

**George Washington & The Whiskey Rebellion**  
**By Senator Bill Ferguson (46<sup>th</sup> Leg. Dist.)**  
George Washington's Birthday Celebration  
Maryland's Old Senate Chamber, Annapolis  
February 18, 2012

Thank you, Mr. President. And thank you, dear colleagues. I am truly honored this evening to have the opportunity to celebrate with you the leadership of our country's Forefather and Standard-Bearer, President George Washington.

Let us begin on July 16<sup>th</sup> in the summer of 1794, just five short years after the ratification of the United States Constitution. General John Neville, a federal tax collector sent by President Washington to rural Western Pennsylvania, settled his family for supper in the General's home, Bower Hill. That evening a Federal marshal who, with Neville's assistance, was sent to collect Whiskey taxes levied upon local farms was intending to join the family meal. Although that Marshall failed to arrive, the family broke bread and began their meal.

Suddenly, sounds of commotion from just outside. General Neville rose from his table and moved to the closest dining room window. He peered outside. To his horror, 30 armed farmers and field workers – 30 members of the Mingo Creek militia – had surrounded his home. They'd gathered to forcibly demand that Neville hand over the Federal Marshall overseeing Whiskey tax enforcement.

General Neville rushed from the window and ordered his family to stay calm. He hastily grabbed his commissioned musket, lodged a ball down the shaft, aimed and fired. The musket ball found its mark, killing one of the 30 "rebels". Chaos ensued, more shots were fired. After several hours, the militiamen retreated, vowing to return.

The next morning, Neville sought reinforcements. 10 U.S. Army soldiers under the command of Neville's brother-in-law arrived at Bower Hill in the mid-afternoon. The Army commander ordered Neville to hide in a nearby ravine that evening, eyeing to keep Neville safe should the rebels return.

And return they did. On that evening, however, there were not just 30 Mingo Creek militiamen. On that night, 700 militiamen stood by the ready. These men were organized in just one day under the command of the legendary veteran of the Revolutionary War, Major James McFarlane. For several hours, the sides negotiated, eventually allowing the women and children to leave the home unharmed. As the last child cleared the fence line, shots from both sides pierced the air. Windows shattered, wood splinters exploded, muskets rung out.

After an hour of intense fighting, the Mingo Creek leader called out a ceasefire. One of the militiamen had seen a white flag fly from inside the home. The battlefield went silent. The militia leader, Major McFarlane, broke cover and began a slow yet cautious walk towards the front door. When within a stone's throw from the threshold, a shot exploded, striking McFarlane and mortally wounding him. The Mingo Creek militiamen immediately sought revenge. They stormed the home, set fire to the residence, and took prisoner the U.S. Army commander and General Neville's son.

Just 13 days later, at a large field in Western Pennsylvania, 7,000 angry and unpredictable sympathizers gathered in support of the Mingo Creek militiamen. They carried Liberty Poles – small flags with 6 striped bars that represented the 6 most forceful counties opposing the imposition of the Whiskey Tax.

They called for their independence. They called for the widespread use of the guillotine in the United States. They called for a Second Revolution.

*And we think we have problems with taxes in Maryland!?*

Friends and colleagues, in 1794, the Whiskey Rebellion was raging in states across colonial America. President Washington was facing the most serious challenge to the mere existence of our United States.

Washington was an American war hero. He was an architect of our modern democracy. He was an American legend. And, yet, just 5 years after his remarkable victories and our country's formation, he faced an internal insurrection wholly of his own making.

We must ask ourselves, "How and why?"

Tonight I propose an answer:

President Washington was willing to risk fleeting turmoil out of conviction to do what was right for the future of his country. And yet, he was willing to put his own life on the line to prevent this turmoil from permanently tearing us apart. He knew that although from time to time we may disagree, our strength ultimately would depend on our ability to come back together.

In 1790, Washington's newly formed Constitutional government faced a federal war debt of \$54 million dollars. Failure to address this debt meant the failure of the United States of America. And, as Washington stated in his famous Farewell Address to the nation: "*[T]owards the payment of debts, there must be revenue; that to have revenue, there must be taxes; [and] that no taxes can be devised which are not more or less inconvenient and unpleasant.*"

Washington knew that by imposing a federal Whiskey Tax – the first of its kind under the new Constitution – he risked his own personal popularity, his own political power, and his own reputation.

For Washington, though, government was not about personal power, nor was it about politics. Government was a tool. It was the means necessary to unify a common people around their common needs for the betterment of all.

Washington's idea of government required leaders to govern with conviction, and to know that a people divided could never prosper.

Tonight, we sit right now in the room where that great man resigned his Commission of the Army 228 years ago. We have progressed quite a great deal in that time. We have achieved great things.

And, yet, right now, in this upcoming Session, we face our own modern challenges. We face our own Whiskey Rebellions.

We live in an age and society where the single greatest indicators of achievement are not one's own ability or ingenuity, but rather are the wealth of one's parents and the zip code into which one is born.

We live in an economy where our traditional working and middle class jobs, are now performed across the ocean, for \$12 a day.

We live in a world where our competition is not between cities, or with other American states, but, rather, countries, a half a world away.

My friends, just as President Washington had a choice, so do we. For him, the easy choice was most clear – end the Whiskey Rebellion by repealing the Whiskey Tax. In fact, Thomas Jefferson, Washington's then Secretary of State, advised just that - satisfy the masses by taking the path of least resistance.

But to Washington, the future existence of the national government required that leaders have the ability to counter violent opposition to the law. He understood the basic premise that leaders, lead. They govern by conviction. And they unite people so that all may prosper.

On October 9, 1794, President Washington rode to Fort Cumberland in Western Maryland. For the first and only time in American history, the President of the United States commanded his troops into battle. He ordered a federalized state militia force drafted from the states of New Jersey, Virginia, and Maryland, to march on Western Pennsylvania and quell the insurrection. When this federal Army reached Pennsylvania and the site of the Rebellion, the rebels fled.

They never dreamt that the American leader would act in such a swift and decisive manner. The rebels underestimated Washington's conviction. They misunderstood his desire for national unity and prosperity.

George Washington grasped the unpopularity of his decision to impose a Whiskey Tax on the American people. He knew that his war torn, newly formed country was fragile and tenuous. But, through his unwavering leadership and his patriotic conviction, he prevented a Second American Revolution and secured a truly United States of America.

My friends and colleagues, let us learn from Washington's example. Let us ensure that our choices, choices made as elected leaders in the Great State of Maryland, are worthy of the legacy that we have inherited.

As we face our State's own Whiskey Rebellions, let us govern by our convictions, and let us unite all people so that all may prosper.

Thank you. And may God bless us all.