

The liberation of the prisoners required only the threat of force rather than actual physical conflict. Along with thirty of

27 Davis, Fries Rebellion, 21-22.
28 Wharton, State Trials, 535.
29 Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 99.
30 Ibid., 147.
his comrades, Fries entered the tavern and demanded that all prisoners be set free. The federal marshal, supported only by a hastily formed posse and confronted by an armed, organized force, acquiesced. Within ten minutes of the release of the prisoners, both the militia which had achieved its objective and the townspeople who had gathered to witness the event quietly dispersed.31

To be sure, not all of the participants in the Bethlehem episode became involved in order to fulfill the group’s main objective. One member of Jarrett’s company, for instance, claimed ignorance of the expedition’s purpose up until the time the militia units entered Bethlehem.32 Another armed participant testified that he meant no harm in going to Bethlehem. Simple curiosity and a desire not to be excluded from an activity involving his friends describe his motivation.33 Still others expressed beliefs that the purpose of the mission concerned only the intimidation of assessors rather than the release of the prisoners. The participation of certain individuals in the affair for reasons not consciously related to the political act of freeing the prisoners, however, does not invalidate the general observation that all but a few of those men marching on the tavern knew full well what their purpose entailed.34

Although the harassment of assessors and the incident at Bethlehem resulted in the apprehension of the resisters and the conviction of three men for treason, evidence indicates neither martial rebellion engineered by conspirators nor irrational, spontaneous mob action. Contrary to contemporary claims that a few evil men manipulated a mass of ignorant German farmers into treasonable measures or to the insinuations of classical social psychologists that participants in such actions necessarily are

31 Estimates of the size of the force that freed the prisoners in both Carpenter and Wharton range between 100 and 140 men with most of them at the higher number. For instance see Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 32, 188; Wharton, State Trials, 500. Trial testimony in both of these sources provides similar descriptions of what transpired at Bethlehem.
32 Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 52.
33 Testimony of John Eberhardt before Judge Peters, April 6, 1799, William Rawle Papers, HSP.
34 Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 58, 188 indicates that intimidation was motivation for some. Numerous references in Wharton and Carpenter indicate that most individuals knew what was involved in marching on the tavern. For instance, see Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 27, 35, 36, 39, 108; Wharton, State Trials, 498, 502.
drawn from the bottom of society, the Fries Rebellion depicts a community-sanctioned response to particular grievances undertaken by individuals representative of the locale in which resistance was offered.

Rather than social outcasts or revolutionaries, the participants in the Hot Water War appear to have been small farmers who were heads of families and who maintained modest property holdings. Of the three individuals tried for treason, two were tailors, and one, Fries, was an auctioneer. Henry Jarrett, the leader of the lighthorse company that marched on Bethlehem, was a local justice of the peace. Almost all of those involved in the Bethlehem incident were members of the state militia, an indication in Pennsylvania, not of a particular level of wealth but of a willingness to abide by state law and to participate, if necessary, in the common defense.

Led by their own kind, the German citizens of Bucks and Northampton moved to act not because of the machinations of devious outsiders but out of a felt sense of grievance directed at specific manifestations of a growing federal government which they could identify and confront. In essence, events in these counties involved a defensive response by a communal group directed at representatives of those who held national power. Similar to instances in European history that Charles Tilly classifies under the heading of reactionary violence, the aims of the Pennsylvania resisters involved both a critique of the manner in which power was being wielded as well as an attempt to maintain local autonomy in the face of encroaching centralized authority.

In barest outline, the emergence of the American nation and its involvement in the 1790s in the conflict between England and France precipitated the development of thought and action consonant with the growth of a modernizing nation. The growth of a governmental bureaucracy, the intrusion of federal authority into local areas, the extension of centralized jurisdiction,


and the increasing demands made on the citizenry for finances and cooperation in national efforts that in other societies created circumstances conducive to social violence, all are evident in the scenario of the Fries Rebellion. In such situations, local, cohesive, cultural groups may react to preserve their independence by attempting to oppose the imposition of central control. Clearly the nature of the resistance offered in Pennsylvania fits this pattern.

German residents in Bucks and Northampton did not offer resistance because of a heavy tax burden. Instead, these people challenged the assessors because they felt threatened by laws they did not understand, implemented by strangers who were not Germans, and who, it was believed, were out for their own personal gain. Intimidation of these officials of the federal government provided immediate gratification of hostile feelings aimed at the central authority responsible for instituting the tax while at the same time representing non-compliance with federal law. Similarly the effort to free the prisoners did not involve a desire to mount insurrection but to prevent the removal of fellow citizens to Philadelphia for trial, thus depriving them of judgment by their peers and their community of a responsibility basic to the preservation of its self-identity. How else to explain the fact that at Bethlehem Fries offered to post bail for all prisoners in custody while requesting that they be tried for their crimes in the counties where they resisted the law.

The Fries Rebellion demonstrates a viable connection between the outbreak of acts of mass force and changes in the political relationships between groups in a developing society. Recognition of violent action in situations where identifiable groups perceive changes in their relationships with other groups or with governmental authority as threatening to deprive them of certain privileges and of destroying their identity as autonomous, distinct units allows an appreciation of such responses as an extreme form of political behavior, a last resort in the bargaining process among society's components by which partic-

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38 Charles Tilly, The Vendée (Cambridge, 1964), 16-26, serves as the framework for this mode of analysis.
39 Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 69, 93; Wharton, State Trials, 510, 523.
40 Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 27, 45, 69.
ular groups hope to preserve their independence and power.41

Certainly not all instances of social violence involve defensive reactions of specific groups against encroaching authority. As noted earlier, Rudé’s analysis of pre-industrial European crowds and Wood’s comments on American colonial mobs indicate that participants in such actions can represent emerging interest groups aggressively seeking out new power within a political structure unwilling or unable to accommodate them. Whether or not mass violence involves groups out to maintain their autonomy, or groups in search of new authority, depends directly on the composition of the particular group and on the set of political, economic, and social conditions within which it operates.42 No matter what the case, an understanding of the political nature of collective violence and its relationship to social change help explain why such action often involves a large measure of organization and planning, why targets are well chosen and specific, and why participants fail to conform to stereotyped images of the common rabble.

Definition of a connection between violence and social change in the instance of the Fries Rebellion suggests some obvious questions. Why was protest against the house tax law limited to a few counties in eastern Pennsylvania? Were there not other areas in the United States where similar protests might have occurred? Acceptance of the idea that modernizing changes in a society do not affect all segments of that society evenly, that the situation of all classes, regions, and communities within the same polity are not transformed in the same way for instance, by the emergence of a strong central authority, suggests possible modes of inquiry but offers no conclusive answers to these questions. Certain factors, however, help to explain why opposition did appear in Bucks and Northampton.

Although not every citizen participated actively in the intim-


42 Obviously these two explanations for group action are not the only alternatives possible. They are used here as examples in order to make the point about the rational, organized, and directed nature of violent group protest.
idation of assessors and in the release of the prisoners, the German community appears to have given tacit approval to these actions. There is little evidence to indicate that elements in the community criticized those who offered resistance or that any positive steps were taken to stifle their movements. The most striking example of this posture came at the tavern in Bethlehem. Townspeople gathered, cheered the arrival of the troops, stood by to watch, and then, according to eyewitness accounts, quietly dispersed. Appearance of such support does not mean that the approval of a non-participatory audience was crucial for the use of force in Pennsylvania. Its existence, however, no doubt encouraged those who engaged in such activity.

Contributing as well to events in Bucks and Northampton was the ethnicity of the protesters. Studies of the eighteenth century Pennsylvania Germans reveal that citizens in the counties where unrest occurred were tied more closely to German culture and language than to native American custom and speech. The German language was used almost exclusively in eastern Pennsylvania. The most popular newspapers were printed in German as well. In such circumstances it is not surprising that one of the major points of contention concerned the fact that the assessors were not German and that they spoke only English. Assessors testifying at Fries's trial remarked that they did not understand what their clients were protesting about as none of the assessors understood German. A community, then, with a definite ethnic and cultural identification openly resisted measures and individuals which appeared to challenge its ability to maintain local control.

Finally the leadership involved in the Pennsylvania resistance also influenced the manner in which it unfolded. As a vendue crier, John Fries traveled throughout the area where opposition developed. In the course of his work he was able to spread in-

43 James O. Knauss, Jr., “Social Conditions Among the Pennsylvania Germans in the Eighteenth Century, as Revealed in the German Newspapers Published in America,” The Pennsylvania German Society Publications, XXIX (1922), 164-165.
46 Wharton, State Trials, 510, 523.
formation and organize, even if informally, opposition to the house tax law. Although open resistance might well have developed without Fries, his ability to serve as a crude channel of communication and as a coordinator of activities facilitated the events that took place.

Resistance against the house tax law, although organized and directed, dropped off dramatically after the release of the prisoners. In part, the limited objectives of the resisters accounts for this fact. Contributing as well to the end of turbulence was the forceful response of the federal government to the supposed state of treason existing in Bucks and Northampton. The swift repression of protest in this instance further sets apart the experience of the Fries rebels from that of activists involved in American colonial mobs. Unlike accounts of revolutionary crowds operating in the absence of an adequate repressive force, description of government reaction to the state of affairs in Pennsylvania demonstrates that participants in the Hot Water War carried out their protest in a political environment in which the locus of power was shifting from local units to a national state capable of meeting supposed challenges to its authority.

Six days after the release of the prisoners, President Adams issued a proclamation in which he called for all citizens in Bucks and Northampton to return to their homes and to comply with federal law. In his message the president termed the seizure of the prisoners an act of treason and announced his decision to employ federal troops and state militia to "suppress" further opposition.

The announcement of Adams's message generated a quick reaction. Within one week of publication of the message, public meetings, conducted in German, were held where both the president's proclamation and the tax laws were read and explained. The dissemination of this information produced a general agreement to accept the conditions set forth in Adams's statement.

Unaware of this disposition to comply with his wishes, Adams authorized a force of some five hundred soldiers under the command of Brigadier General William MacPherson to march

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47 U. S., Congress, Annals, 6th Cong., 1300-1301.
48 For examples see Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 66; Wharton, State Trials, 550; Gazette of the United States, March 20, 1799.
into eastern Pennsylvania. Provided with discretionary powers and assured of a reserve force of some two thousand additional troops, MacPherson and his men left Philadelphia on April 4, 1799.49 By the time of their arrival in the area, the tax law with few exceptions was being peacefully implemented. To be sure, MacPherson’s troops captured the participants in the tax protest. These men, however, offered no resistance. This object was accomplished at a cost of $80,000 to the federal government.50

Although inadequate local enforcement agencies together with community approval of their actions allowed participants in the resistance some initial success, the most effective use of force was displayed by federal troops. Possessed of better organization and greater manpower, this representative arm of the very authority that had imposed the tax law on the German community in Bucks and Northampton proved a definite factor in the rapid cessation of opposition and the arrest of individuals alleged to have committed crimes against the state. Unlike the more permanent successes enjoyed by mobs in the colonial period in situations where neither local nor central authority proved capable of effective responses, participants in the Hot Water War resisted in vain.51 Unable to confine their opposition, in the eyes of federal authority, to their own locality, their actions provoked a harsh response by the government of a growing national state which viewed their resistance as a threat to the powers of that maturing entity.

Republicans as well as Federalists understood the opposition offered in Pennsylvania in similar terms. To be sure, Republican commentators took a dim view of the need to employ a large military force to quell unrest. Nor did they accept Federalist arguments that events in Bucks and Northampton constituted treason. In expressing these views, however, Republicans offered criticism only of the manner in which Federalists exercised power rather than of the right of the national government to intervene. Thus, Alexander Dallas, a defense attorney for Fries and an important leader of Republican forces in Pennsylvania, while

50 Davis, Fries Rebellion, 140.
51 Maier, “Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority,” 19-21.
denying that his client had committed treason, readily conceded that he was guilty of inciting a riot. Dallas even went so far as to ask that Fries and his comrades be prosecuted under the terms of the Sedition Act, a rather unusual position for a prominent Republican to take in 1799.52

While the ability of the federal government to intervene in Pennsylvania indicated the growing maturity of national power in the 1790s, a more significant manifestation of change involved this general approval of the spirit of that response. As Pauline Maier has noted, essential to the success of colonial mobs was the absence of an adequate repressive force combined with the quasi-legal status given to colonial mobs in formal political thought. A view that popular civil disorder was a necessary element in maintaining free institutions, however, became less acceptable after independence had been achieved. The emergence of a belief that the Constitution represented the ultimate expression of a series of experiments to produce a true Republican government did not mesh easily with earlier notions that emphasized the virtues of occasional domestic unrest.53 Not surprisingly, then, even in their attempts to make political capital of the Federalist administration’s response to the Hot Water War, Republicans refused to challenge the right of the government to intervene. By denying the justness of the Pennsylvania resistance and by expressing a willingness to enforce legislation originally designed to hinder their ability to contest for power, Republicans thus reinforced the legitimacy of the federal government to maintain and to extend its authority.

This investigation of community reaction to federal authority in eastern Pennsylvania, similar to recent studies of collective violence in the European and the American experiences, demonstrates that violent group action need not be the aimless, spontaneous, destructive response of society’s pariahs. Instances of mass violent behavior can involve the rational, organized protest of particular groups calculated to achieve specific objectives.

The experience of the Fries rebels has additional import for understanding eighteenth century American mob violence. The resistance in Pennsylvania in 1799 resembles closely the operation of revolutionary colonial mobs in terms of the discriminating

52 Carpenter, Two Trials of John Fries, 99, 107, 117, 135.
53 Maier, “Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority,” 27-35.
choice of targets, the level of organization and direction, and
the decision of groups to affect changes in their relationships
with other elements in society by violent means. Group defini-
tion and motivation, however, were not the same for the partic-
ipants in the Hot Water War and for those who composed
colonial crowds. Reactionary rather than forward looking, con-
cerned with maintaining local autonomy rather than with seek-
ing new power, defined by cultural and ethnic qualities rather
than by economic interest, those who acted in Bucks and North-
ampton did so out of a desire to resist the encroachments of a
developing national state rather than to mark out new areas of
authority in that arena.

The situation of these Pennsylvania Germans and their response
to it is clearly different from the particular circumstances and
reactions of the colonial mobs analyzed by Lemisch, Maier, and
Wood. Similarly, the crowds described by these scholars differ
with each other in varying degrees. This diversity, however,
presents no problems in deciding which interpretation most ac-
curately fits the pattern of late eighteenth century American mob
violence. Changing social, economic, and political circumstances
affect different groups in society in different ways. The reaction
of these groups to change will vary according to their particular
situation and to their particular objectives.

The Fries Rebellion, for instance, illustrates how one well-
defined ethnic group responded to the growth of the national
state. Analysis of this event enlarges our understanding of the
nature of change in American society after the Revolution and
the problems and tensions it engendered. By no means, however,
does it exhaust the question. Investigations of more forward-
looking groups and their response to change are necessary in
order to more fully delineate the effects of modernization on
other segments of the new nation. Those who undertake these
examinations must not assume at the outset that their task is
to construct narrow studies of deviant behavior. That emphasis,
like the conspiracy theories of history it spawns, neglects the
fact that investigations of social violence can serve as convenient
mechanisms for understanding the responses of particular groups
in society to the process of change.