

American Machiavelli

Alexander Hamilton and the Origins
of U.S. Foreign Policy

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	page ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction	I
PART I THE COMING OF NECESSITY	
1. From Providence into Fortune, 1757 (?)–1781	11
2. Prepared To Be Not Good, 1781–1788	26
PART II BATTLE LINES ARE DRAWN	
3. At Washington’s Side Again, 1789	43
4. Hamilton versus the Virginians, 1789–1791	55
5. The Nootka Sound Crisis, Part One: The Morris Mission	65
6. Nootka Sound, Part Two: The View from New York	74
7. Liaisons Dangereuses, 1791–1792	88
PART III SEIZING THE HELM	
8. The Birth of American Neutrality, February–May 1793	103
9. “A Most Distressing Dilemma,” May–December 1793	115
10. Hamilton and the Crisis of 1794	127
11. The Jay Treaty	140
PART IV INFORMAL ADVISER TO THE PRINCE	
12. Return to Not-So-Private Life, 1794–1795	153
13. “Camillus” into the Breach	163
14. A High-Stakes Game: Washington’s Farewell Address, 1796	171
15. Transition to the New Regime, 1796–1797	180

PART V A PRINCE IN HIS OWN RIGHT?	
16. Hamilton and Adams: The Background	191
17. Hamilton's "Grand Plan"	205
18. Hamilton and His Army, Part One, 1797–1798	213
19. Hamilton and His Army, Part Two, 1798–1799	224
20. Killing Two Birds with One Stone, 1799	237
PART VI THE LESSER OF EVILS	
21. 1800 and After	251
22. From Fortune into Providence	265
Conclusion: Hamilton Then and Now	271
<i>Notes</i>	277
<i>Bibliography</i>	329
<i>Index</i>	337

From Providence into Fortune, 1757 (?)–1781

Introduction

In September 1494, King Charles VIII of France invaded Italy with an army of 18,000 men and a horse-drawn siege train of at least forty pieces of artillery. Charles's aim was to enforce his claim to the throne of the Kingdom of Naples by ousting its Aragonese holder. At the height of their artistic splendor but tragically divided, the Italian states became the objects of a struggle between France and Spain lasting more than thirty years. Unable to ensure the safety and dignity of Florence, the Medici family regime, which had ruled the city for sixty years, collapsed in November 1494. In its place, the Florentines refounded their republic. Its cumbersome institutions included the Great Council, newly enfranchising about 3,000 citizens (of a total of some 60,000), the Major Council, composed of about 1,000 citizens, ages twenty-nine or older, the Council of Eighty, limited to men over forty, the *signoria*, or rotating ten-man executive headed by a *gonfaloniere*, or standard-bearer, plus a number of specialized commissions.¹

In May 1498, twenty-nine-year-old Niccolò Machiavelli was appointed secretary and head of the Second Chancery, a bureau dealing with the city's outlying dominions (they included most of the present-day Region of Tuscany, except for the provinces of Lucca, Siena, and Grosseto). He was also made secretary of "The Ten of Liberty and Peace," a commission overseeing military and diplomatic affairs. On behalf of "The Ten," Machiavelli would mount his horse innumerable times, gallop along the rough roads of Renaissance Europe, and parley with the mighty of his day. But despite his energy and brilliance, Machiavelli faced a built-in ceiling to his career. He sprang from a none-too-prosperous and (according to rumor) illegitimate branch of a distinguished family. His father, Bernardo, owed a debt of back taxes to the city government and thus Machiavelli was excluded from high political office. This was something that the city's haughty patriciate (the so-called

ottimati, who looked with suspicion on the republic's policies) did not let him forget.²

Machiavelli did not devise a philosophical system. His political notions were the trenchantly stated lessons of his personal experience, and reinforced by the study of history, rather than precisely defined concepts. "Things human being in constant motion," an idea traceable to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, lay at the heart of his worldview. So did the assumption that human nature itself is unchangeable over time. After a revolt against Florentine rule in Arezzo and the surrounding Valdichiana (south of Florence) in 1502, he reminded his superiors that men "have always had the same passions; there were always those who serve and those who command, and those who serve against their will, and those who serve willingly." History was a treasure house of such insights for those who bothered to look for them. He would make the same point about passions in his *Discourses*, written largely after the republic's collapse and his own forced retirement in 1512.³

What were those inescapable driving passions? Fundamentally, they were to possess what belonged to others in a world of finite resources and constant flux. History and everyday life demonstrated that "the nature of men is ambitious and suspicious." Human beings were restless, perpetually dissatisfied creatures whose desires outstripped their powers of acquisition. Enmities developed, wars erupted, and states rose and fell, because some men always wanted more than they had, whereas others feared losing what they had acquired.⁴

Machiavelli grasped from an early age that human affairs were constantly subject to unreason, chance, and contingency. The nonrational, unexplainable forces at work in the world he and his contemporaries often referred to as *fortuna* or fortune. He did not operate on (and did not pay hypocritical lip service to) the assumption that God ruled the world, with the implication that people must passively accept their destinies. Although early Christian theology had attempted to consign the old Roman Goddess of Fortune to oblivion, replacing her with Divine Providence, Machiavelli and fellow Italian humanists reversed the transformation by reviving the ancient goddess. As he famously put it, "fortune is a woman," and as such she is susceptible to being possessed and controlled. On another occasion he compared fortune to "one of those ruinous rivers" that, when flooded, might destroy everything in its path. In quieter times men must build barriers to channel the torrent and contain its destructive potential. Human beings, by playing their cards well and by possessing *virtù*, might make their own luck to a degree.⁵

Together with *fortuna*, *virtù* was a basic notion in Machiavelli's outlook. The term is not to be confused with "virtue" in the classical or Christian sense of moral goodness or moderation. It is the Italian version of the Latin *virtus*, which in turn derives from *vir* or *man*. *Virtù* is something that can

be found and systematically developed in both states and individuals. That much Machiavelli scholars agree on, though little else. For one, it is “the fundamental quality of man which enables him to achieve great works and deeds.” For another, it is something baser and purely utilitarian, that which enables self-aggrandizement, which, for Machiavelli, was the one measure of success.⁶ *Virtù* is best understood as encompassing both the vital energy and the manly qualities necessary for success in war and politics, including discipline, courage, guile, and skill at arms. It is both the will to power and the means by which to acquire and maintain it. As embodied in a polity, *virtù* is dedication to the collective good as opposed to the interests of some faction or private individual. A precondition and generator of *virtù* is *necessità* or necessity. Machiavelli writes at one point, “necessity makes *virtù*.” But necessity does not guarantee effective action. A city “never agrees to a new law concerning a new order . . . unless it is shown by necessity that it must be done; and since this necessity cannot come without danger, the republic may easily be ruined before it is led to perfect its laws.”⁷

In the final analysis, *virtù* has something in common with other elusive concepts: It is hard to define exactly, but one usually knows it when one sees it. Alexander Hamilton is a case in point.

Nevis, St. Croix, and New York

The details are sketchy and the evidence is open to interpretation, but the Hamilton family story is without doubt an exemplary tale of the West Indies: its central themes are the weakness of the flesh and sudden death. The islands of Alexander’s boyhood were an exotic paradise for a planter elite fabled for its hedonism and extravagance. They were also a volatile and vulnerable world, subject to practically every known calamity: war, epidemic, drought, deadly storms, volcanic eruptions, slave revolts, and economic boom and bust. During the War of the Austrian Succession in the 1740s, and fifteen years later during the Seven Year’s War, the leeward (including Nevis) and windward islands were major prizes in the ongoing struggle between France and Britain. In 1759, a British expedition seized the rich sugar-, coffee-, cocoa-, and cotton-producing islands of Guadaloupe and Marie-Galante. In 1762, the British added Martinique, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Grenada to their list of acquisitions.⁸

Hamilton’s maternal grandparents, the physician and planter John Faucett and his wife, lost five of seven children to disease, after which their marriage fell apart. Their daughter Rachel Faucett, Hamilton’s mother, married at sixteen, abandoned her indebted husband and young son, and bore two children out of wedlock – Alexander and an older brother – by James Hamilton, a lackadaisical merchant with whom she cohabited for ten years. In February 1768, three years after separating from the elder Hamilton, she died of a tropical fever at age thirty-two.

The family of Rachel Faucett's half-sister, Ann Lytton, and her husband, James Lytton, a successful planter, also disintegrated. One daughter's husband died in poverty, and the daughter and a second husband soon followed suit. Another daughter's husband went bankrupt, while one of the sons ran off with slaves belonging to his first wife's estate. Ann Lytton died in 1767, a year before Rachel. James Lytton died in 1769. Their son, Peter, legal guardian of the orphans Alexander and James Hamilton, committed suicide after his investments went bad, also in 1769. James Lytton's surviving children litigated for years over his estate.⁹

The mid-eighteenth-century West Indies may not invite comparisons to early sixteenth-century Italy, but it is easy to see why Hamilton's grasp of the notion of *fortuna*, the force of circumstance, was more or less innate. His belief, as he later put it, that human beings were "ambitious, vindictive, and rapacious" was practically in his blood. Here was a powerful antidote in his makeup to the Enlightenment belief in the triumph of Reason over man's lower drives.¹⁰

According to one historian, what everyday life and the study of history taught Hamilton about human nature his family's Calvinism reinforced: all men were equal in the eyes of God and equally marked by sin. When a devastating hurricane struck the leeward islands in August 1772, Hamilton wrote, "Our distressed, helpless condition taught us humility and contempt of ourselves . . . But see the Lord relents. He hears our prayer." At the time, Hamilton was under the influence of Hugh Knox, a local Presbyterian minister and scholar who had taken an interest in his welfare. But except during his adolescence, and after tragedy struck him late in life, Hamilton showed few signs of religious piety. His parents did not have him baptized, and he did not see fit to do so on his own. Like Machiavelli, he would become a devout believer in the political utility of religion. But in 1787, when Benjamin Franklin suggested that sessions of the Constitutional Convention pause for prayer, Hamilton is said to have remarked that "he did not see the necessity of calling in foreign aid."¹¹

Hamilton's life suggests that he put his faith mainly in himself and a few like-minded companions. It suggests that he shared something close to the view that "the *vir*, the man of true manliness," could shape fortune.¹² Along with a deep-seated pessimism and fatalism, the West Indian setting fostered a powerful drive in Hamilton to dominate adverse circumstances and to create order, as well as an abhorrence of potential gone to waste. It also suggests that he was an enormously gifted but somehow vulnerable individual; in those close to him he could evoke feelings of protectiveness as well as awe.

Rachel Faucett's role in forming her son's character is a matter of dispute. For a time at least, she seems to have been a footloose as well as physically attractive woman. Her estranged husband, one Johann Michael Lavien, had her jailed and cited her for "whoring with everyone" in his petition for divorce. According to James Thomas Flexner's influential biography, the

home she kept was a “shambles,” and her “betrayal” of the young Hamilton left him emotionally crippled and with a lifelong fear of dependency. In fact, he later wrote that he wished to keep himself “free from particular attachments,” and his “happiness independent on [sic] the caprice of others.”

But this picture is overdrawn. By betrayal, Flexner means that Rachel dropped the surname Hamilton in later life, something that her sons must have taken as “a repudiation of themselves.” But it strains credulity to think that she would not have explained to them that she was not entitled by law to use the name. It is at least equally plausible to assume that she was an affectionate mother and encouraged Alex (as he was called) to be self-reliant – a lesson driven brutally home by her death. It is true that Hamilton rarely mentioned his mother in later life, but this does not mean, as some suggest, that he harbored deeply hostile feelings toward her. In a letter written in 1800, he referred to her as “a handsome young woman having a *snug* fortune” who had entered into an unhappy marriage with the “fortune-hunter” Lavien “against her own inclination.”¹³

Rachel Faucett and James Hamilton may well have led a relatively stable, if marginal, life on the island of St. Kitts, near Nevis. After her separation, she ran a small store with Alex’s help in Christiansted, the capital of the Danish island of St. Croix. She may have encouraged her son to follow in the footsteps of his maternal grandfather – Hamilton’s initial course of study in college was medicine. Of Huguenot origin, she helped him to acquire his good French and stimulated his ambition and escapism through literature, including Alexander Pope’s poetry and Plutarch’s *Lives*. Her collection of some thirty books is said to have included a French translation of *The Prince*.¹⁴

The reason for the end of his parents’ relationship is also a matter of controversy. Hamilton’s observation in 1774 that “the law ruins many a good honest family” suggests what may have been his own interpretation. Years later, he told a correspondent that a marriage had actually taken place between his parents, but on moving from St. Kitts to St. Croix in 1765, they found that, under Danish law, Rachel was forbidden to remarry after being divorced by Lavien in 1759. It may have been this discovery, or perhaps other legal problems, that precipitated the breakup of the family and James Hamilton’s return alone to St. Kitts.¹⁵

Hamilton naturally wished to minimize a central fact: his illegitimacy. But he knew that there was little solid ground for doing so. John Adams’s reference to him as “the bastard Bratt [sic] of a Scotch Pedlar” expressed, albeit crudely, a basic truth. In this existential sense, Hamilton resembled not only Machiavelli himself, but the upstart figure who was the focus of the Florentine’s famous study. The basic problem Machiavelli analyzed in *The Prince* was how “to make a new prince appear to be an established one.” Hamilton’s life story, in essence, is that of a would-be prince who uses exceptional intelligence, daring, and cunning – in a word, *virtù* – in search of legitimacy and lasting fame.¹⁶

A Gentleman and a Whig

In reality, Machiavelli's father, Bernardo, had not been a miserable deadbeat, but a cultivated gentleman. By the same token, Hamilton's father, James, was not exactly the lowly peddler of Adams family lore. He was the fourth son of Alexander Hamilton, Laird of the Grange, Ayrshire, in southwestern Scotland, and of his wife, Elizabeth, the daughter of a baronet. He was remembered as a dreamer, drifter, and heavy drinker, but also a generous (when he had money) and charming character. Hamilton never saw his father again after the latter left St. Croix in 1765. His feelings toward him were a mixture of shame, loyalty, and compassion. In 1785, he wrote, "My heart bleeds at the recollection of his misfortunes and embarrassments." On another occasion he recalled, "It was his fault to have had too much pride and too large a portion of indolence – but his character was otherwise without reproach and his manners those of a Gentleman." The elder Hamilton was an ever-present negative example, both fortune's victim and someone who had failed to capitalize on his opportunities. A basic source of Hamilton's phenomenal energy and competitiveness was the desire to avoid his father's fate, as well as the wish to vindicate him and realize his frustrated hopes for success.¹⁷

If the Machiavelli family's social position is the key to Niccolò's visceral preference for broad-based politics in his native city, Hamilton's feelings toward his father help to explain his early political orientation. In 1773, with generous financial help from his New York-based cousin, Ann Lytton Mitchell, and local St. Croix supporters, Hamilton left the West Indies to study in North America. He was never to return. Once there, he developed sympathy for the Whig cause against the British crown. This was natural enough insofar as the people who had recognized his promise and arranged his departure – Hugh Knox and the merchant Nicholas Cruger, who had employed the precocious youth in his St. Croix office – were solid Whigs. Knox's prominent New Jersey friends, William Livingston and Elias Boudinot, who looked after Hamilton in 1773, and his tutor, Francis Barber, were also Whigs. Hamilton later wrote his Scottish uncle, William Hamilton: "my principles led me to take part" in the revolution, and presumably he meant the Whig principles drummed into him by Knox. As Hamilton proclaimed in a 1774 political pamphlet, "no laws have any validity, or binding force, without the consent and approbation of the *people*."¹⁸

Principle was not the whole story. According to an eyewitness, during the buildup to the revolution, people lived "a joy unutterable and an exultation [sic] never felt before." Even at a staid institution like King's College (later Columbia), where Hamilton matriculated in 1774, the mood was insurrectionary. Moreover, "[b]eneath all the specific constitutional grievances against British authority lay a more elusive social and political rancor that lent passion to the Revolutionary movement." According to George

Clinton, the future Governor of New York, the Whig spirit was a “Spirit of Resentment.” The resentment was aimed at an “unmerited aristocracy” of colonial officeholders who owed their positions to royal patronage and family connections. Hamilton, too, felt a sense of injustice toward a system that humiliated its subjects and failed to recognize merit, like the one that had conferred all of the family privileges on the eldest son (James Hamilton’s brother William) and had cast his father to the winds.¹⁹

But there was another, contradictory, emotion connected to his family background: the envy and ambition of a *déclassé* British gentleman, the feeling that what was wrong was not the winner-take-all system itself, but where he stood on the social ladder. Hamilton and his college roommate, Robert Troup, recalled that in some political discussions in 1773–74, he had taken the British side. Contrary to the conventional account, it is probable that Hamilton preferred Anglican King’s College to the Whig and Presbyterian College of New Jersey (Princeton). Hamilton and Troup helped to save the Loyalist president of King’s from a Whig lynch mob in May 1775.²⁰ Despite, or rather because of, his family’s modest circumstances and his illegitimacy, it was impressed on Hamilton early on that *he* was a gentleman. He must have known that he had been named for his grandfather, the laird, and always referred to his own father as a “Gentleman.” At age fourteen, toiling as a clerk in Cruger’s counting house, he referred in a letter to his “character.” “Character” in the eighteenth century signified a gentleman’s reputation. The boy was trapped not only on an island but in a social position where he did not belong. Evidently, he saw no possible middle way between rotting there and going for broke.²¹

The role of gentleman came naturally to Hamilton, even if his West Indian élan would rub some American-born aristocrats the wrong way. Despite what his enemies would later insist (and following his father’s example), Hamilton was never interested in the bourgeois pursuit of accumulating money. He was to be known for his gallantry, extreme touchiness on questions of honor, and sophisticated tastes. When his illegitimacy was bruited about in the late 1790s, he wrote a friend that he had “better pretensions than most of those who in this Country plume themselves on Ancestry.”²²

The same juvenile letter to his friend Edward Stevens revealed what was perhaps the most visceral reason why Hamilton threw himself into the American revolution: “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 . . . I wish there was a War.” Machiavelli’s advice to the new prince had been to “have no other objective nor other thought, nor take anything as his art, except war and its ways and discipline; because that is the only art that belongs to one who commands; and is of such *virtù* that it not only maintains in power those who are born princes, but often times raises men of private fortune to that station.”²³

Schools for Statesmen

The historian Felix Gilbert observed that Machiavelli “was deeply involved in the political world, yet he also looked upon it from a distance.” The sense of distance had several, mutually reinforcing sources: his social position, a developing historical perspective on contemporary events, and the opportunity and the ability to see his country through foreign eyes.²⁴

In 1500, his political masters dispatched Machiavelli to the French court at Lyon. France and Florence had been nominal allies for many years, and France was the republic’s ostensible protector. But it was also an emerging unitary state ruled by a strong king (after 1498, Louis XII), whereas Florence was a mere city with some outlying dominions. Crossing the Alps on the first of four missions to France, Machiavelli found “that to anyone schooled in the ways of modern kingship, Florence’s governmental machinery appeared absurdly vacillating and weak Even more humiliatingly Machiavelli discovered that his native city’s sense of its own importance seemed to the French to be ludicrously out of line with the realities of its military position and its wealth.” As a mere civil servant lacking ambassadorial powers, Machiavelli spent six months following the itinerant court while Florence debated whether to send an envoy to renegotiate its existing alliance. He informed the *signoria* that the French “call you Mr. Nothing.”²⁵

In fact, Florence’s dealings with France recall the adage, “With friends like these, who needs enemies?” The flight of the Medici and refounding of the republic in 1494 had been brought about by popular outrage over Piero de’ Medici’s abject cession to France of Florence’s western strong points and seaports, including Sarzana, Pietrasanta, Pisa, and Livorno. When Charles VIII had encamped in Florence for eleven days in November 1494, en route to conquer the Kingdom of Naples, his army and the local citizenry had come close to a bloody confrontation. The French had promised to return what they had taken at the end of the war, but instead had sold Sarzana to Genoa and given Pietrasanta to Lucca. In the case of Pisa (near the mouth of the Arno River and controlling Florence’s access to the Mediterranean), the French commander had sold the local fortress to the Pisans and pocketed the proceeds.

Lacking their own military forces, the Florentines were obliged to hire a famous Roman *condottiere*, Paolo Vitelli, and later 1,500 Swiss and Gascon soldiers under French command, to try to recapture Pisa. Both campaigns ended in ignominious, hugely expensive failures. The Florentines beheaded Vitelli, and it was after the latter debacle that they dispatched Machiavelli to France. The King demanded that Florence settle an unpaid bill of thirty-eight thousand gold florins, even though the Swiss and Gascons had mutinied before the walls of Pisa. Although they eventually reined him in, the French backed the bold and ruthless Cesare Borgia, son of Pope Alexander VI. Borgia’s lightning conquests in the Romagna and the Marches, and support for the return of the Medici to Florence, threatened the republic’s survival

in 1499–1502. Last but not least, it was France's withdrawal from Italy after its costly victory over the "Holy League" (the papacy, Spain, Venice) at the battle of Ravenna that paved the way for the republic's overthrow at the hands of Pope Julius II and Spanish troops in 1512.²⁶

It is no wonder that Machiavelli wrote that the French character was marked by "greed and lack of good faith." Nor is it surprising that he developed a revulsion for the temporizing and half-measures that typified Florentine foreign policy. "Weak states," he wrote, "are always ambiguous in taking a decision and slow deliberations are always harmful." Another lesson learned the hard way was that states must rely on their own efforts rather than those of marauding and double-dealing mercenaries. Fortunately, history furnished examples of excellent statecraft and military organization. One in particular was to become Machiavelli's model and *idée fixe*.²⁷

* * *

Hamilton, like Machiavelli, was a person who managed to be deeply immersed in the political world while retaining the perspective of the historian and outsider. His resentment of the British colonial system and his burning ambition tied him to the Whig cause from the moment he landed in America. But his exposure to the prerevolutionary climate was superficial. Other instinctive feelings tended to separate him from his adopted country. With Hamilton, there is always the sense that, although America was the stage on which he was acting, the part he was playing originated somewhere else.

The constructive force of American nationalism grew out of "continentalism," the perspective of those who spent the war years (1775–83) in the army, on the war committees of the Continental Congress, or on diplomatic missions in Europe. Those who sacrificed, while the majority sat by or feathered their own nests, came to see themselves as a kind of virtuous elite. Speaking of the melting-pot effect of the war on officers from different sections of the country, George Washington wrote: "A century in the ordinary intercourse, would not have accomplished what the Seven years association in Arms did." Hamilton was an instinctive continentalist. The intensity of national feeling he brought to the war effort was connected to his recent arrival and lack of provincial roots. The army reinforced this feeling and gave him a sense of the gulf dividing him from the majority of Americans who put state and local loyalties above national ties.²⁸

Hamilton's native *virtù* was on display from the beginning of the war. A self-taught artilleryman, he was appointed captain of a New York provincial company and took part in the unsuccessful defense of the city against Sir William Howe's invading army in the fall of 1776. He met and impressed General Nathanael Greene and the commander of artillery, General Henry Knox. It was perhaps their recommendation, as well as his competence during the Continental Army's retreat across New Jersey, that brought him to the Commander-in-Chief's attention in early 1777.

Joining Washington's small personal staff, or "family" as it was known, marked his "early, sudden, and protracted introduction to public life." In November 1777, Washington sent his 20-year-old aide on a solitary ride from Philadelphia to the upper Hudson River valley to negotiate the dispatch of reinforcements from his rival general, Horatio Gates, after Gates's victory over the British at the battle of Saratoga. As a trusted draftsman and adviser, Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton assisted Washington in conducting complex and demanding negotiations with the Continental Congress and, after early 1778, the French.²⁹

Hamilton developed a revulsion for what he considered the politicians' dithering and parochially minded conduct. From Washington's winter encampment at Valley Forge in early 1778, he wrote, "Folly, caprice, a want of foresight, comprehension and dignity, characterise [sic] the general tenor of their actions." How, he asked, "can we hope for success in our European negotiations [sic], if the nations of Europe have no confidence in the wisdom and vigor, of the great Continental Government?" "Without a speedy change," he wrote in 1780, "the army must dissolve. It is now a mob rather than an army, without clothing, without pay, without provision, without morals, without discipline." Several years later he would ask, "Is respectability in the eyes of foreign powers a safeguard against foreign encroachments?" Unfortunately, "[t]he imbecility of our Government even forbids them to treat with us: Our ambassadors abroad are the mere pageants of mimic sovereignty."³⁰

In his (one is tempted to call them Machiavellian) moments of pessimism and alienation, Hamilton at times fantasized about a glorious martyrdom.³¹ He wrote his closest wartime friend, Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, in January 1780, "I am disgusted with everything in this world but yourself and very *few* more honest fellows and I have no other wish than as soon as possible to make a brilliant exit. 'Tis a weakness; but I feel I am not fit for this terrestreal [sic] country." This was not simply idle talk. He was frequently under fire during the campaign leading to the British occupation of Philadelphia in September–October 1777 and during the battle of Monmouth, New Jersey, in June 1778. In early 1781, he quit Washington's staff and eventually joined a New York infantry regiment. During the decisive battle of Yorktown (October 1781), he led his bayonet-wielding battalion up the side of a British redoubt, forcing its abrupt surrender. Colonel Laurens, a cultivated, rashly brave South Carolinian, knew what Hamilton was talking about. In August 1782, with the war for all intents and purposes over, he was killed leading skirmishers against an enemy force several times larger than his own.³²

The pathetic weakness of "rule by committee" and the American government's incapacity to mobilize the resources of the country, even to feed and clothe its own army, helped to crystallize Hamilton's political thinking. His wartime reading of Plutarch on the lives of ancient Greek and Roman luminaries reinforced the view that human nature was static and that it was vain

to put great faith in human rationality. One biographer speaks as well of his “new-found Humean perspective.” Even before the war, Hamilton had cited the Scottish philosopher to the effect “that in contriving any system of government . . . *every man* ought to be supposed a *knave*; and to have no other end in all his actions, but *private interest*. By this interest we must govern him, and by means of it, *make him co-operate to public good*.” Hamilton did not believe that all men *were* knavish. (He later wrote: “The supposition of universal venality in human nature is little less an error in political reasoning than the supposition of universal rectitude.”) But experience taught that the “ruling passion” of many was the love of wealth or power. It also taught that a noble handful were ruled by a higher passion, the love of fame of the sort achieved by carrying out “extensive and arduous enterprises” for the public good.³³ Hume’s maxim was taken nearly verbatim from Machiavelli: “it is necessary to those who set up a republic and order its laws to presuppose that all men are delinquents.” Machiavelli had also written that “never or rarely does it happen that a republic or kingdom is well ordered from the beginning, or completely renewed, if it is not done by a single man.” At the top of his hierarchy of greatness were the founders and lawgivers like Moses, Cyrus, and Romulus: “And truly the heavens cannot give men a greater chance for glory, nor can men desire greater glory” than that to be gained by reordering a corrupt state.³⁴

Models to Live by

At the end of the day, what history and contemporary events taught Machiavelli was that “It is impossible for a republic to manage to stand still and enjoy its liberty and limited confines: because if it won’t molest its neighbor, it will be molested by him; and being molested gives rise to the desire and the necessity to acquire [territory].” Given the imperative to acquire or be acquired, moreover, he professed that republics, allowing popular participation, were more energetic and successful at the business than autocracies. Accommodating the plebians’ demand for power through the institution of the tribunate, arming its own citizens, and giving them a stake in the conquest of adjacent areas helped to explain the miracle by which a tiny, hemmed-in city had become the mistress of Italy and eventually the entire Mediterranean. Though he was not consistent on the point (and one senses a certain wishful thinking), Machiavelli wrote: “One sees by experience that cities have never increased in dominion or wealth until they became free.”³⁵

If Machiavelli developed a feeling of kinship with the Roman republic and looked to its experience for guidance, Hamilton was emotionally and intellectually attached to his own model. He knew Roman history, referred to it in his writings, and as pseudonyms usually chose Roman republican characters. But his real inspiration was contemporary Britain. The Roman and British models were far from identical, but they did have much in

common. The constitutions of both had been works in progress whose mixture of democratic (tribunate and commons), aristocratic (senate and lords), and autocratic (consulate and crown) elements had emerged from bitter civil strife. Both were dynamic, self-aggrandizing states who saw expansion as essential to security and prosperity. Starting from small bases, both had hit upon enormously successful formulas for generating wealth and power. At least for a time, they had managed to combine liberty at home and foreign empire. Both were inclined to prefer glory to longevity, and to republican purity, if that became the choice.

Paradoxical though it may seem, the war served to strengthen Hamilton's attachment to the British model while reinforcing a fundamentally Machiavellian view of France. In a political pamphlet he wrote in early 1775, several months before the first shots of the war were fired at Lexington and Concord, Hamilton had argued that the American colonies were bound to the monarchy – “the great connecting principle” – but should enjoy complete legislative autonomy. “Prudence and sound policy” on Britain's part strongly recommended that it accept a federative arrangement:

In fifty or sixty years, America will be in no need of protection from Great-Britain. She will then be able to protect herself both at home and abroad. . . . She will indeed owe a debt of gratitude to the parent state, for past services; but the scale will then begin to turn in her favour, and the obligation for future services, will be on the side of Great-Britain.

The British would do well to retain the colonists' loyalty by “affectionate and parental conduct” because someday it would be Britain who needed America.³⁶ The idea of a federative system, with the parts linked to the king rather than parliament and in which London continued to regulate the vast, mutually profitable trade of the empire, had been developed by the Virginian Richard Bland and the Pennsylvanian Benjamin Franklin, among others. It was the position of conservatives at the Continental Congress for a time, the resolution on independence coming only in June 1776. Hamilton was never to abandon the idea of Anglo-American cooperation based on common interests. He did not believe, like John Adams, that war between America and Britain must end in “an incurable animosity” between the two.³⁷

Hamilton's weighing of the odds in case of war had been prescient, if overly optimistic. For the British to use force would be nothing less than “*the grossest infatuation, madness itself.*” They could never win if the colonists adopted a temporizing, Fabian strategy (as was to be the case). What the colonies lacked in war supplies, France, Spain, and Holland would provide. France may have promised not to interfere in the dispute, but “the promises of princes and statesmen are of little weight. . . . If we consult the known character of the French, we shall be disposed to conclude, that their present, seemingly pacific and friendly disposition is merely a piece of *finesse.*” Concluding, Hamilton attested: “I earnestly lament the unnatural quarrel,

between the parent state and the colonies; and most ardently wish for a speedy reconciliation, a perpetual and *mutually* beneficial union, that I am a warm advocate for limited monarchy, and an unfeigned well-wisher to the present Royal Family.” The best way to secure a “permanent and happy union” was to permit the colonies “to be as free, as they desire.”³⁸

Hamilton was anything but an uncritical admirer of British statecraft. In 1783, after seven years of war, he wrote, “The situation of Great Britain puts her under a necessity at all events of fulfilling her engagements and cultivating the good will of this country. This is no doubt her true policy.” But recent history had proved that “passion makes us depart from the dictates of reason . . . [W]e have seen that passion has had so much influence in the conduct of the British councils in the whole course of the war.” Hamilton reacted in disgust whenever spite or anger led the British to pursue what was basically an “unnatural quarrel.”³⁹

When Henry Cabot Lodge in the 1880s, and Clinton Rossiter in the 1960s, argued that Hamilton’s “thoughts were fixed on the United States unbiased by a sentiment for or against any other nation,” they were denying the obvious. Samuel Flagg Bemis, one of the first historians to analyze Hamilton’s foreign policy role, was closer to the truth: “The sympathies of Hamilton were wholly with Great Britain but for no sentimental or even philosophical reason.” But it is not, *pace* Bemis, a case of either/or. Rather, to paraphrase Hamilton himself, “calculations and passions conspired.” This does not mean that the national interest was at odds with Hamilton’s personal bias, and certainly he rarely if ever saw a contradiction between the two.⁴⁰ In his attitude toward Britain one senses the feeling “I have something to prove to you, and the effort is worth little if it does not receive your approbation.” His outlook was infused with a feeling of kinship, a psychic need to measure up, and a desire for respect and recognition. It is little wonder that he clashed with those contemporaries who never ceased to look on Britain as an evil empire and a whore.⁴¹

During the war, Hamilton moved toward the position he took at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. The British constitution was “the best in the world: and . . . he doubted much whether anything short of it would do in America.” He also embraced the British financial revolution launched in the 1690s. According to J. G. A. Pocock:

The institutions of the new finance, of which the Bank of England and the National Debt came to be the most important, were essentially a series of devices for encouraging the large or small investor to lend capital to the state, investing in its future political stability and strengthening this by the act of investment itself, while deriving a guaranteed income from the return on the sum invested. With the aid of the invested capital, the state was able to maintain larger and more permanent armies and bureaucracies – incidentally increasing the resources at the disposal of political patronage – and as long as its affairs visibly prospered, it was able to attract further investments and conduct larger and longer wars. The era of the *condottiere* – the

short-term military contractor – ended, his place being taken by the military administrator as one arm of the bureaucratic state.

With its high land taxes, large military establishment, and cohorts of crown officials, stock jobbers, and speculators, the system had been the favorite target of the opposition to Sir Robert Walpole's rule in the early to mideighteenth century. "Old Whig" and "Country party" spokesmen adopted the conspiracy theory according to which the court was using the system to corrupt parliament and destroy English liberties. American patriots embraced the same theory in the 1760s, because it provided a plausible and psychologically satisfying explanation of royal policy toward themselves in the wake of the Seven Year's War.⁴²

For Hamilton to advocate a national bank and funded debt was thus like waving a red flag in the face of the average Whig. He was well aware that the system was subject to abuse, witness the crushing debt accumulated by the British government. But other concerns were paramount. Nathanael Greene, commanding American troops in the South, wrote Hamilton in January 1781:

The army is in such a wretched condition that I hardly know what to do with it. The officers have got such a habit of negligence [sic], and the soldiers so loose and disorderly that it is next to impossible to give it a military complexion. Without clothing I am sure I shall never do it.

With the soldiers defending the Whig cause forced to fight barefoot, Hamilton naturally looked with favor on a mechanism that had allowed Britain to mobilize wealth on an unprecedented scale to wage war. Together with the system of regulated overseas trade, it had made Britain the most powerful country in the world. In 1781, Hamilton wrote Robert Morris, the Pennsylvania merchant who had played a key role in financing the war effort: "A national debt if it is not excessive will be to us a national blessing; it will be a powerful cement of our union."⁴³

Hamilton's view of France, meanwhile, contained several layers. The most basic was an instinctive suspicion and dislike of dependency, connected to his family background: the typical Huguenot was raised on stories of French intolerance and cruelty during the reign of Louis XIV. It is probably no coincidence that three of his closest friends had French Huguenot backgrounds: John Laurens, Gouverneur Morris, and John Jay. At another level, Hamilton admired France's mastery of power politics, a game, he believed, that America would have to equip itself to play. This is what Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, no mean judge of the matter (and who knew Hamilton during his American sojourn, 1794–96), meant when he said of Hamilton that "*il avait deviné l'Europe.*" The youthful author of the 1775 pamphlet had in fact divined France's policy of revenge for its defeat by Britain in the Seven Year's War, which was being planned even as Hamilton wrote by

the French foreign minister, Charles Gravier, the comte de Vergennes. Pierre Caron de Beaumarchais, better known as the author of *The Barber of Seville*, would shortly begin his career as gunrunner to the American rebels on behalf of Louis XVI.⁴⁴

As a French-speaking aide-de-camp, Hamilton was thrown into close contact with the French officer corps. He became fast friends with several Frenchmen, including his endearing brother-in-arms, eight months his junior, the Marquis de Lafayette. But by and large, the wave of aristocratic volunteers seeking plum positions in the American army proved to be an annoyance and an embarrassment. As the war dragged on longer than he had predicted, Hamilton knew better than anyone, as he put it to Laurens, that “the friendship of France is our *unum necessarium*.” But the fact that French money and regular forces might “save us in spite of ourselves” was not exactly reassuring. When it finally arrived, the French army was smaller than expected, and its high command dismissed Washington’s appeal for a frontal assault on New York. When Laurens was to be sent as envoy to Paris, Hamilton worried that his friend might be too honest and warm-tempered to be effective at the French court: “A politician My Dear Friend must be at all times supple – he must often dissemble.” Hamilton would follow his own advice as a member of Washington’s court after 1789.⁴⁵

As the war wound down (after Yorktown, there was no major fighting in North America), he favored the continuation of close Franco-American friendship, including privileged commercial relations. When a new British administration under the Earl of Shelburne offered generous terms to America in late 1782, Hamilton wrote Washington that he suspected British “insincerity and duplicity.” Those words betray not just distrust, but anxiety that news of a definitive peace would destroy efforts by nationalists in Congress to create a stronger central government. And they were written before he had learned what he might have suspected: the French had been prepared to end the war *without* securing American independence and had opposed the American bid (granted by the British) to establish the United States’s western boundary on the Mississippi River.⁴⁶

Years later, Hamilton recalled that during his service in Congress as a New York delegate in the early 1780s, he had been “struck with disgust at the appearance, in the very cradle of our Republic, of a party actuated by an undue complaisance to foreign power” – namely France – and had “resolved at once to resist this bias in our affairs.” By the mid-1780s Hamilton believed – by and large correctly – that France did not want a strong America, that its help could not be counted on a day longer than selfish interests dictated, and that the alliance signed in 1778 was a marriage of convenience. The foundations of a longer term community of interests – trade, finance, language, religion, a shared political culture – simply did not exist.⁴⁷