

The Challenge of Theory into Practice  
A Critical Examination of  
Dr. Darren Staloff's  
Hamilton, Adams, and Jefferson  
And the Politics of the Enlightenment

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## Part 1

### Paradox of the Enlightenment

I have always been fascinated by the challenges theorists face in any field to put into practice the “discoveries” they make in the theoretical realm. It was a rare “convergence of the planets” that gave a most extraordinary group of generally like-minded men an opportunity to address the momentous issue of self-government. The perfect alignment of political events, geographical location, and philosophical development gave Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson the historically unique chance to make “a great leap forward” in the realm of political science. As Prof. Staloff shows in his remarkable book, these men’s thinking evolved over their careers in response to the changing political realities. Why this occurred is the topic of this paper and, through analysis of Darrin Staloff’s book, I hope to discover the causes and impacts of their evolving philosophies and comment on the implications of those evolutions.

What allowed this historically unique moment to happen? Prof. Staloff believed it was the Enlightenment’s achievement to “naturalize the world”. The universe “was not the ‘creation’ but ‘nature,’ and nature was a system of interacting entities with man no longer conceived as occupying an intermediary position in a great chain of beings” (p. 14). That is, man was in control of his destiny, that the world was knowable, and most importantly, man was “progressive” (Humanity was capable self-improvement or progress). In America, away from the centralized seats of both governmental and religious authority, English settlers were able to develop organizations in both spheres,

allowing the “habit of democracy” and self-reliance to be firmly established (p. 19). Although regional differences were remarkable and would eventually be a source of significant divergence of opinion among the three men, the common thread of independent thought and action would bind the colonies together to ultimately achieve political independence from Great Britain.

The brevity of this paper demands that I focus my commentary on the philosophical underpinnings of those momentous decades that had profound implications for the United States and the world. I will limit my discussion to the problem of “thought into action”, taking each man in turn. In his book, Prof. Staloff uses the phrase “the Turning” to describe this response to the problem of “thought into action.” Therefore, I will first turn to Alexander Hamilton to discover how his thinking evolved

## Part II Alexander Hamilton – The Enlightenment Fulfilled

*“The political forces he represented and the vision of the nation he pursued were both powerfully alluring and deeply troubling to his fellow Americans.” (p. 46)*

No founder had a more complete and more accurate vision of America than Alexander Hamilton. Note that I did not call it *his* vision, as in something he was trying to implement, but rather his recognition of the forces of history and economics that were already unleashed. I will argue that Hamilton’s programs were his attempts to harness those forces to the advantage of the United States. Unlike Jefferson, whose vision was essentially static or even regressive (America as a great agrarian Republic), Hamilton provided the young nation with a creative and dynamic strategy that laid the foundation

for the economic powerhouse that America would become. His intellectual journey, in many ways like Adams', embodies the very essence of the American story.

Born a bastard in a Caribbean slave colony, Hamilton's early genius won him the support of the island business community which sent him, at the age of sixteen, to the College of New Jersey (Princeton). Later he attended King's College (Columbia) in New York City. He would never return to the colony (bad luck for them!). Soon he became intoxicated by the freedom and entrepreneurial spirit he found in New York which informed his outlook for the rest of his life. In the period of the debates with Great Britain and continuing into the early days of the Revolution, Hamilton was (somewhat surprisingly) a strong supporter of the democratic impulse he felt around him. He believed that "the instability of popular government is due to elitist prejudices." (p. 61) His experience in Washington's service during the Revolution began to erode his faith in his political creed (p. 67). At fault was the states' unwillingness to support the central government in meaningful ways. "We must have a Government with more power" (p. 69) bemoaned Hamilton. For the rest of his life the states would be the object of his derision and enmity. (p. 71) That led to the development of a central tenet of Hamiltonian philosophy: Liberty was not the only goal of statecraft, but "strength and stability in the organization of government." (p. 74)

Hamilton's skeptical view of the states reached full maturation during the political crisis of 1785 – 89. Critical to understanding Hamilton during this period is to appreciate his growing realization that the power of the states was a genuine threat to the union. To combat this trend, Hamilton realized that support for the national government was based on the powerful financial sector having a vested interest in the success of the new

national government. (*That is his primary political rationale for taking on the states' Revolutionary War debts.*) What most people saw as corruption (ambition and deal-making), Hamilton saw as an opportunity to turn private vices into public benefits. (p. 49) For the new government to work, the political elite (admittedly for Hamilton this doubled as the nation's financial elite) must commit themselves to Political Responsibility – i.e. they must be accountable for the actions of the new government. (p. 73)

Hamilton's philosophy of the ends of constitutional government is instructive when evaluating his time in Washington's cabinet. "If government is to be charged with certain duties and tasks, it must be armed with the requisite authority and resources to discharge those duties." What is the point of having power to acquire debt or raise troops if the government does not have the means to effectively organize the finances or supply the troops in a timely or proper manner?

Contrary to popular perception, Hamilton never completely abandoned his democratic heritage. Hamilton understood that the protection of liberty and the stability of government rested on the people's commitment to two principles. The least democratic branch (the judiciary) stood to be the best guarantor of liberty because it could be "above the fray" (p. 130) and that for *any* regime (even the most despotic) there exists a need for popular support for it to be legitimate (p. 77). As I will explore in the next section on John Adams in regards to his feelings on the problem of the elite, Hamilton understood that liberty does not depend on democracy and that in fact democracy could be a very real threat to liberty. This central feature of Hamilton's philosophy colored his countrymen's perception of him and led directly to the great schism in American politics in the 1790s.

Part III – John Adams and the "Problem" of the Elite

What I found most fascinating in Prof. Staloff's book when his attention turned to John Adams was "the problem of the elite" and Adam's response to this dilemma. Recognizing that all societies develop political elite, the central challenge facing those constructing a framework of government whose primary *raison d'être* is the protection of liberty is what to do with the elite. The "early" John Adams embraced two concepts to handle this issue: education of the populace and a structure of government that included "a bicameral legislature, checked and balanced by a powerful and separate executive, and an independent judiciary." (p. 133)

Like Hamilton, Adams was a product of an educational system that emphasized excellence to lift himself up and out of the economic class of his birth. (p. 132) Unlike Hamilton, John Adams emerged from a social milieu that informed his early views of the power of education. The finest public education system in the English speaking world (excepting Scotland [p. 140]) existed in New England which convinced him that education could lift the body politic making it a bulwark of the republic. "Almost all mankind have lost their liberties through ignorance" bemoaned a 1774 John Adams.

Adams' perspective on the Stamp Act is most illuminating in this regard. He saw the Act as a Tory/ministerial assault on learning, robbing the people of "the cultural resources essential to defend their liberties". (p. 157) (As an aside, on September 16 I used this quote in class – my first direct opportunity to utilize information from this class in my classes!) Since this was an Act of Parliament, the memory of the Stamp Act may have colored Adams latter views concerning a "tyranny of the many" that would earn him scorn from the democratically inclined leadership during the constitutional crisis of 1785

– 89.

It was this crisis coupled with the seemingly inability of the states to effectively govern themselves that soured Adams on the notion that education would lift the vast majority of the polity to a level that would guarantee its ability to self-govern. Adams had included in the Massachusetts constitution the mandatory education of the children of the Commonwealth, but this notion did not spread to the other states. Particularly in the South, the idea of a general education was not supported. I believe that Shay's Rebellion in Massachusetts, along with the challenging situation in Rhode Island, must have genuinely depressed Adams. Both states had sound education systems and yet both faced challenges to their political stability. An older John Adams would agree with Voltaire that ten percent of the population (in a better mood Adams might say twenty percent) could be educated. (p. 159 - 160) For me this immediately brought to mind W.E.B. Du Bois' statement 100+ years later concerning the "talented-tenth". If this is true it would bring Adams directly to the next issue: if we must have elite, can we decide what type of elite? If we believe in each man's right to Liberty and self-government, how can we best assure that the elite are tempered in their governance? Adams also knew that a liberal education does not guarantee ethical or even moral behavior (p.160), so the "problem" of the elite becomes the central dilemma not only for Adams, but for America.

Adams answer, as we know, is a government based on a series of checks and balances. Every year I stress to my students how little democracy existed in the original Constitution when it is contrasted with the Articles of Confederation or many of the state constitutions written in this period, yet this document has proven to be the best defender of liberty. Why? For this we can thank the outstanding, thoughtful, and theoretical work of John Adams.

As Hamilton, Adams understood that the elite must have a vested interest in the success of the young Republic. Unlike Hamilton, Adams envision an educated elite emerging, one who's vested interest would be "intellectual", in other words, their participation in the government would be assured regardless of their wealth, but on their merit. The challenge for Adams then was to bring the elite into the government, maybe even accepting their dominance, but never extinguishing the voice and influence of the "common man". Thus, the bicameral legislature includes a "lower" house for the common man and an "upper" house that would be the near-exclusive domain of the elite both assuring their participation in the government and ostracizing them from the direct influence over the people. The independent judiciary would have to be dominated by the intellectual elite by the very nature of the discipline of law and a powerful executive of a single individual chosen by the nations elite would serve as the capstone of this structure.

Having looked at both Hamilton and Adams, and having been persuaded that democracy can not insure the continuance of liberty, what now do I think of the "democrat", the great defender of the rights of the states over a central government, the man who will emerge as sort of arch-nemesis of Hamilton-Adams, Thomas Jefferson? For this answer, an extended look at the Jeffersonian paradox will be the thrust of the third part of my paper.

#### Part IV – Thomas Jefferson – Romantic America(n)

No American both inspires and troubles us more than Thomas Jefferson. "The powerful evocation of the 'the laws of nature and nature's god' and the 'self-evident' truths that 'all men are created equal' and enjoy from 'their creator' the 'inalienable rights' to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'" that transformed the Declaration of

Independence from a state paper whose intended purpose was to facilitate diplomacy with France to a defining statement on the theory of the nature of government (p. 247) was penned by a man who owned slaves. The last five words of that sentence have presented teachers with the central paradox not only of Thomas Jefferson by essentially America as well.

It was the experiences of the Revolutionary period and the constitution crisis that, like Hamilton and Adams, transformed Jefferson's re-thinking of the philosophies of the Enlightenment. It was not so much a rejection of the enlightenment rather than a freeing of the constraints of that body of thought that Jefferson embraced. In one of the very few places in Prof. Staloffs book that I find myself in disagreement with him is the passage that he states that Jefferson's views "were progressive, radical, and democratic." (p. 247) Radical and democratic I agree, but progressive?

Did Jefferson understand the cancerous impact of the institution of slavery? He did, and nowhere is this more obvious than in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In this, his only book-length work of his literary life, Jefferson is candid on slavery and its impact, namely its society and economy were retarded by eighteenth century standards. (p. 281) ignoring the critics, who pointed out that cities and a fully functioning economic life was in fact civilization, Jefferson envisioned a rural, rustic society as the best guarantor of liberty and it is on this point that my disagreement with Prof. Staloff over the "progressive" nature of Jefferson's thinking is based. For all of his attempts to reform the state of Virginia, one fact remains: it was predicated on the maintenance of (and ultimate expansion of) the institution of chattel slavery. Nothing could be more contradicting of the very points put forth in the Declaration.

Jefferson troubles us for the very reason that he embodies the self-image we have of America. A nation “conceived in liberty” and “dedicated to proposition that all men are created equal” could have as its true philosophical founder someone who ultimately failed to convince himself of the rightness of the argument he put forth and that gives us pause. He is the ultimate American, noble and ignoble, genius and flawed, romantic and tragic.

In the first class of each new academic year I give my students the thesis of the course, the story-arc if you will. I use Jefferson’s words from that most amazing document the Declaration of Independence. The struggle of America, its “project”, is the realization of the legal, ethical, and moral argument put forward by Jefferson, he who ultimately failed and left as his last will and testament the charge to assure those inalienable rights to all.

For me Hamilton, Adams, and Jefferson are the pieces that created America, especially the intellectual foundation of our nation. Each man contributed key components to the structure of government and the society that it would govern, Hamilton the economic parameters, Adams the political parameters, and Jefferson the idealistic parameters. Each man transformed his thinking to adapt to new realities he found and the challenges the young Republic faced. Without each, America would have been less of a nation.