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ALEXANDER HAMILTON

By early October 1787, Hamilton conceived an ambitious writing project to help elect federalist delegates to the New York Ratifying Convention: a comprehensive explication of the entire document, written by New Yorkers for a New York audience. In early October 1787, James Kent encountered Hamilton at a dinner party at the Schuyler mansion in Albany, where Hamilton was attending the fall session of the state supreme court. Philip Schuyler expatiated on the need for a national revenue system while Hamilton listened quietly. "Mr. Hamilton appeared to be careless and desultory in his remarks," Kent recalled, "and it occurred to me afterwards . . . that he was deeply meditating the plan of the immortal work of *The Federalist*."¹³

Tradition claims that Hamilton wrote the first installment of the masterpiece known as *The Federalist Papers* in the cabin of a Hudson River sloop as he and Eliza returned to New York from Albany. Eliza recalled going upriver, not down, and said Hamilton laid out the contours of the project as they sailed: "My beloved husband wrote the outline of his papers in *The Federalist* on board of one of the North River sloops while on his way to Albany, a journey . . . which in those days usually occupied a week. Public business so filled up his time that he was compelled to do much of his studying and writing while traveling."¹⁴ Whether he was sailing downriver or upriver, it is pleasant to picture Hamilton scratching out his plan as the tall, single-masted schooner slipped past the Hudson Highlands and the Palisades. This first essay appeared in *The Independent Journal* on October 27, 1787.

Hamilton supervised the entire *Federalist* project. He dreamed up the idea, enlisted the participants, wrote the overwhelming bulk of the essays, and oversaw the publication. For his first collaborator, he recruited John Jay, a tall, thin, balding man with a pale, melancholy face and a wary look in his deep-set gray eyes. Jay always looked austere, almost gaunt, in paintings, though he could show delightful flashes of wit. Descended from Huguenots, the son of a wealthy merchant, Jay had been the major draftsman of the New York State Constitution. Along with Franklin and Adams, he had negotiated the treaty that ended the Revolution and was a longtime secretary of foreign affairs under the Articles of Confederation. With his first-rate mind and unquestioned integrity, he was a superb choice to collaborate on the project.

Hamilton and Jay invited in three other authors. Madison wrote, "The undertaking was proposed by Alexander Hamilton to James Madison with a request to join him and Mr. Jay in carrying it into effect. William Duer was also included in the original plan and wrote two or more papers, which, though intelligent and sprightly, were not continued, nor did they make a part of the printed collection."¹⁵ Hamilton courted Gouverneur Morris, who said he was "warmly pressed by Hamilton to assist in writing the *Federalist*" but was too harried by business to consent.¹⁶ That Hamilton approached Morris and Madison shows that he wanted the anonymous essays to profit from detailed knowledge of the convention's inner workings. He always believed that the framers' intentions were important, though not decisive. He said the Constitution "must speak for itself. Yet to candid minds, the [contemporary] explanations of it by men who had had a perfect opportunity of knowing the views of its framers must operate as a weighty collateral reason for believing the construction agreeing with this explanation to be right, rather than the opposite one."¹⁷

Each author was assigned an area corresponding to his expertise. Jay naturally handled foreign relations. Madison, versed in the history of republics and confed-

eracies, covered much of that ground. As author of the Virginia Plan, he also undertook to explain the general anatomy of the new government. Hamilton took those branches of government most congenial to him: the executive, the judiciary, and some sections on the Senate. Previewing things to come, he also covered military matters and taxation.

The *Federalist* essays first appeared in newspapers. The authors had to camouflage their identities behind a pseudonym, lest they be accused of betraying the confidentiality of the convention. At first, Hamilton planned to publish the pieces under the rubric of a "Citizen of New York" but changed it when James Madison of Virginia was recruited to the project. He then selected the pen name "Publius," which he had first used in 1778 when he berated Samuel Chase for wartime profiteering. It was an apposite choice: Publius Valerius had toppled the last Roman king and set up the republican foundations of government. Hamilton rushed a copy to Mount Vernon without identifying himself as its author. "For the remaining numbers of Publius," Washington responded, "I shall acknowledge yourself obliged, as I am persuaded the subject will be well handled by the author."¹⁸ Jay wrote the next four numbers, then had to drop out because of a severe bout of rheumatism. In the final tally, *The Federalist Papers* ran to eighty-five essays, with fifty-one attributed to Hamilton, twenty-nine to Madison, and only five to Jay. Since Hamilton had not reckoned on Jay's illness and had expected to include Morris and Duer, he could never have anticipated that he and Madison would write so much in seven months—some 175,000 words in all—or that *The Federalist* would essentially settle down to a two-man enterprise. Thanks to the cooperation of Hamilton and Madison, New York emerged as the main arena of intellectual combat over the new plan of government.

The project's magnitude mushroomed tremendously from its origins, as indicated by Archibald McLean, the Hanover Square printer who published the bound version and felt beleaguered by the project. "When I engaged to do the work," he grouched to Robert Troup, "it was to consist of twenty numbers, or at the most twenty-five."¹⁹ Instead of one projected volume of two hundred pages, McLean complained, *The Federalist* ended up running to two volumes of about six hundred pages. To worsen matters, the luckless printer was stuck with several hundred unsold copies and grumbled that he didn't clear five pounds on the whole deal. For Archibald McLean, *The Federalist Papers* were a dreadful flop, an unfortunate publishing venture best forgotten.

To safeguard his anonymity, Hamilton sent the early essays to the newspapers via Robert Troup. If Hamilton was out of town, he sometimes sent them to Eliza, who may have then relayed them along to Troup. Later, as it became an open secret in New York political circles that Hamilton was the chief author, newspaper publisher

Samuel Loudon went straight to Hamilton's office for fresh copy. Many people knew that Hamilton, Madison, and Jay were the authors, but the trio proclaimed their authorship to only a chosen few and then mostly after the first bound volume was published in March 1788. Madison furnished Jefferson with the relevant names in code, while Hamilton sent Washington the book version and observed, "I presume you have understood that the writers . . . are chiefly Mr. Madison and myself, with some aid from Mr. Jay."²⁰ More sensitive was the question of who wrote what. Hamilton and Madison forged a pact that they would reveal this only by mutual agreement, initiating two centuries of scholarly disputation over the authorship of approximately fifteen of the essays. True to their pledge, Hamilton and Madison remained coy on the subject.

The Federalist has been extolled as both a literary and political masterpiece. Theodore Roosevelt commented "that it is on the whole the greatest book" dealing with practical politics.²¹ Its achievement is the more astonishing for having been written under such fierce deadline pressure. The first of the staggered series of ratifying conventions was scheduled to start in late November, and this allowed Hamilton and Madison little opportunity for fresh research or reflection. They agreed to deliver four essays per week (that is, two apiece) at roughly three-day intervals, leaving little time for revision. The essays then appeared in four of the five New York newspapers. The constantly looming deadlines meant that the authors had to draw on information, ideas, and citations already stored in their minds or notes. Luckily, they had both been in training for several years. Madison explained to Jefferson, "Though [the publication is] carried on in concert, the writers are not mutually answerable for all the ideas of each other, there being seldom time for even a perusal of the pieces by any but the writer before they are wanted at the press, and sometimes hardly by the writer himself."²² So excruciating was the schedule, Madison said, that often "whilst the printer was putting into type parts of a number, the following parts were under the pen and to be furnished in time for the press."²³ Very often, Hamilton and Madison first read each other's contributions in print.

Madison was aided by his convention notes and crib sheets from his preparatory reading. Without these scholarly crutches, he confessed, "the performance must have borne a very different aspect."²⁴ For Hamilton, it was a period of madcap activity. He was stuck with his law practice and had to squeeze the essays into breaks in his schedule, as if they were a minor sideline. Robert Troup noted of Hamilton's haste in writing *The Federalist*: "All the numbers written by [Hamilton] were composed under the greatest possible pressure of business, for [he] always had a vast deal of law business to engage his attention." Troup remembered seeing Samuel Loudon "in [Hamilton's] study, waiting to take numbers of *The Federalist* as they came fresh

from" his pen "in order to publish them in the next paper."²⁵ During one prodigious burst after Madison returned to Virginia, Hamilton churned out twenty-one straight essays in a two-month period. On two occasions, he published five essays in a single week and published six in one spectacular week when writing on taxation.

Hamilton's mind always worked with preternatural speed. His collected papers are so stupefying in length that it is hard to believe that one man created them in fewer than five decades. Words were his chief weapons, and his account books are crammed with purchases for thousands of quills, parchments, penknives, slate pencils, reams of foolscap, and wax. His papers show that, Mozart-like, he could transpose complex thoughts onto paper with few revisions. At other times, he tinkered with the prose but generally did not alter the logical progression of his thought. He wrote with the speed of a beautifully organized mind that digested ideas thoroughly, slotted them into appropriate pigeonholes, then regurgitated them at will.

To understand Hamilton's productivity, it is important to note that virtually all of his important work was journalism, prompted by topical issues and written in the midst of controversy. He never wrote as a solitary philosopher for the ages. His friend Nathaniel Pendleton remarked, "His eloquence . . . seemed to require opposition to give it its full force."²⁶ But his topical writing has endured because he plumbed the timeless principles behind contemporary events. Whether in legal briefs or sustained polemics, he wanted to convince people through appeals to their reason. He had an incomparable capacity for work and a metabolism that thrived on conflict. His stupendous output came from the interplay of superhuman stamina and intellect and a fair degree of repetition.

Hamilton developed ingenious ways to wring words from himself. One method was to walk the floor as he formed sentences in his head. William Sullivan left an excellent vignette of Hamilton's intense method of composition.

One who knew his habits of study said of him that when he had a serious object to accomplish, his practice was to reflect on it previously. And when he had gone through this labor, he retired to sleep, without regard to the hour of the night, and, having slept six or seven hours, he rose and having taken strong coffee, seated himself at his table, where he would remain six, seven, or eight hours. And the product of his rapid pen required little correction for the press.²⁷

Since Hamilton's abiding literary sin was prolixity, the time and length constraints imposed by *The Federalist* may have given a salutary concision to his writing.

For all his charisma, Alexander Hamilton was essentially an intellectual loner who took perverse pride in standing against the crowd. All the more remarkable that his greatest literary triumph came in close collaboration with Madison and Jay. After leaving the convention in Philadelphia, Madison had returned to his lodgings at 19 Maiden Lane in Manhattan, where he resided with other Virginia delegates to the now almost moribund Confederation Congress. Later anointed "the Father of the Constitution," Madison had many reservations about the document, especially the equal representation of states in the Senate, and was content at first to let others take up the cudgels in its defense. He also thought it proper that others should assess the convention's work. But by late October, he was so upset by the grotesque distortions of the Constitution and the furor whipped up by the New York press that he agreed to work with Hamilton on *The Federalist*.²⁸

Americans often wonder how this moment could have spawned such extraordinary men as Hamilton and Madison. Part of the answer is that the Revolution produced an insatiable need for thinkers who could generate ideas and wordsmiths who could lucidly expound them. The immediate utility of ideas was an incalculable tonic for the founding generation. The fate of the democratic experiment depended upon political intellectuals who might have been marginalized at other periods.

At this crossroads, Hamilton and Madison must have seemed an odd pair in the New York streets: Hamilton, thirty-two, the peacock, wearing bright colors and chattering gaily, and Madison, thirty-six, the crow in habitual black with a quiet, more reflective manner. When French journalist J. P. Brissot de Warville met them that year, it was the older Madison who resembled a pallid young scholar while Hamilton seemed older and more worldly. "This republican seems to be no more than thirty-three years old," the Frenchman wrote of Madison. "When I saw him, he looked tired, perhaps as a result of the immense labor to which he had devoted himself recently. His expression was that of a stern censor, his conversation disclosed a man of learning, and his countenance was that of a person conscious of his talents and of his duties."²⁹ Of Hamilton: "Mr. Hamilton is Mr. Madison's worthy rival as well as his collaborator. He looks thirty-eight or forty years old, is not tall, and has a resolute, frank, soldierly appearance. . . . [H]e has distinguished himself by his eloquence and by the soundness of his reasoning."³⁰

Hamilton and Madison came to symbolize opposite ends of the political spectrum. At the time of the *Federalist* essays, however, they were so close in style and outlook that scholars find it hard to sort out their separate contributions. In gen-

eral, Madison's style was dense and professorial, Hamilton's more graceful and flowing, yet they had a similar flair for startling epigrams and piercing insights. At this stage, Madison often sounded "Hamiltonian" and vice versa. Later identified as a "strict constructionist" of the Constitution, Madison set forth the doctrine of implied powers that Hamilton later used to expand the powers of the federal government. It was Madison who wrote in *Federalist* number 44, "No axiom is more clearly established in law or in reason than that wherever the end is required, the means are authorized."³¹ At this juncture, they could make common cause on the need to fortify the federal government and curb rampant state abuses.

Both Hamilton and Madison were rational men who assumed that people often acted irrationally because of ambition and avarice. Madison wrote, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary."³² The two shared a grim vision of the human condition, even if Hamilton's had the blacker tinge. They both wanted to erect barriers against irrational popular impulses and tyrannical minorities and majorities. To this end, they thought that public opinion should be distilled by skeptical, sober-minded representatives. Despite Hamilton's reputation as the elitist, the starting point of Madison's most famous essay, *Federalist* number 10, is that people possess different natural endowments, leading to an unequal distribution of property and conflicts of classes and interests. In a big, heterogeneous country, Madison argued, these conflicting interests would neutralize one another, checking abuses of power. "Let ambition counteract ambition," he wrote in *Federalist* number 51.³³

If Madison displays a broader knowledge of theory and history in *The Federalist*, Hamilton betrays wider knowledge of the world. With his itinerant background, he brought commercial, military, and political expertise to bear. This was especially true in discussions of political economy, in which he outshone Madison. Madison showed more interest in constitutional curbs against tyrannical encroachments, whereas Hamilton lauded spurs to action. In sections of *The Federalist* dealing with the executive and judicial branches, Hamilton pressed his case for vigor and energy in government, a hobbyhorse he was to ride for the rest of his career. At the same time, he was always careful to reconcile the need for order with the thirst for liberty. Bernard Bailyn has written that "the Constitution, in creating a strong central government, *The Federalist* argued, did not betray the Revolution, with its radical hopes for greater political freedom than had been known before. Quite the contrary, it fulfilled those radical aspirations, by creating the power necessary to guarantee both the nation's survival and the preservation of the people and the states' rights."³⁴