Paper One Style DBQ – Shays Rebellion

**Historical Context:**
Daniel Shays was a Patriot farmer who fought in the Continental Army against the British. When he returned home to western Massachusetts following the war, he found that property taxes imposed to pay state debts resulted in many farmers losing their property and being incarcerated in debtor’s prisons. Throughout the fall of 1786 and into 1787, Shays led armed rebellions against the debtor’s courts in protest.

**Source A:**

We have thought proper to inform you of some of the principal causes of the late risings of the people, and also of their present movement, viz.

1st: The present expensive mode of collecting debts, which by the reason of the great scarcity of cash, will be necessity fill our gaols with unhappy debtors, and thereby render a reputable body of people incapable of being serviceable either to themselves or the community.

2d. The monies raised by impost and excise being appropriated to discharge the interest of governmental securities, and not the foreign debt, when these securities are not subject to taxation.

3d. A suspension of the Writ of Habeas Corpus, by which those persons who have stepped forth to assert and maintain the rights of the people, are liable to be the taken, and conveyed even to the most distant part of the commonwealth, and thereby subject to an unjust punishment.

4th. The unlimited power granted to Justices of the Peace, Serriffs, Deputy-Serriffs and Constables, by the Riot Act, indemnifying them in the prosecution thereof, when perhaps wholly actuated from a principle of revenge, hatred and envy.

5th. be assured, that this body now at arms, dispite the idea of being initiated by British emissaries, which is to strenuously propagated by the enemies of our liberties: We also with the most proper and speedy measures may be taken to discharge both our foreign and domestic debt.

*Source: New Hampshire Gazette, Letter from Daniel Gray Pelham, Dec. 27, 1786*

**Source B:**

On Thursday late, a number of the militia of this county amounting to 1500 men, by order of Major General Shephard, marched to Springfield with a view, as we are informed, to defend the public Store at that place on behalf of the government.—It is said that the insurgents to the number of five or six hundred have assembled at West Springfield, and that Mr. Shays with his party, supposed to amount to about the same number, marched from Pelham towards Palmer.—We are also informed that Gen. Lincoln with his division arrived on Monday last, at Worcester, from which movements it is highly probable, events of importance speedily take place.

We are told, in the Worcester Magazine of the week before last, that several of the inhabitants of that county, who had opposed Government, took the oath of allegiance previous to the first of January, instant.
Source: Gazette Report on Militia and Regulator Movements, Northampton, January 24, 1787

Source C:
"In monarchies, mercy to rebels may be the highest magnanimity—In republics, it assumes a different character, and becomes a weakness. Insurrection in a monarchy effects but the extremities and limbs. In a republic, the disease is in the head; the disease therefore, must not only be removed, but the seeds of it rooted out for one or two returns may bring on a political dissolution. And it is not enough to hang two or three to terrify the rest—many must be cut off, because it is dangerous to society that they should live."

Source: Extract of a letter from a gentleman in one of the eastern counties to his friend, an officer in General Lincoln’s army. February 14, 1787

Source D:
... On prospect of the happy termination of this insurrection I sincerely congratulate you; hoping that good may result from the cloud of evils which threatened, not only the hemisphere of Massachusetts but by spreading its baneful influence, the tranquility of the Union. Surely Shays must be either a weak man, the dupe of some characters who are yet behind the curtain, or has been deceived by his followers. Or which may be more likely, he did not conceive that there was energy enough in the Government to bring matters to the crisis to which they have been pushed. It is to be hoped the General Court of that State concurred in the report of the Committee, that a rebellion did actually exist. This would be decisive, and the most likely means of putting the finishing stroke to the business.

... Our Affairs, generally, seem really, to be approaching to some awful crisis. God only knows what the result will be. It shall be my part to hope for the best; as to see this Country happy whilst I am gliding down the stream of life in tranquil retirement is so much the wish of my Soul, that nothing on this side Elysium can be placed in competition with it.

Source: The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799. John C. Fitzpatrick, Editor.—vol. 29 To Henry Knox from Mount Vernon, Feb. 25, 1787

Source E:
... The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions, that I wish it to be always kept alive. It will often be exercised when wrong, but better so than not to be exercised at all. I like a little rebellion now and then. It is like a storm in the atmosphere.

Source: Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Abigail Smith Adams, Feb. 22, 1787 re: Shays’ Rebellion

Source F:
... These disorders are evident marks of a defective government; indeed the thinking part of the people of this Country are now so well satisfied of this fact that most of the Legislatures have appointed, and the rest it is said will appoint, delegates to meet at Philadelphia on the second Monday in May next in a general Convention of the States to revise and correct the defects of the federal System. Congress have also recognised, and recommended the measure. What may be the result of this meeting is hardly within the scan of human wisdom to predict. It is considered however as the last essay to support the present form.
1. 
   a. What, according to Source A, are the “principle causes” of the uprisings?
   b. What, according to Source D, was Washington’s opinion of Shays?

2. Compare and contrast sources C and E in their views on rebellion.

3. With reference to the origins and purposes, assess the values and limitations of Source A and Source F for historians studying Shays’ Rebellion.

4. Using the sources and your own knowledge, explain why Shays’ Rebellion was significant in U.S. nation building.

**Bonus:** Evaluate sources D and F as justification for convening the Constitutional Convention in May 1787.