

Conflicting Political Philosophies in the Early Republic

Directions: Study the following descriptions of the philosophies of Alexander Hamilton, secretary of the treasury, and Thomas Jefferson, secretary of state. Assume the role of either Hamilton or Jefferson, and prepare for a Cabinet meeting with President George Washington tomorrow. The agenda includes discussion of the following issues:

1. Funding the foreign, national, and state debt
2. Proposed Bank of the United States
3. Whiskey excise
4. Protective tariff
5. The country's appropriate response to the French Revolution

Be ready to present your position on each issue and to explain a rationale consistent with your philosophy of government.

Alexander Hamilton

Alexander Hamilton, born in the West Indies in 1757, came to the colonies to go to school and, later, to attend King's College (Columbia University). At seventeen, he composed a series of persuasive letters to the editor on the principles involved in the colonial dispute against the mother country. When war broke out, Hamilton earned a commission as a captain in a New York artillery company. After a short time, George Washington appointed him to be his aide and to think for him, as well as to execute orders. After a time, Hamilton retired to study law and serve as receiver of continental taxes for New York, a position that soon taught him the desirability of a strong national government capable of enforcing its will on adamant states' rights advocates. In 1786, at the poorly-attended Annapolis Convention, Hamilton introduced a resolution to call a convention of all thirteen states to consider revisions to the Articles of Confederation. At the resulting Philadelphia Convention in 1787, Hamilton used all of his influence to push for the strongest possible central government. He later helped to pen a series of "Federalist Papers," designed to build support for the new government. When the Constitution went into effect, Washington again chose Hamilton to do his thinking, this time in organizing the Department of the Treasury to put the nation on a sound financial footing.

In that capacity, Hamilton, now married to the aristocratic Betsy Schuyler of New York, displayed his elitist tendencies and his lack of faith in the common people. Hamilton believed in the development of a strong central government and a self-sufficient economy based on industry as well as agriculture. Although he had strongly supported the American Revolution, he favored the Tory government of Britain over the revolutionary government of France. In creating a financial policy for the new nation, Hamilton aimed, specifically, to establish the credit of the nation, build a strong central government, consolidate the support of the wealthy for the new government, and help to solve the currency shortage that threatened the development of industry in the United States.

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson, the elder son of a prominent Virginia planter, inherited two farms in 1757 when he was fourteen. Jefferson, who had been educated by local tutors, developed an insatiable appetite for learning. Leaving his plantations in the hands of overseers, he moved to Williamsburg at seventeen to pursue professional training at the College of William and Mary. There, young Jefferson became acquainted with the ideas of the Enlightenment and accepted the belief of enlightened thinkers in the capacity of humans to solve problems of society. Along with the English philosopher John Locke, Jefferson believed in certain natural rights that government has an obligation to protect; if the government fails to protect those rights to life, liberty, and property, the people have a right to alter or abolish the government. This idea of the social contract became a major premise of the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson's reading ranged widely in politics, philosophy, religion, natural science, music, architecture, sculpture and painting, the law, literature, and agriculture. Serving in the Virginia colonial legislature in the critical years beginning in 1769, Jefferson soon had ample evidence to convince him of the undesirability of an authoritarian government. He quickly concluded that government should be restricted to protecting natural rights. Jefferson's tenure as minister to France just before the French Revolution reinforced that view. The same concern for human rights prompted Jefferson to withhold support for the new Constitution until the framers agreed to the addition of a Bill of Rights.

While he was not a systematic thinker, Jefferson had clarified his thinking on the proper role of government by the time he agreed to serve as secretary of state in the Washington administration. He wanted the states to retain as much authority as possible and the powers of the national government to be interpreted narrowly. He had seen enough of the manufacturing centers of Europe to be assured that an agricultural economy should avoid many of the undesirable consequences of industrialization and urbanization. Although he favored nonintervention in European affairs as a way of preserving peace, he, nonetheless, strongly favored the French against the British in foreign matters.