

George Washington Thinks Aloud

As the first president of this new nation, I am about to face the first real test of our government and new Constitution. There have been disagreements since our nation was founded. The Constitution was amended to address [concerns](#) that some citizens had about protecting individual rights. I assumed that this action would settle fundamental differences among Americans over the role of the government. However, now I face a dilemma in which my two most trusted advisors disagree. [Alexander Hamilton](#) is convinced we need a strong national government so that we may remain safe and prosperous. [Thomas Jefferson](#) believes that the liberty of the individual is the most important factor in making decisions about governmental actions. Although this began as an ideological disagreement, citizens are now defying national laws and endangering people's lives. My decision could determine what kind of nation we have or even whether our nation survives.

The disturbance began with the passage of Secretary Hamilton's [excise tax](#). This tax is part of Hamilton's [financial plan](#) to assist the new government in repaying its debts and establishing a stable economy. The [National Bank](#), which has also created great controversy, is part of that plan. Those Western Pennsylvanians who are refusing to pay the tax are comparing my administration to the British monarchy that we so recently defeated. Although these rebels fought courageously along side other Americans during the Revolution, their opposition to a strong central government did not seem to end when we defeated the British. Although I want to respect their firm belief in liberty, I have to keep the interests of the whole nation in mind. The rebels [began protesting](#) this tax in a manner that the administration could accept. However, when they began using [vigilante](#) tactics against the [tax collectors](#) and putting their lives in danger, the situation became serious. Now I must decide: At what point am I justified in using troops to curb their actions and force them to comply with national policy?

After fighting British tyranny myself, will I be a hypocrite to suppress others' liberties? After all, it was not that long ago that many of us found the [Stamp Act](#) terribly oppressive. Are my tax collectors any different from those who collected taxes on stamps? Just as we did in the Revolution, these Pennsylvanians believe their [cause is just](#). Is it ever justified to threaten civil order and safety?

I will have to make a decision. If I send in troops to put down the revolt, will it set a precedent for future administrations to attack any opposition and coerce the public into agreeing with all government policies? Is liberty itself endangered by the use of government force? On the other hand, if I do not put an end to the rebellion, will I open the door for every group to use force to disobey governmental authority and terrorize those who oppose them?