

Jefferson vs. Hamilton Redux

The debate over ObamaCare brings to mind an old dispute

By Alfred G. Cuzán : 13 Aug 2009

Today's divide over ObamaCare, bailouts and an exploding national debt brings to mind a defining conflict between two of America's founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Their feud--nicely recounted in John Ferling's [A Leap in the Dark: The Struggle to Create the American Republic](#)--has parallels with today's debate, but with an ironic twist.



Hamilton, our first Secretary of the Treasury, was a nationalist who had an expansive view of the powers granted to the nascent federal government under the newly-ratified Constitution. A favorite of President George Washington (in whose staff he served during the war of independence), Hamilton drafted legislation providing for federal assumption and funding of the debt incurred during the war, along with the taxes to finance it, and to establish a Bank of the United States. Less successfully, he promoted federal involvement in manufacturing enterprises and other economic activities (something that had to wait for 20th century presidents for implementation).

In these endeavors, Hamilton faced the bitter opposition of Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Though a landlord and slave-owner, ideologically Jefferson was something of a populist and states' rights advocate. Jefferson was deeply suspicious of centralized power, which he thought invariably did the bidding of moneyed elites at the expense of the common folk. Fearing that Hamilton wanted to craft the United States according to a British-style blueprint, or perhaps even reintroduce royalty to America, Jefferson set out to thwart Hamilton at every turn.

Jefferson warned that raising taxes to finance a growing national debt would spark resistance. But he went well beyond merely counseling the President and wrestling with Hamilton inside the cabinet. In combination with James Madison, Hamilton's erstwhile collaborator in the ratification struggle who had broken with his ally over the Bank of the United States, Jefferson took the lead in organizing a "republican" opposition to Hamilton's "royalists" or "monocrats." He corresponded with activists in several states, toured the back country with Madison in search of supporters, and gave a hack writer a job at the State Department, helping him found a newspaper with which to savage Hamilton (who relied on his own allied newspaper to punch back).

In these and related activities, Jefferson fanned the flames of a renewed anti-Federalist movement that was beginning to build independently. Inspired by the writings of Thomas Paine (who like Jefferson was a defender of the French Revolution then in full swing), a network of Democratic Societies sprung up across the country. Hamilton, who had initially viewed the revolutionaries with sympathy, turned against them as heads began to roll from the guillotine, and sought to persuade President Washington to tilt U.S. policy against France and in support of the British, who were soon at war with Paris. But Hamilton discerned that as well as pressuring Washington on foreign policy, the Democratic Societies constituted, as Ferling puts it, "the first evidence of grassroots discontent with the direction that he and his adherents were taking the new nation."

The conflict took a dangerous turn with the outbreak of the Whiskey Rebellion, an uprising against an excise tax on spirits that Hamilton had recommended. Public protests erupted first in Pennsylvania and were mostly peaceful, but not entirely; there were several mob attacks on tax collectors. Federalist forces struck back, painting the protesters as "a rabble" and "an ignorant herd" wedded to "worn out ideas." President Washington temporized, hoping that reducing the tax and emitting conciliatory messages would dissipate public anger. But official reports kept reaching him that characterized the protests, with more than a little exaggeration, "as a vast conspiracy of Anti-Federalist sympathizers bent on destroying the new national government."

When a mob attacked a respected revolutionary war veteran employed as a tax collector an exasperated Washington denounced those who had "sow[ed] the seeds of jealousy and distrust" in order to "destroy all confidence in" the federal government. Marching with Hamilton into western Pennsylvania at the head of a 13,000-strong militia, Washington quickly suppressed the rebellion, exerting but little actual force in the process and amnestying or pardoning those involved. But in his State of the Union address later that year, the president defended the military response to the insurrection, which he blamed on "certain self-created societies." Taking the argument a step further, Hamilton's Federalists insinuated a connection between the societies and Jefferson's party. Outraged, Jefferson denounced such charges as attempts to suppress freedom of speech and publication, and Madison "reminded Congress that in a republican system 'the censorial power is in the people over the government, and not in the government over the people'."

The parallels with today's discontents are striking. Only, in an ironic role

reversal, it is the party that honors Jefferson in an annual dinner that has adopted policy positions and rhetoric more in keeping with those of Hamilton's Federalists. Having retaken the Congress and the Presidency in the last two elections, Democrats are closer than ever to nationalizing health care, a goal they have pursued for more than half a century. Their proposed legislation includes provisions that many find objectionable, if not downright threatening. Additionally, they have voted for partial federal takeover of auto, banking, and insurance companies, and for trillion-dollar deficits.

These policies have met with increasing opposition from the electorate, registered in opinion polls and public protests. The demonstrators have adopted the tactics, symbols, and rhetoric of the American Revolution—holding anti-tax tea parties, hanging in effigy Congressmen favoring nationalized health care, and reciting passages from Paine's Common Sense and the Declaration of Independence.

Their criticism of the Democratic proposals has resonated among the reading public. According to *The New York Times*, currently the top-three best selling hard-cover books about politics are:

- Culture of Corruption by Michelle Malkin ("President Obama and his team of tax cheats, petty crooks, influence peddlers and Wall Street cronies")
- Liberty and Tyranny, by Mark R. Levin ("A conservative manifesto from a talk-show host and president of Landmark Legal Foundation")
- Catastrophe, by Dick Morris and Eileen McGann ("Stopping President Obama before he transforms America into a socialist state and destroys the health care system").

Thus, just as Jefferson accused Hamilton of trying to turn the United States into a monarchy, so as the *Times'* blurb of Catastrophe indicates, President Obama's critics charge him with trying to impose socialism in America.

According to polls the protests have struck a sympathetic chord among the electorate, but the Democrats, sounding more like yesteryear's "monocrats," have attacked the dissenters as "well-funded angry mobs" out to "destroy President Obama and stop the change Americans voted overwhelmingly in November" (Democratic National Committee). They've called them "Astroturf" demonstrators "carrying Swastikas" (House Speaker Nancy Pelosi), and "Brooks Brothers" attack brigades financed by "the bad guys" of the insurance industry (long-time aide to former Democratic House Speaker Tip O'Neill turned Hardball Host Chris Matthews). Furthermore, the White House has invited its supporters to forward them any "fishy" e-mails or websites criticizing the Democrats' health care bills. This prompted Texas Republican U.S. Senator John Cornyn, among others, to charge the White House with attempting to chill debate by compiling a Nixon-style "enemies' list."

It is to be hoped that the parallels will stop there, at the rhetorical level, and that no modern-day equivalent of the Whiskey Rebellion will ensue. On both sides of the debate, cooler heads speaking in softer tones need to prevail. But because they control the government, the burden to conciliate and compromise

falls on President Obama and his party. For, as John Locke put it in The Second Treatise on Government, a work Jefferson echoed in the Declaration of Independence, it is "as impossible for a governor, if he really means the good of his people, and the preservation of them and their law together, not to make them see and feel it, as it is for the father of a family not to let his children see he loves and takes care of them."