

# The Best of Enemies

Jefferson was visionary and crafty.  
In Hamilton, he met his match. How the rivalry lives on.

Ron Chernow

ON MARCH 21, 1790, THOMAS JEFFERSON BELATEDLY arrived in New York City to assume his duties as the first Secretary of State after a five-year ministerial stint in Paris. Tall and lanky, with a freckled complexion and auburn hair, Jefferson, 46, was taken aback by the adulation being heaped upon the new Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton, who had streaked to prominence in his absence. Few people knew that Jefferson had authored the Declaration of Independence, which had yet to become holy writ for Americans. Instead, the Virginian was eclipsed by the 35-year-old wunderkind from the Caribbean, who was a lowly artillery captain in New York when Jefferson composed the famous document. Despite his murky background as an illegitimate orphan, the self-invented Hamilton was trim and elegant, carried himself with an erect military bearing and had a mind that worked with dazzling speed. At first, Hamilton and Jefferson socialized on easy terms, with little inkling that they were destined to become mortal foes. But their clash inside George Washington's first Cabinet proved so fierce that it would spawn the two-party system in America. It also produced two divergent visions of the country's future that divide Americans to the present day.

For Hamilton, the first Treasury Secretary, the supreme threat to liberty arose from insufficient government power. To avert that, he advocated a vigorous central government marked by a strong President, an independent judiciary and a liberal reading of the Constitution. As the first Secretary of State, Jefferson believed that

liberty was jeopardized by concentrated federal power, which he tried to restrict through a narrow construction of the Constitution. He favored states' rights, a central role for Congress and a comparatively weak judiciary.

At first glance, Hamilton might seem the more formidable figure in that classic matchup. He took office with an ardent faith in the new national government. He had attended the Constitutional Convention, penned the bulk of the Federalist papers to secure passage of the new charter and spearheaded ratification efforts in New York State. He therefore set to work at Treasury with more unrestrained gusto than Jefferson—who had monitored the Constitutional Convention from his post in Paris—did at State. Jefferson's enthusiasm for the new political order was tepid at best, and when Washington crafted the first government in 1789, Jefferson didn't grasp the levers of power with quite the same glee as Hamilton, who had no ideological inhibitions about shoring up federal power.

Hamilton—brilliant, brash and charming—had the self-reliant reflexes of someone who had always had to live by his wits. His overwhelming intelligence petrified Jefferson and his followers. As an orator, Hamilton could speak extemporaneously for hours on end. As a writer, he could crank out 5,000- or 10,000-word memos overnight. Jefferson never underrated his foe's copious talents. At one point, a worried Jefferson confided to his comrade James Madison that Hamilton was a one-man army, "a host within himself."

Despite Jefferson's policy battles, there was a playful side to his politics. On New Year's Day 1802, supporters in Cheshire, Mass., sent him, as a gift, a mammoth cheese that measured more than 4 ft. in diameter and 17 in. in height and weighed 1,235 lbs. President Jefferson took the pungent present in good humor. Reportedly, he stood in the White House doorway, arms outstretched, waiting for the cheese's delivery. The smelly gift was served to guests for at least a year, perhaps more.

The individuals who wrote the American Constitution could only provide a general structure under which the government would work. Those involved in actually making the system function had to venture into uncharted territory. There were no blueprints as to exactly which body had what powers, or what their relationships with one another would be. And, if disputes arose, which individual or group would act as arbiter? Officials during the first few years after 1789 were conscious that practically everything they did would be regarded as setting precedents for the future. Even such apparently trivial matters as the proper form of addressing the president caused debate. From hindsight of more than 200 years, it is difficult to appreciate how tentative they had to be in establishing this newborn government.

The most fundamental difference over the Constitution arose over whether it should be interpreted strictly or loosely. That is, should governmental powers be limited to those expressly granted in the document, or were there "implied" powers that could be exercised as long as they were not expressly prohibited? Many of the disputes were argued on principles, but the truth is that most individuals were trying to promote programs that would benefit the interests they represented.

George Washington, as first president, was a towering figure who provided a stabilizing presence during the seemingly endless squabbles. He believed that he served the entire nation, and that there was no need for political parties (he disdainfully referred to them as "factions") which he regarded as divisive. Despite his disapproval, nascent political parties did begin to develop fairly early on in his first administration. Washington's first Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, almost invariably favored those measures that would benefit the commercial and manufacturing interests of the Northeast. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and his ally James Madison just as often spoke for the rural and agricultural interests of the West and the South. These two groups frequently clashed over what the Constitution did or did not permit, what sources of revenue should be tapped to pay for government, and a host of other issues. The fact that Washington most often sided with Hamilton's views made him a partisan despite his wish to remain above the fray. "The Best of Enemies" analyzes the Hamilton-Jefferson struggle.

Washington's enormous prestige delayed the creation of formal political parties until he was out of office. "Cliffhanger: The Election of 1800" shows how this changed after John Adams became president in 1797. Because the Constitution did not provide for political parties, Aaron Burr and Thomas Jefferson wound up in a tie even though both were Republicans. "Federalists and Republicans appeared to agree on one thing only," author John Ferling writes, "that the victor in 1800 would set America's course for generations to come, perhaps forever."

The United States already was a large country by 1803, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River. Some said it was too large. Propertied Easterners complained that the Western migration lowered property values and raised wages, and they feared population shifts would weaken their section's influence in government. Others thought that the great distances involved might cause the system to fly apart, given the primitive means of communication and transportation at the time. When Thomas Jefferson had the unexpected opportunity to double the nation's size by purchasing the huge Louisiana Territory, as discussed in "The Revolution of 1803," he altered the course of American history. "Paddle a Mile in Their Canoes" describes the Lewis-Clark expedition, a Jefferson-sponsored effort to find out just

what had been acquired and whether there were water routes to the Pacific coast.

Coverage of African-Americans in high school and college textbooks is far more comprehensive than it was a few decades ago, according to Gary B. Nash, but some areas still merit greater concentration. "African Americans in the Early Republic" describes some of these, such as the rise of free-Black communities and early abolitionism. Another article on African-Americans, "How American Slavery Led to the Birth of Liberia," shows how the American Colonization Society's efforts to create a haven for blacks was doomed to failure. Detractors of this project argued that it actually would benefit slavery by drawing off the most vigorous and independent blacks, who could provide leadership in the struggle against the institution in the United States.



Pirates from rogue states along the northern coast of Africa had for centuries highjacked ships and cargoes, and enslaved crews in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Most European nations and the United States attempted to alleviate these depredations by paying bribes or "tribute" to these pirates. Under the administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, naval expeditions were mounted against the predators. "Pirates!" argues that these expeditions did more than merely address the problem, they helped establish the United States as a world power.

Accounts of settling the West also have changed over the years. Once presented in the relatively simplistic terms of "taming the wilderness," the westward movement was far more complicated than the story of hardy pioneers overcoming obstacles. "Andrew Jackson Versus the Cherokee Nation" tells of the forcible removal of the Cherokees from Georgia to west of the Mississippi. The trek had such awful consequences that it became known as "the trail of tears." The phrase "Manifest Destiny" became popular during the 1840s. Advocates believed that the United States was destined to dominate Mexico and the Caribbean. "Storm Over Mexico" examines this phenomenon, with particular reference to one of its most ardent advocates, a woman named Jane McManus. She was a dynamo who was a political journalist, a land speculator, and a pioneer settler in Texas.

Whether in person or on paper, Hamilton served up his opinions promiscuously. He had a true zest for debate and never left anyone guessing where he stood. Jefferson, more than a decade older, had the quiet, courtly manner of a Virginia planter. He was emphatic in his views—Hamilton labeled him “an atheist in religion and a *fanatic in politics*”—but shrank from open conflict. Jefferson, a diffident speaker, mumbled his way through his rare speeches in a soft, almost inaudible voice and reserved his most scathing strictures for private correspondence.

The epic battle between these two Olympian figures began not long after Jefferson came to New York City to assume his State Department duties in March 1790. By then Hamilton was in the thick of a contentious campaign to retire massive debt inherited from the Revolution. America had suspended principal and interest payments on its obligations, which had traded as low as 15¢ on the dollar. In an audacious scheme to restore public credit, Hamilton planned to pay off that debt at face value, causing the securities to soar from depressed levels. Jefferson and Madison thought the original holders of those securities—many of them war veterans—should profit from that appreciation even if they had already sold their paper to traders at depressed prices. Hamilton thought it would be impractical to track them down. With an eye on future U.S. capital markets, he wanted to enshrine the cardinal principle that current owners of securities incurred all profits and losses, even if that meant windfall gains for rapacious speculators who had only recently bought the securities.

That skirmish over Hamilton’s public credit plan was part of a broader tussle over the U.S.’s economic future. Jefferson was fond of summoning up idyllic scenes of an agrarian America peopled by sturdy yeoman farmers. That poetic vision neglected the underlying reality of large slave plantations in the South. Jefferson was a fine populist on paper but not in everyday life, and his defense of Virginia interests was inextricably bound up with slavery. Hamilton—derided as a pseudo aristocrat, an elitist, a crypto-monarchist—was a passionate abolitionist with a far more expansive economic vision. He conceded that agriculture would persist for decades as an essential component of the economy. But at the same time he wanted to foster the rudiments of a modern economy—trade, commerce, banks, stock exchanges, factories and corporations—to enlarge economic opportunity. Hamilton dreamed of a meritocracy, not an aristocracy, while Jefferson retained the landed gentry’s disdain for the vulgar realities of trade, commerce and finance. And he was determined to undermine Hamilton’s juggernaut.

Because we celebrate Jefferson for his sonorous words in the Declaration of Independence—Hamilton never matched Jefferson’s gift for writing ringing passages that were at once poetic and inspirational—we sometimes overlook Jefferson’s consummate skills as a practicing politician. A master of subtle, artful indirection, he was able to marshal his forces without divulging his general-

ship. After Hamilton persuaded President Washington to create the Bank of the United States, the country’s first central bank, Jefferson was aghast at what he construed as a breach of the Constitution and a perilous expansion of federal power. Along with Madison, he recruited the poet Philip Freneau to launch an opposition paper called the *National Gazette*. To subsidize the paper covertly, he hired Freneau as a State Department translator. Hamilton was shocked by such flagrant disloyalty from a member of Washington’s Cabinet, especially when Freneau began to mount withering assaults on Hamilton and even Washington. Never one to suffer in silence, Hamilton retaliated in a blizzard of newspaper articles published under Roman pseudonyms. The backbiting between Hamilton and Jefferson grew so acrimonious that Washington had to exhort both men to desist.

Instead, the feud worsened. In early 1793, a Virginia Congressman named William Branch Giles began to harry Hamilton with resolutions ordering him to produce, on short deadlines, stupendous amounts of Treasury data. With prodigious bursts of energy, Hamilton complied with those inhuman demands, foiling his opponents. Jefferson then committed an unthinkable act. He secretly drafted a series of anti-Hamilton resolutions for Giles, including one that read, “Resolved, That the Secretary of the Treasury has been guilty of maladministration in the duties of his office and should, in the opinion of Congress, be removed from his office by the President of the United States.” The resolution was voted down, and the effort to oust Hamilton stalled. Jefferson left the Cabinet in defeat later that year.

Throughout the 1790s, the Hamilton-Jefferson feud continued to fester in both domestic and foreign affairs. Jefferson thought Hamilton was “bewitched” by the British model of governance, while Hamilton considered Jefferson a credulous apologist for the gory excesses of the French Revolution. Descended from French Huguenots on his mother’s side, Hamilton was fluent in French and had served as Washington’s liaison with the Marquis de Lafayette and other French aristocrats who had rallied to the Continental Army. The French Revolution immediately struck him as a bloody affair, governed by rigid, Utopian thinking. On Oct. 6, 1789, he wrote a remarkable letter to Lafayette, explaining his “foreboding of ill” about the future course of events in Paris. He cited the “vehement character” of the French people and the “reveries” of their “philosophic politicians,” who wished to transform human nature. Hamilton believed that Jefferson while in Paris “drank deeply of the French philosophy in religion, in science, in politics.” Indeed, more than a decade passed before Jefferson fully realized that the French Revolution wasn’t a worthy sequel to the American one so much as a grotesque travesty.

If Jefferson and Hamilton define opposite ends of the political spectrum in U.S. history and seem to exist in perpetual conflict, the two men shared certain traits, feeding a mutual cynicism. Each scorned the other as excessively

According to the new book *Jefferson's Second Revolution*, by Susan Dunn, for more than a week in early July 1800, Federalist newspapers gleefully carried the (false) story that Jefferson had died. **"I am much indebted to my enemies,"** Jefferson said, "for proving, by their recitals of my death, that I have friends."

ambitious. In his secret diary, or *Anas*, Jefferson recorded a story of Hamilton praising Julius Caesar as the greatest man in history. (The tale sounds dubious, as Hamilton invariably used Caesar as shorthand for "an evil tyrant.") Hamilton repaid the favor. In one essay he likened Jefferson to "Caesar coyly refusing the proffered diadem" and rejecting the trappings, but "tenaciously grasping the substance of imperial domination."

Similarly, both men hid a potent hedonism behind an intellectual facade. For all their outward differences, the two politicians stumbled into the two great sex scandals of the early Republic. In 1797 a journalist named James T. Callender exposed that Hamilton, while Treasury Secretary and a married man with four children, had entered into a yearlong affair with grifter Maria Reynolds, who was 23 when it began. In a 95-page pamphlet, Hamilton confessed to the affair at what many regarded as inordinate length. He wished to show that the money he had paid to Reynolds' husband James had been for the favor of her company and not for illicit speculation in Treasury securities, as the Jeffersonians had alleged. Forever after, the Jeffersonians tagged Hamilton as "the amorous Treasury Secretary" and mocked his pretensions to superior morality.

By an extraordinary coincidence, during Jefferson's first term as President, Callender also exposed Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings. Callender claimed that "Dusky Sally," a.k.a. the "African Venus," was the President's slave concubine, who had borne him five children. "There is not an individual in the neighborhood of Charlottesville who does not believe the story," Callender wrote, "and not a few who know it." Jefferson never confirmed or denied Callender's story. But the likely truth of the Hemings affair was dramatically bolstered by DNA tests published in 1998, which indicated that a Jefferson male had sired at least one of Hemings' children.

The crowning irony of the stormy relations between Hamilton and Jefferson is that Hamilton helped install his longtime foe as President in 1801. Under constitutional rules then in force, the candidate with the majority of electoral votes became President; the runner-up became Vice

## HAMILTON

Favored a strong Federal Government  
Pushed for an economy in which trade, finance and manufacturing supplemented agriculture  
Feared closer relations with France and was an Anglophile  
Wanted the U.S. to have a professional federal army

## JEFFERSON

Argued strongly for states' rights  
Admired farming and the simple, rural life and hoped America would remain an agrarian nation  
Favored warm, fraternal relations with France and was an Anglophobe  
Thought the country should rely on state militias

President. That created an anomalous situation in which Jefferson, his party's presumed presidential nominee, tied with Aaron Burr, its presumed vice presidential nominee. It took 36 rounds of voting in the House to decide the election in Jefferson's favor. Faced with the prospect of Burr as President, a man he considered unscrupulous, Hamilton not only opted for Jefferson as the lesser of two evils but also was forced into his most measured assessment of the man. Hamilton said he had long suspected that as President, Jefferson would develop a keen taste for the federal power he had deplored in opposition. He recalled that a decade earlier, in Washington's Cabinet, Jefferson had seemed like a man who knew he was destined to inherit an estate—in this case, the presidency—and didn't wish to deplete it. In fact, Jefferson, the strict constructionist, freely exercised the most sweeping powers as President. Nothing in the Constitution, for instance, permitted the Louisiana Purchase. Hamilton noted that with rueful mirth.

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