

HAMILTON AND JEFFERSON: THE DEMISE OF REPUBLICANISM

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NOTE: The following paper is a revision of one that I did while in graduate school in history in the early 1980s. In it, I am attempting to show how the tension between these two very powerful personalities shaped the early political history of our nation.

The American political experience of the early nineteenth century witnessed the gradual decline of the original republicanism that undergirded the writing of our Constitution. The beginning of this decline was due, in part, to the tensions that existed between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton in the latter eighteenth century. In the following essay I will analyze the Hamilton-Jefferson split and in so doing, point out the impact such differences had on republican political theory and practice. Before proceeding with that analysis, it is necessary to establish some groundwork concerning the nature of eighteenth century republican political and social theory.

Stow Persons, in his book *American Minds*, points out that republican political theory began with three basic assumptions: one, a distinctive notion of law often identified by enlightenment writers as “natural law”; two, the theory of the social contract whereby mankind possessed rights and liberties anterior to the government, but had willingly given up certain freedoms in favor of civil restraint; and three, a commitment to constitutionalism with a characteristic feature of balanced or mixed governmental powers (Persons, 139-142).

Underneath these building blocks of republicanism lay several assumptions concerning human nature. First of all, people were viewed as essentially selfish creatures, driven by their own ambitions. In addition, human inequality was viewed as a normal state of affairs which led to the universal “phenomenon of ruling aristocracies” (an accepted notion in republican political theory). Secondly, people were viewed as moral agents capable of structuring a government that could fulfill its obligations to the people. Paramount in such obligations was the pursuit of freedom and liberty. Finally, republican theorists saw people as a product of their environment. If liberty and virtue were to succeed, specific social conditions were necessary. Such conditions could be ensured by the government which indirectly reflected the will of the people (Persons, 143-148).

The three assumptions of republican theorists coupled with the preceding views of human nature led to the republican perception of the nature of government itself. Government was seen as artificial (man-made) and as being distinct from society. A healthy society, which in the republican world-view rested upon an agrarian economy and a utilitarian morality, did not need much government. Governments, therefore, must be limited to the keeping of order and the curbing of selfish ambitions. In this regard we can see the effect of the enlightenment on republican theorists (“That government is best which governs least”) (Persons, 143-148).

The agrarian emphasis in republicanism led to the idea of sovereignty following property. Those who were “landed” should be responsible for the

major political decisions simply because so many decisions related to property (“Those who own the country ought to govern it”). Popular sovereignty taken to the extreme really did not fit with republican political thought. Majority rule implied the “tyranny of the mob” and was simply too great a risk for republican political theorists. In this regard it is not difficult to understand why republicans squarely opposed the formation of political parties or factions which could easily fall prey to demagogues who were bent on pursuing selfish aims. Representation of the majority in the republican sense, was based on the idea that elected officials must act in the best interests of the state and must not reflect the passions of their constituents.

It is indeed ironic that both Hamilton and Jefferson adhered to and promoted republican virtues. Each man would eventually contribute to the downfall of republicanism in the United States. This story can best be understood by examining several basic differences between Hamilton and Jefferson as reflected in their own words. These differences will be viewed in the context of Persons’ definition of republicanism, and specifically with regard to each man’s view of society and the role of government.

Of the two men and because of his generally uncompromising attitude, Hamilton was more the ideologue and less the republican. While his view of human nature was perhaps consistent with republican principles, his views of society and the role of government were not. Society, to Hamilton, was to be controlled by the wealthy interests including merchants, manufacturers, and shippers. In his Report on Manufactures he stated that it is in the “interest of nations to diversify the industrious pursuits of the individuals who compose them . . . and the establishment of manufactures is calculated not only to increase the general stock of useful and productive labor, but even to improve the state of agriculture in particular . . .” (Marshall and Wiltz, p. 47). This industrial emphasis, of course, strayed from the agrarian image popular in most republican minds of that era.

It was in his perception of the role of government, however, that Hamilton most clearly digressed from republican political thought. He clearly advocated “vigour” in the government, particularly in fostering the growth of business in America (The Federalist: Number 1). His view of government was more monarchical than republican, as reflected in his arguments concerning the constitutionality of a national bank in 1791:

. . . this general principle is inherent in the very definition of government, and essential to every step of the progress to be made by that of the United States, namely: That every power vested in a government is in its nature sovereign, and includes, by force of the term, a right to employ all the means requisite and fairly applicable to the attainment of the ends of such power, and which are not precluded by restrictions and exceptions specified in the Constitution, nor not immoral, or not contrary to the essential ends of political society (The Federalist: Number 1).

In opposition to Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson was less the ideologue (as evidenced by actions later in his career) and more the republican, as reflected by his views concerning society and the role of government. Jefferson certainly epitomized republican political theory concerning agrarianism. Inherent in his perception of a society founded upon agriculture was a more than hesitant approach to the establishment of manufacturing. Consider his words from Notes on Virginia published in 1782:

The political economists of Europe have established
It as a principle that every state should endeavor to manufacture
for itself; and this principle, like many others, we transfer to
America, without calculating the difference of circumstance
which should often produce a difference of result. In Europe
the lands are either cultivated, or locked up against the
cultivator. Manufacture must therefore be resorted to of
necessity, not of choice, to support the surplus of their
people. But we have an immensity of land courting the
industry of the husbandman . . . while we have land to labor,
then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a
workbench (Annals, 573).

These thoughts, though consistent with the republican view of society, were surprisingly shortsighted when viewed from the perspective of the late twentieth century.

Concerning the role of government, Jefferson was again very consistent with the prevailing republican notion of limited government. When arguing against the establishment of the national bank in 1791, for example, made reference, as he often did, to the 10th Amendment:

I consider the foundations of the Constitution as
Laid on this ground – that all powers not delegated to the
United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to
The states, are reserved to the states, or to the people . . .
To take a single step beyond the boundaries thus
Specifically drawn around the powers of Congress is to
Take possession of a boundless field of power, no longer
Susceptible of any definition (Annals, Volume 3, 450).

The problem we confront, finally, is the Hamilton-Jefferson differences and their relation to the demise of eighteenth century republicanism. The demise began, as often noted, with the development of political “factions” or parties during the second Washington term. If republican theorists were so openly opposed to such party development, what explains their emergence in the 1790s?

The simplest answer, it seems, is that organized political factions were inevitable in the quasi-democratic political environment of the day. In hindsight, it appears that Hamilton and Jefferson were simply catalysts in the

process. Both were outspoken and powerful personalities that naturally attracted adherents. What began as several basic differences in perception gradually evolved into general political ideologies more defined and absolute.* Political factions, the great fear of republican thinkers, had become a fact of life.

As time passed, such factions would be increasingly forced to appeal to a broader base of the American populace in order to both achieve and hold power. In time the parties found themselves democratizing their earlier positions. Especially those seeking the office of President were forced to become “politicians” as opposed to “statesmen.” It can be argued, for instance, that because of his circumstances, Washington was the only President who had the option of being a statesman in the republican sense of the word. In short, republican political theories, though embodied in the Constitution, were no longer applicable in the increasingly “democratic” American political experience.

* I am using the term *ideology* to mean a set of beliefs held by a significant number of people which provides a *description of* and a *prescription for* society.

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