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*Alexander Hamilton
and the American Tradition*

IT IS A commonplace that every nation continuously rewrites its history to accord with changes in its moods, ideals and prejudices. The mood of America over the past several years has been a conservative one, a circumstance that has led to a revival of interest in Alexander Hamilton, that national figure who stands out above all others as the architect of a native American conservatism.

And yet it is a curious fact that there are few willing to do him the homage he earned or to recognize his claim to paternity.¹ This seems to be due largely to the fact that the vocal conservatives are the intellectuals, and intellectual conservatives have always been in favor of aristocracy in principle and in general, but have rarely been pleased with any actual aristocracy in particular. Intellectual conservatives in America especially have had little

¹ A notable recent exception is Louis M. Hacker, *Alexander Hamilton in the American Tradition* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1957).

use for the practising conservative, the man of affairs, the spokesman for an economic power elite operating in a business-dominated culture. In the first place, the intellectual, even when he is a conservative, is bound to suffer the alienation felt in some degree by all intellectuals in a business-oriented society. In the second place, the economic conservative has generally neither felt the need for nor requested intellectual support, though he is willing to accept it from those who like von Mises and Hayek speak in the language of business interests. Finally, the intellectual conservative's concern is with tradition, balance, Providence or Higher Law as sources of restraint on man's innate anti-social tendencies. He is accordingly bound to take a dim view of a narrow conservatism that equates private interest with public interest and glorifies an aristocracy not itself restrained by "the tradition of civility." For these and perhaps other reasons, when modern intellectual conservatives have sought to identify the American conservative tradition, they have avoided Hamilton like the plague. When they deal with him at all it is only to dismiss him as a "pseudo-conservative," an "economic conservative" seeking to defend vested interests, a materialist and an economic determinist, and therefore outside the authentic "conservative tradition."²

But if there is a conservative tradition in America, it is the conservatism of Hamilton. And while intellectual conservatism in our own day has stirred the academic community, it has made scarcely a ripple in the world of affairs where the conservative tradition of Hamilton has had its triumphs. For Hamilton is, beyond question, the founding father of the G. M. view of the national interest, of a businessman's government, of the partnership principle, of the conservatism of the present administration and of the mood and principles that put it in office.

The modern practitioners of this economic conservatism are no more inclined than the intellectuals to re-evaluate Hamilton's role

² See, for example, Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), p. 65, and Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (New York: Knopf, 1955), pp. 112 ff. An exception is Raymond English, "Conservatism; The Forbidden Faith," *American Scholar*, XXI (1952), 400-401. English argues that Hamilton, together with Madison, represents the beginning of the tradition of "philosophic conservatism" in America.

in the American tradition. Economic conservatives are not, in the first place, tradition-minded. Their concerns are, like Hamilton's, intensely practical affairs. There is in their outlook an anti-intellectual bias rooted in their commitment to the "realist" view that thought is, after all, parasitic upon action. And there is, in the slogan that "progress is our most important product" and in the activist frame of mind an anti-traditional bias. The appeal of business conservatism is to "success," to the pragmatic test of "workability," to the realist's test of "practicality." If there is any connection here with the intellectual's fondness for tradition, it is to be found in Disraeli's remark that "being practical means continuing in the mistakes of our ancestors." If the practical business conservative conserves a tradition, he does so almost unwittingly, and he is likely to feel no need to prove his legitimacy by establishing his paternity.

There are, therefore, not many eager to sing Hamilton's praises in our own day. But neither was he a popular figure in his own. That he was not seems to have been due to the role he played, as the architect of economic conservatism, in relation to the intellectual conservatives and the liberals of the time. The chief figure among the intellectuals was, of course, John Adams. Adams was in the authentic intellectual conservative tradition of the West which, since Plato and Aristotle, had sought a solution to the problems posed by the tendency of power to corrupt and the irrational proclivities of human nature in the effort to find an alternative to a government of men. Adams found the solution in the doctrine that John Taylor called "doctor Balance, venerable with the rest of antiquity,"³ and in tradition operating in a system of stable social orders. On this basis Adams worked out his elaborate and intricate network of constitutional balances which would, like the Newtonian universe, insure equilibrium under a "government of laws" and, in a mechanical counterposing of powers, provide an alternative not only to majority rule, but to the rule of minorities as well. But while Adams was adding yet another mechanical feature, the better to insure a "government

³ John Taylor, *Inquiry Into the Principles and Policy of the Government of the United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 61.

of laws," Hamilton turned his genius to constructing a political economy in which the "best men" would rule. The "rich, wise, and well-born" would constitute the elite whose judgment would decide between balance and unbalance. For, to Hamilton, government—indeed all social relations—were synonymous with power. Power—centralized, discretionary authority—he held to be the necessary condition of social organization and progress.⁴

It can be persuasively argued that it has always been the fate of intellectual conservatives to supply a moral smokescreen for the machinations of the Machiavellian man of power. The intellectual's effort to do people good has often been ammunition for the man of power who would do them, good. At least this has been the case where the man of power has been perceptive enough to see that the appeals to tradition and balance are essentially spurious, but useful.

And when Adams' irascibility led him to the remark that Hamilton was the "bastard brat of a Scots peddler," he was not simply giving vent to his outraged and admittedly over developed conceit. Nor was the remark unfair solely on the ground that there was at the time no clear evidence as to the nationality of the peddler. Adams' pique and his hatred of Hamilton stemmed from the fact that he was being used by Hamilton. And he knew it. Hamilton could use him because Hamilton understood, as Adams did not, that governments are always "of men."⁵

For the same reasons Hamilton was able to make use of the "liberal" theory of *laissez faire* in the interest of a policy more mercantilist than competitive in the classical sense. He had read Adam Smith, but he was not impressed by the main argument.

He was always aware of the sophistry by which every contract was held to be free which was voluntary. He saw clearly that the contractual relationships on which capitalism rested were always matters of relative bargaining *power*. For him, property

⁴ Government, Hamilton argued in *Federalist No. 33*, "is only another word for POLITICAL POWER AND SUPREMACY."

⁵ Although Hamilton, in *Federalist No. 35* and *No. 60*, argues for the Constitution as a system of balance, he was never persuaded, as was Adams, that balance is an alternative to power. His willingness to use Adams' arguments to serve other purposes was not calculated to endear him to Adams.

was power, and justly so.⁶ The superior are entitled to rule. Since the harmony of interests is not guaranteed by an invisible hand of nature or nature's God, then it must be humanly contrived. To leave men "free," in the classical sense, to seek their own interests in a system of universal competition is to invite anarchy. To imagine that a society is possible in which no man is subject to the constraint of another is visionary idealism. For Adam Smith's invisible hand, Hamilton would substitute the visible hands of the leaders of men. The real political problem, he held, is to insure that those who occupy the uppermost rungs in the political and economic hierarchies, and who accordingly order the lives of those in the lower levels, are genuinely the most capable, far-sighted and enlightened.

Although he has been widely interpreted as a monarchist—this is the basis of the well-known charge that he was a great man, but not a great American—the scheme of government to the erection of which he devoted all his energies and talents has been more accurately labelled by Lodge as "an aristocratic as distinguished from a democratic republic" with a centralized and powerful government.⁷ The evils of the Confederation sprang, in his view, from two sources: "the too great power of the states" which precluded the necessary vigor and strength in the national government, and "the democratic form of their governments."⁸ But the aristocracy which he sought was not an aristocracy based on hereditary orders and classes. It was rather a dual aristocracy: an economic aristocracy of the enterprising in an expanding capitalist economy in close alliance with a far-sighted, enlightened political aristocracy in a limited, representative republic.

At the same time it is not true that Hamilton naively identified the public interest with the private interests of his economic aristocrats. The public interest, for him, lay always in national power and wealth. This end could be realized only by utilizing

⁶ This is a fundamental premise of the "Report on Manufactures." And this, together with his recognition of the force of habit and emulation, also stressed in the "Report," made the laissez faire assumption of a natural harmony of interests inadmissible.

⁷ Henry Cabot Lodge, *Alexander Hamilton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1898), p. 60.

⁸ Lodge, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62.

the egoistic pecuniary and power drives of individuals. Strong, stable government must rely on and make use of human frailties. National power must rest on private property; but national power, not private profit, remains the criterion.⁹ This implies the existence of at least one aristocratic class—the governing class—who are aloof from the meaner motives of profit and wealth which dominate the lives of the economic aristocracy. It was this role which Hamilton envisioned himself as occupying, and not without considerable justification. Personally, he seems to have had nothing but contempt for the motives that guided the speculators and for the crass materialism of the struggle for wealth. These men and these motives must be catered to and put into the service of a strong national state, but under the direction of men like himself, men of loftier view adept in turning the meaner motives of lesser men to public account. No charge of speculation, no charge of turning his remarkable intellectual powers or his access to inside information to his own aggrandizement was ever successfully maintained against him.¹⁰ If he was a man with pride enough to match his inordinate ambition, the stakes for which he played were not the paltry counters of the market place; they were the destiny of a nation. To translate the narrow private interests of his talented but parochial fellows into the sinews of strength of a stable and orderly society; to prevent the rabble from destroying themselves and society with them through the pathetic delusions of grandeur inspired in them by the theory of democracy; to provide a new nation with the kind of government which it really needed and to save it from the anarchy to which an ignorant and misguided populace would have liked to bring it; these constituted Hamilton's mission as he saw it.

As the acknowledged leader of the Federalist party, and as self-

⁹ This point of view is reflected, for example, in his attitude on the protective tariff. In *Federalist No. 35* he wrote that duties are exorbitant if they "tend to render other classes of the community tributary, *in an improper degree*, to the manufacturing classes, to whom they give a *premature* monopoly of the markets." Italics supplied.

¹⁰ This was not due to lack of energy or diligence on the part of the Jeffersonians. The lengths to which they were willing to go to discredit Hamilton personally are revealed in the roles played by Monroe and others in the Reynolds affair.

appointed Prime Minister of Washington's cabinet, Hamilton bent all his energies to the task. Fundamentally, his problem was to establish policies which would firmly link the interests of the wealthy and powerful with the interests of the state. From his position as Secretary of the Treasury he submitted to Congress the financial and economic program designed to accomplish this objective. The funding of the national debt at par, the assumption by the national government of state debts, the establishment of a national bank, and the program of economic development under a protective tariff outlined in his "Report on Manufactures" were to establish the new nation on a solid capitalistic basis. The economic and financial sinews of national strength and power required an integrated ruling class.

Hamilton's contempt for the common man was never more than thinly concealed. "The mass of the people," he thought, "are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right." So far as the masses of men are concerned, therefore, when we say that Hamilton's dream was an aristocratic republic of the enterprising, what we mean to describe is a form of representative government in which it is the aristocracy who are actually represented. So far as the masses are concerned, Hamilton argued that they *were* represented in any government which spoke for them through the aristocracy. Their *real* interests are identical with the interests of the commercial or landed aristocracies.¹¹ This is the theory of "virtual representation" developed by Burke and utilized in England to maintain the substance of aristocracy in the language of democracy. In the *Federalist* Hamilton confuses the issue by describing the constitutional limitations on popular sovereignty as, in effect, cooling off devices which permit an appeal from the people drunk to the people sober. But he saw them as nothing of the kind. Popular "delusions" are to be resisted, not temporarily in order to provide time for second thought, but as a permanent arrangement made possible by a system of representation designed to reflect the interests of the aristocracy.¹²

¹¹ See *Federalist No. 35* in which Hamilton argues that "merchants" and "landholders" are the "natural representatives" of "mechanics" and persons engaged in agriculture respectively.

¹² This is an implicit premise in his argument for "time and opportunity for more cool and sedate reflection" in *Federalist No. 71*.

Hamilton was not alone in his distrust of the people and in his contempt for democracy. What made him the leader of the conservative forces of his day was his ability to translate their aspirations into a legislative program. What made him also their spokesman was his facility in making use of the doctrines of intellectual conservatism and of popular sentiments of democracy as well. Representative government, federalism, even natural rights, could be used to support institutions capable of infusing and making dominant the aristocratic spirit. His state papers, the crusading series of newspaper articles that poured from his pen in every crisis, and his public speeches were masterpieces of the manipulation of political symbols. The democrats could have their high-sounding slogans; Hamilton would even help to make them popular, provided always that they could be used to cloak the realities of an aristocratic, orderly, strong government.¹³

When, however, in 1800 it appeared that republican government must come to mean democratic government, when it seemed that the federal structure must play into the hands of the Jeffersonians, when "states rights" could be used in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions to challenge the constitutionality of the Alien and Sedition Acts, Hamilton was prepared to drop the pretense and was as willing and ready to destroy the states and to eliminate republicanism as he had been earlier to defend them. His speeches before the New York Convention for the Ratification of the Constitution had justified that document as resting on the representative and federal principles.¹⁴ "I insist," he said, "that it never can be the interest or desire of the National Legislature to destroy the State governments." But the evidence is abundant that he never developed any emotional attachment

¹³ Hamilton's contributions to the *Federalist* are replete with examples. Compare, for example, his argument for majority rule in *No. 22* with his argument for balance in *No. 35* and *No. 60*. For examples of Hamilton's dissimulation in the area of foreign policy see Albert H. Bowman, "Jefferson, Hamilton and American Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXI (1956), 18-41. It was this hypocrisy that led John Quincy Adams to the remark that "like the Priests of Egypt, he had a revelation for the multitude and a secret for the initiated."

¹⁴ Henry Cabot Lodge (ed.), *Works of Alexander Hamilton* (Constitutional edition; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, n. d.), II, 67-70.

to a state government and always regarded the states as obstacles to the energy and power required in a central government.

The idea of federalism was harmless enough, however, so long as the instruments of national government were not handicapped by it. So long, that is, as the theory could be construed to permit the establishment of a national bank and such other instrumentalities as a powerful, aristocratic state demanded. But when the states seemed to provide the basis of the growth and strength of the Jeffersonian political machine, federalism became an intolerable doctrine. Thus, in 1799 in a letter to Drayton, the Speaker of the House, Hamilton advised the subdivision of the states into convenient administrative units as soon as practicable.

In the New York Convention Hamilton had also argued that the Constitution, through its system of representation, founded all political power on the people. But when Jefferson's victory seemed imminent in 1800, it was Hamilton who planned and engineered the strategies by which some Federalists were willing to destroy representative government to defeat Jefferson. After the defeat of the Federalists in the New York elections, it was Hamilton who wrote Governor Jay suggesting that he adopt a tactic which would have nullified the election and maintained the Federalists in power. "In times like these," he wrote, "it will not do to be overscrupulous." Whatever is necessary must be undertaken "to prevent an atheist in religion and a fanatic in politics from getting possession of the helm of the state."¹⁵ And when he added that he regarded the proposed measures as being "legal and constitutional steps," he was not simply ministering to a guilty conscience; he was restating his view that the constitutional principles of representation, federalism, and civil liberties had been concessions to popular prejudice which were never intended to interfere with the essential principles of aristocracy and national power.

The Federalists had, from the beginning, identified democracy with anarchy. This conviction was strengthened by the impact of the French Revolution on American politics. American democrats had been restive but unorganized in the face of Hamilton's

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, X, 371.

financial and economic program. Indeed, until Gallatin's appearance on the national scene, none of the Jeffersonians seems to have had sufficient grasp of the principles of public finance to understand that program well enough for effective criticism. Vaguely but deeply concerned about what they regarded as the infusion into American culture of the spirit of aristocracy, Jefferson's mob was galvanized into effective political organization and action by the French struggle for the Rights of Man. The Hamiltonians never understood this American reaction to the French Revolution. They regarded it as confirmation of their fears, as an attack on society that must lead to anarchy and despotism. Jeffersonians, Hamilton was convinced, were American Jacobins. Almost at the inception of the French Revolution, he advised Lafayette that the end result must be mob rule, anarchy, war and ruthless dictatorship.¹⁶ His fatal error lay in assuming that the causes were rooted in the theory of democracy and the doctrine of natural rights and that, therefore, Jeffersonians were cut from the same cloth. This conviction led him increasingly to identify dissent from Federalist policies with treason and to regard himself and his policies as the only barrier between the country and a reign of terror. In 1800, with the victory of Jefferson imminent, he announced to an assemblage of prominent Federalists that he confidently expected that within four years "he would either lose his head or be the leader of a triumphant army."¹⁷

Henry Cabot Lodge, writing in 1882, observed: "That this dread of the success of the other side in a representative government should have led such a man as Hamilton" to such attitudes "is a most melancholy example of the power and the danger of such sentiments, which are wholly foreign to free constitutional systems."¹⁸ The relevance of Lodge's comment for American politics since World War II will only be lost on those who, like

¹⁶ David Loth, *Alexander Hamilton; Portrait of a Prodigy* (New York: Carrick & Evans, Inc., 1939), p. 207.

¹⁷ *Aurora*, June 21, 1800. Quoted by Claude G. Bowers, *Jefferson and Hamilton: The Struggle for Democracy in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925), p. 462.

¹⁸ Lodge, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

Hamilton, hold values that they prize more dearly than those of intellectual freedom.

While the reaction of the democrats to the French Revolution, for example in the case of Genet, seemed to confirm the fears of Hamilton and the Federalists, the course of action which they pursued had deeper roots. The reaction took the form of the Alien and Sedition Acts. The organization of the Jeffersonian party and its democratic societies was the immediate provocation. In 1794 Washington had been prevailed upon to include an attack on the societies in his Message to Congress. Increasingly, the leading Federalists and their newspapers tended to identify popular opposition to their policies with treason. Finally, from 1798 to the fall of 1800, the new nation experienced its first reign of terror—but a reign of terror like those that followed periodically later, underwritten in the name of law and order and justified in the name of freedom. But if the reign of terror was not as terrifying—or as effective—as its proponents would have desired, it was because men in large numbers refused to be terrified. They believed that, as Tawney later put it, “men exercise only the power that they are allowed to exercise by other men, whom, when their clothes are off, they much resemble. . . .” And, accordingly, they understood further that “to destroy it, nothing more is required than to be indifferent to its threats, and to prefer other goods to those which it promises. Nothing less, however, is required also.”¹⁹

Relying on a letter in which Hamilton warned his colleagues against the severe language of the first drafts of the Alien and Sedition Acts, historians have quite generally acquitted him of responsibility for them. Hamilton, I think, would smile at this tenderness. His initial objections to the acts were dictated by a strategic desire not to make martyrs of the Jeffersonians needlessly. His subsequent behavior and pronouncements indicate a firm allegiance to the principle that orderly government rests on what modern political scientists call “charisma”—the emotional reliance of the people on the potency of their leaders—and on reverence

¹⁹ R. H. Tawney, *Equality* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931), p. 211.

for constituted authority.²⁰ Enduring stability and strength require that these characteristics be matters of habit and tradition. But where these sanctions are unavailable, the coercive imposition of loyalty constitutes a necessary if temporary substitute.

With the victory of Jefferson in 1800, Hamilton was despondent. "Every day," he wrote to Gouverneur Morris in 1802, "proves to me more and more that this American world was not made for me." And he cautioned Morris to recognize the fact that, though, "by birth a native of this country," he too was "by *genius* an exotic," acting upon a stage unsuited to his aristocratic outlook and superior talents.²¹ The cynical Morris was better equipped than Hamilton to adjust to defeat, but Hamilton had built better than he knew. The impersonal forces on which he had built were still operative. The dynamism of technological change, as he had foreseen, meant the development of commerce and industry, factories and cities. And industrialism, as he clearly foresaw, was the key to national survival in the world of the future. The victory of the North in the Civil War was the irrefutable vindication of his insight.

But in 1802 Hamilton was misled by his thoroughly mistaken appraisal of the meaning and implications of American democratic ideals and of their relation to the physical facts of the frontier. The philosophy of liberty and equality in America was not, as he thought, a doctrine of perfection which must lead to anarchy or despotism. To be sure, the meaning of equality to men like Jefferson, Paine and Taylor was not exhausted, as Hamilton would have liked and as some modern conservatives would have us believe, in the principle of equality before the law. It was more a moral guide to conduct than a legal rule. "Choose equality and flee greed," Menander had said in one of his maxims.²² The choice of equality, John Taylor of Caroline similarly contended, is an alternative to "avarice and ambition." In his words, "a handful

²⁰ See James Morton Smith, "Alexander Hamilton, the Alien Law, and Seditious Libels," *Review of Politics*, XVI (1954), 305-333.

²¹ Letter to Morris of February 27, 1802. Quoted by Lodge, *op. cit.*, pp. 262-263. Italics in original.

²² Quoted by Matthew Arnold in his essays on "Equality." *Mixed Essays* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1879), p. 49.

of guineas thrown among a mob” and Hamilton’s program of “a mountain of dollars exposed to be scrambled for by a nation” are equally well calculated to infuse in the populace the creed of inequality, the belief that no man can regard his condition as worthwhile unless it is manifestly better than his neighbor’s.²³ Taylor was not alone. In the writings of Paine, Sam Adams, Barlow and others, equality recurs as the alternative to “avarice and ambition.”

It was not that these men imagined that the desires for wealth and power could be eliminated as potent human motivations. “Where avarice and ambition beat up for recruits,” Taylor noted, “too many are prone to enlist.”²⁴ What they objected to was the official, public alliance between government and an economic power system. What they argued was that to make capitalism public policy—in the modern phrase, to qualify democracy with the adjective capitalistic—is to destroy its essential meaning. What these men objected to, in short, was an official alliance between government and a particular creed of inequality, the effect of which would be to put those inequalities beyond the reach of public examination, and to make difficult or impossible the realization of other and more important human differences and potentialities.

“Power over a man’s subsistence,” Hamilton had said, “is power over his will.” The Jeffersonians agreed. But they concluded that economic independence is therefore a necessary condition of the free society. Their ideal democrat was the man who approximates, or at least seeks to approximate, the character of the Jeffersonian journalist and editor, Philip Freneau, as Bowers describes him: “He had no vanity, no ambition for place or power, and no fear of either. He wore no man’s collar and he was no man’s man. He was a law unto himself.”²⁵ Industrial and urban society represented for them the conditions in which this kind of individuality was impossible precisely because industrial and commercial property, as distinguished from agricultural property in the frontier community, implied control over men’s

²³ Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁵ Bowers, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

lives and magnified in all men “the thirst of avarice and ambition for wealth and power.”²⁶ They sought refuge in an agrarianism where, they believed, conditions of life made the ethic of equality possible and practicable. They believed that the Hamiltonian system, in its doctrines of the Main Chance and equality of opportunity to achieve inequalities, contained the most seductive form of the aristocratic principle, and the only one which had a real chance of corrupting the moral principles of American democracy. They proposed that the greatness of America lay in its dedicating itself to the pursuit of equality as the most adequate basis for the development of individual capacities of mind and character, and as the only framework in which diversity of natural endowment could find both expression and recognition. Equality, as James Wilson expressed it in the Constitutional Convention, meant that not wealth or power, but the “cultivation and improvement of the human mind” was the primary object of government.²⁷ The victory of Hamiltonianism meant for Taylor the establishment of an aristocracy of “paper and patronage”; but more important it meant in a fundamental sense the “democratization of aristocratic vice,” the abandonment of the moral principle of equality which both justified democratic institutions and gave them meaning.

But any real threat to Hamilton’s vision of a capitalistic and aristocratic society could come only from an alternative program for channeling the forces of industrialization and urbanization. The existence of the frontier and the absence of a social system linking an hereditary aristocracy with land ownership seemed to make it unnecessary for the democrats to face the difficult task of working out the implications of their assumptions in the conditions of industrialism. Unlike Europe, the philosophy of liberty, equality, fraternity was not formulated in a manner capable of challenging effectively the growth of industrial capitalism. If this circumstance helped save us from doctrinaire socialism, it like-

²⁶ Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

²⁷ Quoted in Alpheus Thomas Mason, *Free Government in the Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 234. It was from this central premise that Wilson argued the validity of majority rule.

wise acted as a deterrent to all effort at conscious, intelligent appraisal of the course that economic changes were taking.²⁸ As a consequence, the victory of industrialism meant the accompanying triumph of Hamiltonianism.

American life was rapidly brought into conformity with the Hamiltonian ideal along two fronts. His vision of an industrial capitalistic society was reflected in the institutions he had been so instrumental in inaugurating and which, as they grew and developed, came more and more to shape the content, the operative goals and the details of men's lives. Hamilton was always confident that a victory in the details of life is, in the long run, a victory over men's minds as well.²⁹ And since, in his view men are fundamentally egoists for whom success can mean only opportunity for wealth and power, to have arranged the details so as to put a premium on the opportunity to rise in organized hierarchies was to insure success.

Hence the second front on which Hamiltonianism triumphed: The democratic ideals themselves were transformed so as to make them serviceable as justifications of Hamiltonian institutions. Within a brief thirty years the Jeffersonian ideal of equality to develop individuality was transformed into Jacksonian democracy's ideal of equality of opportunity for ambition, equality of opportunity to climb the ladder of wealth and power. Henceforth the democratic creed in America was to be conditioned and confined by the cult of success in an industrial capitalist order. "Equality of opportunity" was, and is, the magic formula by which the rhetoric of democracy is made to serve the substance of the aristocratic ideal.³⁰ In periodic "revolts of the American conscience" men were occasionally to challenge the practices of

²⁸ See the comments of Morris R. Cohen in Felix S. Cohen, (ed.), *American Thought; A Critical Sketch* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1954), pp. 37 ff.

²⁹ This view is implicit in the emphasis Hamilton placed on habit in human behavior and in the view expressed in *Federalist No. 6* that "momentary passions, and immediate interests, have a more active and imperious control over human conduct than general or remote considerations of policy, utility, or justice."

³⁰ "Equality of opportunity" has not been generally recognized as, at bottom, a conservative doctrine. Clinton Rossiter, however, sees it as one of the major themes of a meaningful modern conservatism. See Rossiter, *op. cit.*, pp. 196, 255-256.

industrial aristocracy, but generally even these revolts were aimed at rectifying inequalities in economic opportunity. Only occasionally did an Emerson point out that, judged by the Jeffersonian ideal, increasing numbers of men “succeeded” but in their very success failed to reach “the mark of a good and equal life.” And while many listened, few caught the point of his insistence that typical Americans came more and more, “like one class of forest animals, . . . [to] have nothing but a prehensile tail; climb they must, or crawl.”³¹

Where democracy was viewed as a racetrack, the equal start and the code of sportsmanship passed for social ethics, and few could pause in the race to hear Santayana’s complaint that “in a country where all men are free, every man finds that what most matters has been settled for him beforehand.”³²

As a consequence, it was to Hamilton’s and not to Jefferson’s vision of America that Matthew Arnold referred when he posed the fundamental problem for England at the turn of the last century: “to use a short and significant modern expression which every one understands, what influence may help us to prevent the English people from becoming, with the growth of democracy, *Americanized*?”³³

The irony of American history seems to me to lie in this process by which Hamiltonian individualism achieved victories over Jeffersonian individualism by use of the Jeffersonian rhetoric.

The irony is compounded by the assertion of many recent intellectual conservatives that the conformity of American life is the inevitable outcome of the logic of the *democratic* concepts of equality and popular sovereignty.³⁴ If Hamilton can hear from wherever he is, he looks, I am sure, quite like the cat who swallowed the canary.

³¹ The quotation is from the essay on “Politics.” *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Heritage Press, n. d.), p. 235.

³² Quoted by Alan Valentine, *The Age of Conformity* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), p. 62.

³³ Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 23. Italics in original.

³⁴ See, for example, Valentine, *op. cit.*, *passim*.