

# Hamilton's final years: the Christian Constitutional Society

by Donald Phau

By 1802, a little over one year before his murder, Alexander Hamilton stood virtually alone, as the country he had helped to found rapidly degenerated. His arch-foe Thomas Jefferson, as President, had turned the economy over to the European oligarchy. Jefferson had chosen Albert Gallatin, Swiss aristocrat and protégé of the man who had destroyed France, Jacques Necker, as his Treasury secretary. The Federalists, the political party which Hamilton and George Washington had founded and which had led the nation through the storms of its first years, had fallen into the hands the British, even supporting Hamilton's future murderer, Aaron Burr, for President.

Establishment historians have succeeded in painting an entirely false view of the last years of Hamilton's life. He is portrayed as a "brooding" man, a "fallen leader," who quit his party and retired in frustration. Indeed, his enemies had run countless operations to drive Hamilton out of public life, but to no avail. These operations included the murder of his eldest son, in a duel set up by Burr, and numerous attempts to frame up the former secretary of the Treasury on the 18th-century equivalent of "securities fraud."

In a letter to Benjamin Rush on Feb. 12, 1802, Hamilton writes of his son's death. The letter reveals a deeply religious side of Hamilton which plays a key part in his last years. "My loss is indeed great. The brightest as well as the eldest of my family has been taken from me. You estimated him rightly. He was a fine youth. But why should I repine? It was the will of heaven, and he is now out of the reach of the seductions and calamities of a world of folly, full of vice, full of danger—of least value in proportion as it is best known. I firmly trust, also, that he has safely reached the haven of eternal repose and felicity."

Standing up, alone, for his beliefs was the hallmark of Hamilton's character. He minced no words in characterizing the so-called leadership of the country. He called Jefferson an "atheist" and a "fanatic"; as for former President John Adams, he quoted Ben Franklin, who said, "Mr. Adams: He is always honest, sometimes great, but often mad." But his real contempt was reserved for Aaron Burr, the man the Federalists ended up supporting for President against Jefferson. Hamilton waged a one-man campaign to convince his party that Burr's election to the presidency would be far worse than the election of Jefferson. Hamilton wrote to

Gouverneur Morris on Dec. 24, 1800:

"Jefferson or Burr? the former without doubt. The latter, in my judgement, has no principle, public or private; could be bound by no agreement; will listen to no monitor but his ambition, and for this purpose will use the worst part of the community as a ladder to climb to permanent power, and an instrument to crush the better part. He is bankrupt beyond redemption, except by the resources which grow out of war and disorder, or by a sale to a foreign power, or by great speculation. War with Great Britain would be an immediate instrument. He is sanguine enough to hope every thing, daring enough to attempt every thing, wicked enough to scruple nothing. From the elevation of such a man may heaven preserve the country."

Due to Hamilton's efforts Burr was barely defeated by Jefferson. Burr would have his revenge, killing Hamilton in a duel four years later. Yet Hamilton saw that if the Federalist Party could stoop so low as to support Burr, in order to gain the presidency, he could no longer associate himself with it. In January 1801 he wrote to James A. Bayard: "If the party shall, by supporting Mr. Burr as President, adopt him for their official chief, I shall be obliged to consider myself an isolated man. It will be impossible for me to reconcile with my notions of honor or policy the continuing to be of a party which, according to my apprehension, will have degraded itself and the country."

## Countering the 'Jacobins'

It is at this very point that the "history" books write Hamilton off. Hated by the Jeffersonian democrats and denounced by those Federalists for destroying the party he had helped found and lead, Hamilton's career was supposedly over. In reality, Hamilton had begun to plan out how to organize a core group of cadre consisting of men determined to rescue the nation from the depths into which it had fallen. Hamilton called his new organization "The Christian Constitutional Society."

For Hamilton, the enemy was the "Jacobinism" of the French Enlightenment, a brand of thought which the "atheistic" Jefferson utilized to establish the doctrine of separation of Church and State. The first principle of the new society, even before supporting the Constitution, was "the support of the Christian religion." In a letter to his friend James Bayard



Alexander Hamilton was laying plans for a “Christian Constitutional Society” to put the United States back on sound economic principles when he was killed in a duel by British agent Aaron Burr in July 1804.

in April 1802, Hamilton lays out, in rough draft, an outline for the new society. It would start out as a network of people dedicated to the “diffusion of information,” as well as those who would monitor the local newspapers—a kind of intelligence-gathering organization. To counter the spread of Jacobinism in the cities, the society would establish “academies” to educate the urban population in the “principles of mechanics” and “chemistry.” The society would also actively support candidates for elected office.

### Hamilton’s letter to Bayard

*The following is nearly the complete text of Hamilton’s letter to Bayard:*

Your letter of the 12th instant has relieved me of some apprehension. Yet it is well that it should be perfectly understood by the truly sound part of the Federalists that there do, in fact, exist intrigues in good earnest between several individuals not unimportant, of the federal party, and the person in question, which are bottomed upon motives and views by no means auspicious to the real welfare of the country. I am glad to find that it is in the contemplation to adopt a plan of conduct. It is very necessary; and, to be useful, it must be efficient and comprehensive in the means which it embraces, at the same time that it must mediate none which are not really constitutional and patriotic. I will comply with your invitation by submitting some ideas which, from time to time, have passed through my mind.

Nothing is more fallacious than to expect to produce any valuable or permanent results in political projects by relying merely on the reason of men. Men are rather reasoning than reasonable animals, for the most part governed by the im-

pulse of passion. This is well understood by our adversaries, who have practised upon it with no small benefit to their cause; for at the very moment they are eulogizing the reason of men, and professing to appeal only to that faculty, they are courting the strongest and most active passion of the human heart, vanity! It is no less true that the Federalists seem not to have attended to the fact sufficiently; and that they have erred in relying so much on the rectitude and utility of their measures as to have neglected the cultivation of popular favor, by fair and justifiable expedients. The observation has been repeatedly made to me by individuals with whom I particularly conversed, and expedients suggested for gaining good will, which were never adopted. Unluckily, however, for us, in the competition for the passions of the people, our opponents have great advantages over us; for the plain reason that the vicious are far more active than the good passions; and that, to win the former to our side, we must renounce our principles and our objects and unite in corrupting public opinion till it becomes fit for nothing but mischief. Yet, unless we can contrive to take hold of, and carry along with us some strong feelings of the mind, we shall in vain calculate upon any substantial or durable results.

Whatever plan we may adopt, to be successful, must be founded on the truth of this proposition. And perhaps it is not very easy for us to give it full effects; especially not without some deviations from what, on other occasions, we have maintained to be right. But in determining upon the propriety of the deviations, we must consider whether it be possible for us to succeed, without, in some degree, employing the weapons which have been employed against us, and whether the actual state and future prospect of things be not such as to justify the reciprocal use of them. I need not tell you that I do not mean to countenance the imitation of things intrinsically unworthy, but only of such as may be denominated irregular [“irregular warfare”—DP]; such as, in a sound and stable order of things, ought not to exist. Neither are you to infer that any revolutionary result is contemplated. In my opinion, the present Constitution is the standard to which we are to cling. Under its banners, bona fide, must we combat our political foes, rejecting all changes but through the channel itself provides for amendments. By these general views of the subject have my reflections been guided. I now offer you the outline of the plan which they have suggested.

Let an association be formed to be denominated “The Christian Constitutional Society.” Its objects to be:

- 1st. The support of the Christian religion.
  - 2d. The support of the Constitution of the United States.
- Its organization:

- 1st. A council, consisting of a president and twelve members, of whom four and the president to be a quorum.
- 2d. A sub-directing council in each State, consisting of a vice-president and twelve members, of whom four, with the vice-president to be a quorum.