

Introduction

Alexander Hamilton continues to hold an unassailable place in the first rank of the American founders. To most minds, Hamilton belongs with that handful of men – such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, and Benjamin Franklin – whose contributions to establishing the American republic are most worthy of our remembrance and our study. Thanks to many fine biographies – and, more recently, a very popular Broadway musical – the general contours of Hamilton’s meteoric career are well known: orphan immigrant to the North American colonies, aide de camp to General Washington during the revolutionary war, framer of the Constitution, organizer and lead author of *The Federalist*, the nation’s first secretary of the treasury, leader of the Federalist Party, victim of Aaron Burr’s bullet in their infamous duel of 1804.

Hamilton’s contribution as a political thinker, however, is less appreciated than it should be. To be sure, there have been numerous scholarly studies – both books and articles – of his political thought. The output here, however, has not been as great as it might be, given the massive amount that Hamilton wrote about politics, and his almost invariable recurrence to fundamental principles whenever he examined a political question. Hamilton rarely addressed an issue that came to his attention without relating it to some enduring aspect of human nature, some fundamental political principle, some axiom or maxim of conduct – even as he also reminded his readers of the role of prudence in statesmanship by emphasizing that such principles and maxims often admitted of exceptions in particular circumstances.

It is with a view to fostering greater interest in and study of Hamilton’s political thought and statesmanship that we offer this two-volume collection of his political writings. Of course, we recognize with respect and gratitude earlier Hamilton collections. We believe this work, however, makes a unique contribution insofar as it is both more comprehensive than some of the earlier collections and more focused than others. On the one hand, there have been volumes that have offered either a relatively small number of Hamilton’s most famous works from across his lifetime or a handful from some specific period of his career. On the other hand, there are Joanne B. Freeman’s *Library of America* collection of Hamilton’s writings and Harold C. Syrett’s *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*. The former will remain useful for historians and a popular audience interested in Hamilton’s life, but for that very reason it includes a good deal of

Hamilton's personal correspondence and therefore necessarily has to exclude many writings of enduring political interest. The latter, a masterful achievement, will remain essential to Hamilton specialists, but it is so comprehensive – twenty-seven volumes – that it cannot offer the convenience of this work. And by including everything that Hamilton wrote, and much that was written to him, Syrett's *Hamilton Papers* present a large body of material that is not of direct interest to the student of politics. In contrast to these earlier works, then, we have striven to include *all* that is of enduring political interest but *only* what is of enduring political interest. By bringing these political writings together in a single two-volume work, and thus making them easier and more convenient of access, we hope to encourage more students of political theory and statesmanship to turn their attention to Hamilton's political thought.

We say we have *striven* to include all that is of enduring political interest because we admittedly have only imperfectly succeeded in doing so. Hamilton wrote so much about politics that it is impossible to include everything of interest while keeping the compilation to a reasonable and manageable size. Our primary principle of selection has been to include whatever touches on matters of principle – political, philosophic, legal, and constitutional – and its application to practice. We have therefore excluded the vast archive of Hamilton's writings in the daily conduct of administrative duties and in commenting to political allies on the horserace aspects of politics.

Our most notable omission, however, was not informed by this principle. It will be regarded by many as our most disappointing exclusion, but we believe it will appear, upon reflection, as most justifiable: we have not included Hamilton's contributions to *The Federalist*. These writings, on which a substantial portion of Hamilton's political fame will always rest, were left out of the present volume not because they are not of enduring political interest – obviously they are – but because they are so readily available in other convenient sources, including an edition by Cambridge University Press. By omitting them we were able to include a wealth of other less well known but very valuable material. The result is that whoever owns a copy of the present work as well as a copy of *The Federalist* will have everything he or she needs to begin the serious study of Hamilton's political thought.

The Political Writings of Alexander Hamilton is divided into two volumes, and each volume is further divided into parts that correspond to the main periods of Hamilton's political career. Volume I, the present volume, is broken into three parts that follow Hamilton's political thought through the ratification of the Constitution and the preparations for the launching of the new government it had called into being. Part 1: Young Revolutionary: 1769–1782 brings together Hamilton's writings on the struggle for American independence. Most prominent among these are his early pamphlets written in defense of the Continental Congress, such as the *Full Vindication of the Measures of the Congress*, *The Farmer Refuted*, and his two shorter works on the Quebec Act. Also included are his first letters under the name of Publius, in which he excoriated Samuel Chase for trying to profiteer on the buying and selling of supplies for the army, and his

Continentalist series, in which he first put before the public his criticisms of the government established by the Articles of Confederation. Part 1 also contains numerous other writings of Hamilton's – primarily letters – in which he commented on the challenges the nation faced in prosecuting the revolutionary war.

Part 2: *Budding Statesman: 1783–1787* presents writings connected to Hamilton's service in the Confederation Congress and the New York Assembly after he had left the Continental Army. In the former capacity, he had to grapple with the problem of Congress's failure to pay the nation's soldiers and the disobedience this fostered among the troops, including the possibility of mutiny against the Congress. During his time in Congress, he also took up themes with which he would become famously associated later in the founding period: the need to provide for the nation's war debt, the related need for the government of the Union to have an adequate ability to raise taxes, and, more generally, the need to reform the Articles of Confederation so as to establish a government equal to the needs of the Union. As a member of the New York Assembly, Hamilton labored to ensure that the state of New York would observe the provisions of the peace treaty with Great Britain, and in general would conduct itself as a good member of the Union, respectful and supportive of the general government. These writings and records present Hamilton's thinking on these questions, as well as his efforts to navigate the political and legal questions raised by the New York legislature's debate over recognizing the independence of Vermont.

Material relating to Hamilton's efforts to erect a new government in place of the Articles of Confederation is offered in Part 3: *Framer and Defender of the Constitution: 1787–1789*. Here we include Hamilton's most important proposals and interventions at the Constitutional Convention, as well as his speeches in defense of the Constitution at the New York Ratifying Convention. We have also included Hamilton's writings making the case to George Washington that the latter's service as president of the United States would be essential to the success of the new government, as well as his advice to Washington on the proper line to be taken regarding the dignity of the presidential office. Finally, we provide Hamilton's arguments that George Clinton's opposition to the new Constitution should have precluded him from being reelected as governor of New York.

We have made some light modifications to Hamilton's original texts in order to ease the task of the contemporary reader. Our most extensive intervention has been to modernize Hamilton's punctuation. He generally used far more commas and semicolons than we do today, although he also sometimes omitted them where we would find them necessary. Our aim here has always been to preserve his meaning while also making it more immediately evident to the modern reader. Put another way, we wanted to save the reader the mental effort involved in "translating" Hamilton's punctuation, so that the reader's mind could instead be occupied wholly with following the train of Hamilton's thought and appreciating the eloquence of his expression. We have also modernized Hamilton's spelling and capitalization, although we have left the latter

undisturbed when Hamilton capitalized a whole word with the intention of emphasizing it. Likewise, italics are retained for words that Hamilton himself chose to emphasize.

We have generally followed the editors of *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* in supplying the missing letters from obviously incomplete words and in supplying missing words. In order to make the text more readable, however, we have omitted the various brackets that they used. Where Hamilton supplied a later list of errata to a published work we have simply made the corrections in our text itself without noting them. We have filled out Hamilton's abbreviations in cases in which they would have been confusing. Occasional blank spaces left in the text are Hamilton's own.

Our preference has been to include whole works, but in some cases it has been necessary to omit passages that were not of sufficient interest but were taking up valuable space. We have generally indicated in the entry title when we have excerpted a work, although we have simply dropped irrelevant postscripts from some letters.

Footnotes are always Hamilton's own. Any editorial remarks we thought necessary to add have been placed in numbered endnotes.

We are grateful to Columbia University Press for allowing us to use *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* as the source for most of the documents included in our volumes. Readers interested in the contexts of and references in Hamilton's writings would do well to consult the editorial notes in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*.

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Alexander Hamilton , Edited by Carson Holloway , Bradford P. Wilson
Excerpt
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PART 1

Young Revolutionary:
1769–1782

Letter to Edward Stevens, November 11, 1769

Dear Edward¹

This just serves to acknowledge receipt of yours per Cap Lowndes which was delivered me Yesterday. The truth of Cap Lightbourn & Lowndes information is now verifyd by the Presence of your Father and Sister for whose safe arrival I Pray, and that they may convey that Satisfaction to your Soul that must naturally flow from the sight of Absent Friends in health, and shall for news this way refer you to them. As to what you say respecting your having soon the happiness of seeing us all, I wish, for an accomplishment of your hopes provided they are Concomitant with your welfare, otherwise not, tho doubt whether I shall be Present or not for to confess my weakness, Ned, my Ambition is prevalent that I contemn the grov'ling and condition of a Clerk or the like, to which my Fortune &c. condemns me and would willingly risk my life tho' not my Character to exalt my Station. Im confident, Ned that my Youth excludes me from any hopes of immediate Preferment nor do I desire it, but I mean to prepare the way for futurity. Im no Philosopher you see and may be jusly said to Build Castles in the Air. My Folly makes me ashamd and beg youll Conceal it, yet Neddy we have seen such Schemes successfull when the Projector is Constant I shall Conclude saying I wish there was a War.

I am Dr Edward Yours
 Alex Hamilton

PS I this moment receivd yours by William Smith and am pleasd to see you Give such Close Application to Study.

A Full Vindication of the Measures of the Congress, &c., December 15, 1774

Friends and Countrymen,

It was hardly to be expected that any man could be so presumptuous as openly to controvert the equity, wisdom, and authority of the measures adopted by the Congress: an assembly truly respectable on every account! Whether we consider the characters of the men who composed it, the number and dignity of their constituents, or the important ends for which they were appointed. But, however improbable such a degree of presumption might have seemed, we find there are some in whom it exists.² Attempts are daily making to diminish the influence of their decisions and prevent the salutary effects intended by them. The impotence of such insidious efforts is evident from the general indignation they are treated with; so that no material ill consequences can be dreaded from them. But lest they should have a tendency to mislead and prejudice the minds of a few, it cannot be deemed altogether useless to bestow some notice upon them.

And first let me ask these restless spirits, whence arises that violent antipathy they seem to entertain, not only to the natural rights of mankind, but to common sense and common modesty. That they are enemies to the natural rights of mankind is manifest, because they wish to see one part of their species enslaved by another. That they have an invincible aversion to common sense is apparent in many respects: They endeavor to persuade us that the absolute sovereignty of parliament does not imply our absolute slavery; that it is a Christian duty to submit to be plundered of all we have, merely because some of our fellow-subjects are wicked enough to require it of us; that slavery, so far from being a great evil, is a great blessing; and even that our contest with Britain is founded entirely upon the petty duty of 3 pence per pound on East India tea; whereas the whole world knows it is built upon this interesting question whether the inhabitants of Great Britain have a right to dispose of the lives and properties of the inhabitants of America or not? And lastly, that these men have discarded all pretension to common modesty is clear from hence, first, because they, in the plainest terms, call an august body of men, famed for their patriotism and abilities, fools or knaves, and of course the people whom they represented cannot be exempt from the same opprobrious appellations; and secondly, because they set themselves up as standards

of wisdom and probity by contradicting and censuring the public voice in favor of those men.

A little consideration will convince us that the Congress instead of having “ignorantly misunderstood, carelessly neglected, or basely betrayed the interests of the colonies,” have, on the contrary, devised and recommended the *only* effectual means to secure the freedom and establish the future prosperity of America upon a solid basis. If we are not free and happy hereafter, it must proceed from the want of integrity and resolution in executing what they have concerted, not from the temerity or impolicy of their determinations.

Before I proceed to confirm this assertion by the most obvious arguments, I will premise a few brief remarks. The only distinction between freedom and slavery consists in this: In the former state, a man is governed by the laws to which he has given his consent, either in person or by his representative: In the latter, he is governed by the will of another. In the one case his life and property are his own, in the other they depend upon the pleasure of a master. It is easy to discern which of these two states is preferable. No man in his senses can hesitate in choosing to be free rather than a slave.

That Americans are entitled to freedom is incontestable upon every rational principle. All men have one common original: they participate in one common nature and consequently have one common right. No reason can be assigned why one man should exercise any power or pre-eminence over his fellow creatures more than another, unless they have voluntarily vested him with it. Since then Americans have not by any act of theirs empowered the British Parliament to make laws for them, it follows they can have no just authority to do it.

Besides the clear voice of natural justice in this respect, the fundamental principles of the English constitution are in our favor. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that the idea of legislation or taxation when the subject is not represented is inconsistent with *that*. Nor is this all, our charters, the express conditions on which our progenitors relinquished their native countries and came to settle in this, preclude every claim of ruling and taxing us without our assent.

Every subterfuge that sophistry has been able to invent, to evade or obscure this truth, has been refuted by the most conclusive reasonings; so that we may pronounce it a matter of undeniable certainty that the pretensions of Parliament are contradictory to the law of nature, subversive of the British constitution, and destructive of the faith of the most solemn compacts.

What then is the subject of our controversy with the mother country? It is this, whether we shall preserve that security to our lives and properties which the law of nature, the genius of the British constitution, and our charters afford us; or whether we shall resign them into the hands of the British House of Commons, which is no more privileged to dispose of them than the Grand Mogul? What can actuate those men who labor to delude any of us into an opinion that the object of contention between the parent state and the colonies is only three pence duty upon tea? or that the commotions in

America originate in a plan, formed by some turbulent men, to erect it into a republican government? The parliament claims a right to tax us in all cases whatsoever: Its late acts are in virtue of that claim. How ridiculous then is it to affirm that we are quarrelling for the trifling sum of three pence a pound on tea, when it is evidently the principle against which we contend.

The design of electing members to represent us in general Congress was that the wisdom of America might be collected in devising the most proper and expedient means to repel this atrocious invasion of our rights. It has been accordingly done. Their decrees are binding upon all and demand a religious observance.

We did not, especially in this province, circumscribe them by any fixed boundary, and therefore as they cannot be said to have exceeded the limits of their authority, their act must be esteemed the act of their constituents. If it should be objected that they have not answered the end of their election, but have fallen upon an improper and ruinous mode of proceeding: I reply by asking, Who shall be the judge? Shall any individual oppose his private sentiment to the united counsels of men in whom America has reposed so high a confidence? The attempt must argue no small degree of arrogance and self-sufficiency.

Yet this attempt has been made, and it is become in some measure necessary to vindicate the conduct of this venerable assembly from the aspersions of men who are their adversaries only because they are foes to America.

When the political salvation of any community is depending, it is incumbent upon those who are set up as its guardians to embrace such measure as have justice, vigor, and a probability of success to recommend them: If instead of this they take those methods which are in themselves feeble, and little likely to succeed; and may, through a defect in vigor, involve the community in still greater danger; they may be justly considered as its betrayers. It is not enough in times of eminent peril to use only possible means of preservation: Justice and sound policy dictate the use of probable means.

The only scheme of opposition suggested by those who have been and are averse from a non-importation and non-exportation agreement is by remonstrance and petition. The authors and abettors of this scheme have never been able to *invent* a single argument to prove the likelihood of its succeeding. On the other hand, there are many standing facts and valid considerations against it.

In the infancy of the present dispute we had recourse to this method only. We addressed the throne in the most loyal and respectful manner, in a legislative capacity; but what was the consequence? Our address was treated with contempt and neglect. The first American Congress did the same and met with similar treatment. The total repeal of the Stamp Act and the partial repeal of the Revenue Acts took place, not because the complaints of America were deemed just and reasonable, but because these acts were found to militate against the commercial interests of Great Britain: This was the declared motive of the repeal.

These instances are sufficient for our purpose, but they derive greater validity and force from the following:

The legal assembly of Massachusetts Bay presented, not long since, a most humble, dutiful, and earnest petition to his Majesty, requesting the dismissal of a governor, highly odious to the people, and whose misrepresentations they regarded as one chief source of all their calamities. Did they succeed in their request? No, it was treated with the greatest indignity and stigmatized as “a seditious, vexatious, and scandalous libel.”

I know the men I have to deal with will acquiesce in this stigma. Will they also dare to calumniate the noble and spirited petition that came from the Mayor and Aldermen of the city of London? Will they venture to justify that unparalleled stride of power by which popery and arbitrary dominion were established in Canada? The citizens of London remonstrated against it; they signified its repugnancy to the principles of the revolution; but like ours, their complaints were unattended to. From thence we may learn how little dependence ought to be placed on this method of obtaining the redress of grievances.

There is less reason now than ever to expect deliverance in this way from the hand of oppression. The system of slavery, fabricated against America, cannot at this time be considered as the effect of inconsideration and rashness. It is the offspring of mature deliberation. It has been fostered by time and strengthened by every artifice human subtlety is capable of. After the claims of Parliament had lain dormant for awhile, they are again resumed and prosecuted with more than common ardor. The premier has advanced too far to recede with safety: He is deeply interested to execute his purpose, if possible: we know he has declared that he will never desist till he has brought America to his feet; and we may conclude nothing but necessity will induce him to abandon his aims. In common life, to retract an error even in the beginning is no easy task. Perseverance confirms us in it and rivets the difficulty; but in a public station, to have been in an error, and to have persisted in it when it is detected, ruins both reputation and fortune. To this we may add that disappointment and opposition inflame the minds of men and attach them still more to their mistakes.

What can we represent which has not already been represented? What petitions can we offer that have not already been offered? The rights of America and the injustice of parliamentary pretensions have been clearly and repeatedly stated, both in and out of Parliament. No new arguments can be framed to operate in our favor. Should we even resolve the errors of the ministry and parliament into the fallibility of human understanding, if they have not yet been convinced we have no prospect of being able to do it by anything further we can say. But if we impute their conduct to a wicked thirst of domination and disregard to justice, we have no hope of prevailing with them to alter it by expatiating on our rights and suing to their compassion for relief, especially since we have found, by various experiments, the inefficacy of such methods.