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Alexander Hamilton, Classical Models and Ideals, and the Deadlocked Presidential Election of 1800

Robert T. Joseph

As Ron Chernow has noted, "Few figures in American history have aroused such visceral love or loathing as Alexander Hamilton." An autodidact of the first order, Hamilton was quite familiar with and influenced by a number of classical Greek and Roman authors. Between his time at Elizabethtown Academy, a New Jersey preparatory school, and King's College (now Columbia University), Hamilton became familiar with Virgil, Cicero, Plutarch, Demosthenes and Aristotle, among others. This familiarity is shown through his writing, which often includes classical references, themes, and values.

This paper focuses on Hamilton's explicit or implicit use of classical models and anti-models, in the context of a particularly fascinating episode in his life: his surprising decision to advocate the election of detested political enemy Thomas Jefferson over Aaron Burr when the House of Representatives decided in 1801 who would succeed John Adams as President. Hamilton's anxiety over the prospect of a Burr presidency was no doubt motivated by the utterly distasteful prospect that Burr (against whom he had fought in the 1800 campaign) would not only hold the highest office in the national government, but would also be at the head of the nascent Federalist "party," in which Hamilton played such a prominent role. However, his apprehension was also grounded in elements of his classically-influenced political philosophy, including his view that a growing and vibrant United States depended on a strong national government governed by a virtuous and energetic executive and guided by the common good. He was convinced that the election of Burr would run directly counter to these principles. In exhorting Federalists to vote for Jefferson rather than Burr, Hamilton drew on classically-infused political principles, likening Burr to Catiline, the founders' classical Roman rogue.

Classical Influences on Alexander Hamilton’s Vision of the Virtuous, Energetic, and Active Chief Executive

Hamilton on the Role of Government and the American Constitution
The fabric of Hamilton’s thought was woven with threads of different intellectual and moral systems. Hamilton was convinced by thinkers
s such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Bernard Mandeville (and by his own experience) that self-interest motivated men and that government must ground the public good in that motivation. In Federalist No. 6 he reminds readers that “men are ambitious, vindictive, and rapacious.” It was, he said, “a principle of human nature” that political institutions must be founded on “men’s interests.” And yet he also remarked that a wise legislator would channel and direct these interests to the public good.

Hamilton’s beliefs about the relationship between self-interest and the public good did not lead him to the sharply limited government and predominately agrarian society desired by Jefferson. Instead, Hamilton’s political thinking was grounded in classical “moral and positive assumptions about the role of government.” He believed that classical values of obligation, community, moral purpose, as well as national leadership, could be preserved in a non-agrarian, commercially-oriented economy. With passionate intensity, he attempted to guide and organize a modern economy into a state preserving a classical purpose and unity.

Hamilton’s view of the appropriate structure for the American republic was shaped by a mixed government perspective. Jottings from which he spoke at the Constitutional Convention refer to “Aristotle-Cicero-Montesquieu-Neckar”, before cryptically noting that government ought to be in the hands of both the “few” and the “many,” with their “separated interests” mutually “checked” by a monarchical element. The new American experiment needed a strong and vigorous national government to provide the requisite stability and order for securing liberty’s blessings. These objectives could only be accomplished, he argued at the Convention, with the establishment of a permanent Senate and an Executive, with lifetime tenure, holding an absolute veto power over legislation. Hamilton also advocated that all state governors be appointed by the federal government.

The proposed Constitution reflected much of the spirit of Hamilton’s philosophy, particularly in clearly subordinating the states to the federal government. The Constitution’s democratic features (such as periodic election of the President and senators) did trouble Hamilton, so that in his last speech to the Convention he confessed that “no man’s ideas were more remote from the plan than [mine] were known to be.” He nonetheless signed and vigorously campaigned for it. It was the best hope for an effective union, and, he hoped, its features might nonetheless provide sufficient flexibility with which its rulers could harness or restrain excessively democratic forces already exerting themselves at the state and local levels.

Hamilton believed that an energetic and vigorous chief magistrate should lead the young national government in the adventure of creating and maintaining a great society. When reading Plutarch as a young officer, he noted that “in the origins of the great states of antiquity there appeared first powerful founders...and then the great lawgivers.” Years later, in Federalist No. 70, Hamilton evoked these themes when he wrote that “energy” in the executive is “essential” for protecting the nation against foreign attacks, overseeing the steady administration of laws, protecting property against “irregular and high-handed” insurrections, and securing liberty against “the assaults of ambition, of faction, of anarchy.”

**Hamilton: Virtue and the Chief Executive**

Inherent in an executive with expansive powers, many in the founding era feared, was unscrupulous, tyrannical rule. Constitutional constraints on presidential power (with classical models) and virtuous leaders were meant to buttress against tyranny. To be sure, Hamilton bore no illusions about the perfectibility of human nature. In Federalist No. 6 he criticized Pericles for actions taken for private motives as examples of “national tranquility” being “sacrificed to personal advantage, or personal gratification.” Nonetheless, he was “ardently Classical” in his conviction that “some men possessed the wisdom, honor, and patriotism to make a good
(nonpartisan) government possible. . . .” It is quite probable that Hamilton's views on the virtuous statesman were influenced by Cicero, including the Roman statesman's work On Duties, which describes practical ethics with an emphasis on social and political morality. Cicero writes that a statesman should "serve the common advantage," and he is critical of those seeking to grab as much wealth as possible. He adds that "to use public affairs for one's profit is not only dishonourable, but criminal and wicked too."

Moreover, from biographical sources, the man's likely educational curricula, and language found in his writings, we can with some confidence conclude that Hamilton was familiar with major portions of Aristotle's work and was aware of Aristotle's three qualifications "required of those who are to fill the highest offices: (1) first of all, loyalty to the established constitution, (2) great administrative capacity, and (3) virtue and justice of the kind proper to the particular form of government." Hamilton also expressed admiration for aristocrats distinguished by their pursuit of justice and their unwillingness to "flatter the follies of the people." He envisioned these "aristocratic" qualities in the president, the Constitution's chief magistrate, noting in Federalist No. 71 that, while the "deliberate sense of the community should govern the conduct" of the leaders to whom it entrusts the management of affairs, there may well be situations where the "guardians" of the people's interests may need to "withstand the temporary delusion" of the people, in order to give them time and opportunity for more "cool and sedate reflection." In Federalist No. 68, Hamilton extols the advantages of the process of selecting a president through the system of an electoral college. This procedure, he argues, "affords a moral certainty that the office of president will seldom fall to the lot of any man who is not in an eminent degree endowed with the requisite qualifications."

It was through this system of beliefs, molded by classical influences, that Hamilton filtered Aaron Burr's conduct and evaluated his character.

**Hamilton Opposes Burr, The Antithesis Of His Idea of the Virtuous Chief Executive**

The Election of 1800: A Snapshot

Bitterly contested, and emotionally charged, the election of 1800 was a bruising rematch of the 1796 bout between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson (which Adams had won by a narrow margin). Wary and often distressed by the flexing of federal powers during the Washington and Adams administrations, many rural, southern Democratic-Republicans supported Jefferson. They were inclined "to embrace an image of a rural agrarian republic." The opposing Federalists, supported by Hamilton, believed that the fortunes of the young republic depended on continuing commercial and industrial growth, fostered by an energetic national government.

The Federalists were divided, however, by the time of the election of 1800 and the end of Adams' term, in no small part due to the marked differences between Hamilton and his followers and Adams on foreign policy toward France. Hamilton's differences with Adams "cost Adams the full support of the party and thus election." Still, the election was close. New York provided Jefferson his slender victory margin, largely due to the efforts of Aaron Burr. Because of his contributions to the Republican cause, Burr had been given a spot on the ballot with Jefferson.

The Republican victory came, however, with a stunning twist: when the ballots were counted in the Electoral College, there was a tie in votes (seventy-three votes apiece) between Jefferson and Burr. At the time, the Constitution gave each elector two votes, with the person receiving a majority becoming president and the person with the second greatest number becoming vice president. Republican electors created the tie by giving one vote to Jefferson and the other...
to Burr. The lame-duck House of Representatives (then dominated by Federalists) would now have the responsibility of deciding who would be president and vice president. Each of the sixteen states was allowed a single vote for president, as determined by the majority of its delegation. The ultimate winner would need a simple majority of nine states voting for him.

It was evident that the American electorate intended to choose Jefferson as president. Burr, however, while seeming to profess loyalty to Jefferson, had not expressed an unambiguous willingness to defer to Jefferson, e.g., by declaring that he would refuse to accept the presidency if voting in the House led to his selection. Rumors were afoot of Federalist support in the House for Burr. The emerging Federalist strategy, it was reported in some quarters, was either to elect Burr in the House and co-opt him for their own uses, or, failing that, to thwart the election of any president and seize federal power outright. In the end, on the thirty-sixth ballot, Jefferson became president by a margin of ten states to four with some Federalists abstaining.

Hamilton Urges Federalist Electors to Vote For Jefferson

In December 1800, Hamilton was privy to rumors that Federalists in Congress might prefer Burr to Jefferson and barraged Federalists with letters attacking Burr and urging them to cast ballots for Jefferson. As far as Hamilton was concerned the survival of the American nation was at peril. "There is no circumstance which has occurred in the course of our political affairs that has given me so much pain as the idea that Mr. Burr might be elevated to the Presidency by the means of the Federalists." Hamilton told Oliver Wolcott, Jr. If the Federalist party elected Burr, it would be exposed "to the disgrace of a defeat in an attempt to elevate to the first place in the government one of the worse men in the community." "The appointment of Burr as president would disgrace our country abroad," he informed Theodore Sedgwick. "No agreement with him could be relied upon."140

Hamilton’s strongly held views about Burr as President were shaped by approximately fifteen years of personal, professional, and political contacts. The son of a prominent Presbyterian minister and grandson of Jonathan Edwards, Burr served with distinction in the Continental Army and, after the war, practiced law in New York and entered politics. Both highly proficient New York lawyers, Hamilton and Burr often socialized with one another.141 The first wedge of hostility between them can be traced to 1789, when Burr and Hamilton campaigned together for Robert Yates, candidate for New York governor, yet Burr accepted the position of attorney general when Yates’s opponent, George Clinton, won the election. In 1791, Burr defeated Philip Schuyler, Hamilton’s father-in-law, in the race for the United States Senate and, as a Senator, consistently sided with those opposed to Hamilton’s financial agenda and Washington’s foreign policy.142 Burr also helped decide (as a referee of sorts) a disputed (and probably rigged) gubernatorial election in New York, in favor of Clinton and against Hamilton’s candidate—after Burr had earlier unsuccessfully tried to put together a coalition of disgruntled Clintonians and Federalists to support himself for governor against Clinton.

Hamilton subsequently opposed Burr’s candidacy for the vice-presidency in 1792, and two years later blocked his nomination as American minister to France.143 Burr retired from the Senate in 1797. The following year, he returned to the New York Assembly, where his conduct subjected him to charges that he had abused the public trust for his personal benefit, leading a defeat of the Republicans in the 1799 state election, with Burr turned out of office.144

Down, but not out, Burr returned to help the Republicans capture the presidency in 1800, employing his political organizational skills in New York and other states as well. He helped the Republicans win control of the State Assembly, delivering New York’s electoral college vote to the Republican side. For these efforts he was considered the presumptive vice president.
Hamilton: The Case Against Burr

Hamilton's most fully detailed and organized arguments attacking Burr are found in his January 4, 1801 letter (and enclosure) to John Rutledge, Jr. They were informed, we suggest, by the classical lessons he had learned so well, explicitly expressed in his comparison of Burr to Catiline.

First, as Hamilton saw it, Burr's personal character, private debts, and lack of political principles made him susceptible to conducting his own personal needs at the expense of the country. Thus, Hamilton labels Burr a "profligate" and "voluptuary in the extreme, with uncommon habits of expense"; claims he was "suspected on strong grounds of having corruptly served the views of the Holland Company, in the capacity of a member of our legislature"; and refers to Burr's "several breaches of probity in his pecuniary transactions." Moreover, Burr was "without a doubt insolvent for a large deficit." Given his personal habits and the extent of his financial precariousness, Burr as president would resort to "unworthy expedients"—such as bargains with foreign powers, combinations with public agents from which he might personally gain, or probably even war. Corruption of this scale, only satisfying Burr's private ambition and interests and flouting the public interest, bears no resemblance to the virtuous conduct of the Greek and Roman founders about whom Hamilton read in Plutarch.

Second, Burr's record did not justify his ascension to the presidency. Hamilton denigrated Burr's military record in the Revolutionary War, further charging that in civil life Burr "has never projected nor aided in producing a single measure of important public utility." In fact, Hamilton argues, Burr constantly sided with those opposed to "federal measures before and since" the ratification of the Constitution and "has been uniformly the opposer of the Federal Administration." Burr's record, as Hamilton saw it, was wholly inconsistent with the "loyalty to the constitution" and "great administrative capacity" that Aristotle believed are characteristics required of those holding high office. And how could he be a wise lawgiver needed by the young United States, like Lycurgus and Numa Pompilius had been for Sparta and Rome?

Third, and perhaps most damning, "[n]o mortal can tell what [Burr's] political principles are" and "[h]e has talked all around the compass." Hamilton added:

The truth seems to be that he has no plan but that of getting power by any means and keeping it by all means. It is probable that if he has any theory 'tis that of simple despotism.

One cannot imagine Cicero commending a statesman without any principle, and Aristotle would certainly not conclude that a man with "no plan but that of getting power by any means" possesses the "virtue and justice" proper to the presidency. Not surprisingly, Hamilton basically concludes that Burr would be a despotic tyrant.

Fourth, Burr's objective was the "establishment of Supreme Power in his own person." Possessing "an irregular and inordinate ambition," and "[c]old and collected by nature and habit," he "never loses sight of his object and scruples no means of accomplishing it." This description of Burr resonates with that of the leader, denounced by Cicero in On Duties, with a "greed" to be king and master of the people, "approving the death of laws and liberty, and counting... oppression—a foul and hateful thing—as something glorious." Unlike other Federalists, Hamilton did not think Burr would be a harmless, lackadaisical president. "He is sanguine enough to hope everything, daring enough to attempt everything, wicked enough to scruple nothing," Hamilton told Gouverneur Morris.

Burr: The Catiline of America

The founders detested certain classical figures, such as Sulla, Marc Antony, and Julius Caesar, whose corruption and dishonorable conduct gave rise to the imposition of tyrannical rule in Rome and the destruction of liberty. Sensitive to charges that the strong national government advocated by him would result in tyranny, Hamilton countered in Federalist No. 1 that
“dangerous liberty more often lurks behind the
specious mask of zeal for the people, than under
the forbidding appearances of zeal for the firm-
ness and efficiency of government.”

In Hamilton’s view, Lucius Sergius Catilina
(Catiline) fell into this category. Catiline, from
whose revolutionary machinations Cicero saved
(or believed he saved) the Roman republic in 63
B.C., was frequently used as an anti-model in the
political debates and controversies where one
side or another claimed to be the true champion
of liberty and enemy of tyranny. Hamilton’s cor-
respondence attacking Burr after the 1800 elec-
tion often refers to Catiline. He concludes his
December 16, 1800 letter to Oliver Wolcott, Jr.
with the assertion that Burr “is truly the Catiline
of America.”56 Catiline is later mentioned in a
letter to James Bayard, where Hamilton pleads
with Bayard that it is preferable for the Repub-
lican “antifederalists” to be answerable for the
“elevation of an exceptionable man” (i.e., Jeff-
erson) than for the Federalists to be “answerable
for a man who on all hands is acknowledged to
be a complete Catiline [sic] in his practice and
principles (i.e., Burr).”57

In doing so, Hamilton was comparing Burr’s
capacity to weaken or destroy the young Amer-
ican republic with Catiline’s attempt to destroy
Roman republican government. Catiline was a
corrupt, debt-ridden aristocrat. Hamilton
charged Burr with personal profligacy, indebted-
ness, and breaches of probity. As Plutarch
notes, Catiline was chosen as “captain” by “pro-
fligate citizens”; a “great part of the young men
of the city were corrupted by him.”58 In his let-
ter to Rutledge, Hamilton picks up on these ver-
words, declaring that “like Catiline, [Burr] is in-
defatigable in courting the young and the proflig-
ate,” because “he knows well the weak sides of
human nature, and takes care to play in with the
passions of all with whom he has intercourse.”59

Further supporting Hamilton’s assessment
of the danger to the Constitution from a Burr
presidency, as well as his comparison of Burr to
Catiline, was a disturbing conversation he had
with Burr in 1798, when Hamilton was inspector
general of the army. “General, you are now at
the head of the army,” Burr had told Hamilton.
“You are a man of the first talents and of vast
influence. Our constitution is a miserable paper
machine. You have it in your power to demolish
it and give us a proper one and you owe it to
your friends and the country to do it.” To which
Hamilton had replied, “Why Col. Burr, in the
first place, the little army I command is totally
inadequate to the object you mention. And in the
second place, if the army was adequate, I am
much too troubled with that thing called moral-
ity to make the attempt.” Reverting to French,
Burr pooh-poohed this timidity: “General, all
things are moral to great souls!”510

Hamilton: The Case For Jefferson Over Burr

In early January 1801, Hamilton heard that
Federalist momentum was growing for Burr. Later
it was reported that the Federalists were decid-
edly tipped in favor of Burr over Jefferson. Faced
with this terrifying nightmare of “Catiline’s”
election, Hamilton was compelled to come up
with as candid, balanced, and nuanced appraisal
of Jefferson as he was capable. In doing so, he
needed to rehabilitate in some way the portrait
of Jefferson painted by Federalists during the
1800 campaign: a demagogue with a Jacobin
mindset, propagating destructive ideologies.511

Hamilton wrote Oliver Wolcott that Jefferson
“is by far not so dangerous a man and he has
pretensions to character.” He also thought that
Jefferson was much more talented than the over-
rated Burr; the latter was “far more cunning than
wise, far more dexterous than able. In my opin-
ion, he is inferior in real ability to Jefferson.”512
Jefferson’s “pretensions to character” and signif-
ificant “talent” apparently indicated to Hamilton
at least a modicum of virtue. In a mid-December
1800 letter to Wolcott, Hamilton urged that the
Federalists should try to make a deal with Jef-
ferson: let him keep the National Bank and the
navy, and maintain neutrality, and they would
acquiesce in his election.513 Apparently, Ham-
ilton believed that one could be a principled
virtuous statesman, and still compromise with
opponents in at least some fashion, without

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losing any claim to virtue. In the end, if forced to choose, and however distasteful it might be, Hamilton preferred Jefferson with the wrong principles to Burr without any.\textsuperscript{104}

**Conclusion**

The picture painted of Burr by Hamilton (and others) has been disputed or questioned by some recent historians.\textsuperscript{105} They claim that Burr's political gambits were skillful anticipations of modern politics and campaigning and that Burr's conduct was not much more "voluptuary" and "profligate" than that of Hamilton himself.\textsuperscript{106} And, of course, one might argue that the concept of disinterested, virtuous leadership devoted to the common good is, if not fanciful, difficult to define, interpret, and apply in the world of practical politics. Whatever the merits of these views, the evidence is fairly compelling that Hamilton was genuinely concerned that fellow Federalists would elect to the highest office a highly opportunistic man, with a very strong propensity to self-serving conduct.

Cognizant of the different vying interests in modern societies, Hamilton believed it important that government leadership at the highest levels be virtuous and attempt to stand above and help arbitrate partial interests to promote the common good. These perspectives, if not wholly formed by classical influences and models, were certainly influenced by them. Hamilton also believed that the process for electing the president would result in virtuous chief magistrates, yet election of Burr would be pretty solid evidence to the contrary. Burr was bright, liberally educated, talented, and cosmopolitan, the type of person that many founders expected to participate in the new government and to transcend localism and special interest in positions of national leadership. Nonetheless, it appeared to Hamilton that Burr's character and history of political gamesmanship and trickery, largely to serve his own personal interests and ambition, were well outside of and beyond the concept of disinterested republican leadership. Instead, Burr "was right down in the pits with all the narrow, self-seeking factions and interests."\textsuperscript{107}

What many Federalists found attractive about Burr was repulsive to Hamilton. Burr's selfish ambition and proclivity to promote whatever would get him reelected, those Federalists believed, would prevent him from dismantling the Federalists' national and commercial systems, from which he personally benefited. For Hamilton, however, this reputation for "selfishness" was the problem. Burr may have been a harbinger of the pragmatism of many politicians, but for Hamilton what mattered, particularly in this novel but fragile Constitution, was the kind of virtuous character associated with classical republicanism and aimed at the public good.\textsuperscript{108}

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Alexander Hamilton, Classical Models and Ideals, and the Deadlocked Presidential Election of 1800


Ibid., 193.

Ibid., 194-5.


See Federalist No. 26.

Ketcham, 195.


Ketcham, 189.


Cicero, On Duties, I,31 and II.77.


Sharp, 3.


Ibid.

Sharp, The Deadlocked Election of 1800, 3.


Chernow, 192-3, 169.


See Ellis, American Sphinx, 41-2 and Chernow, 275-6, 421-2.

"Aaron Burr, 3rd Vice President (1801-1805)."