

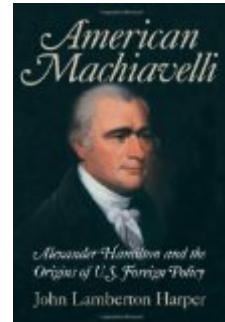
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Lamberton Harper. *American Machiavelli: Alexander Hamilton and the Origins of U.S. Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xiv + 347 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-83485-8.

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## Against the Ideologues: Hamilton as Machiavellian

John Lamberton Harper's new book on Alexander Hamilton promises to examine the career of the notable American revolutionary and founder from a comparative perspective. The book's title oversells the point, however, as this is more a positive account of Hamilton's statesmanship than a thorough comparison of General Hamilton to the Florentine politician and political scientist.

Hamilton is much in vogue among historians and political scientists these days, just as the supposedly conservative congressional majority considers removing his image from American currency. By Harper's account, Hamilton is a fit symbol of Republican realist foreign policy thinking, especially as contrasted with Democrats in the period from McGovern through Gore, and Harper thinks Machiavelli a close analogue to Hamilton in outlook and approach.

Why do I say, then, that Harper's account is sympathetic? Consider this: "Hamilton's ideas and achievements entitle him to a sustained revival of interest in his life, a rank second to none in the national pantheon, even a monument of his own" (p. 276). Other recent accounts of Hamilton, such as Karl-Friedrich Walling's fine *Republican Empire: Alexander Hamilton on War and Free Government* (1999), never reach quite this level of breathlessness despite their overall sympathy for their subject.

For Harper, Hamilton's opponents, particularly Thomas Jefferson, stand for reckless optimism, for ig-

norant wishfulness elevated to the status of principle. Hamilton, on the other hand, resembles Machiavelli in his reasonableness, in refusing to be bound by any dogma; in other words, Hamilton is anti-ideological.

The Hamilton of Harper's account is best captured by this evaluation of the *Report on Manufactures*:

"Overall, the report suggests that, aside from national security considerations (and despite the reading later given it by Friedrich List and others), Hamilton was not a doctrinaire, but a rather reluctant mercantilist and advocate of domestic manufacturing.... The context, as well as the content, of the *Report* clearly indicate [sic] that (with the important exception of arms and munitions) the West Indian emigrant [sic] viewed encouraging U.S. manufactures as a lever to push British policy in a more liberal direction, and to counter Jefferson's confrontational strategy, as much as an end in itself. The beauty of Hamilton's proposal was that it would bring pressure to bear on Britain gradually and indirectly, without unleashing the kind of devastating trade war that would follow from the Madison-Jefferson approach. Not only that—and the report was quite explicit on this point—the manufacturing areas of the United States would themselves constitute an emerging market for American food production. The agricultural South would find itself less dependent on foreign markets and less inclined to see its interests as being in direct conflict with those of Britain than was presently the case" (p. 96).

The *Report on Manufactures*, then, should be understood as a brilliant response to an array of problems, foreign and domestic, not as a predetermined outgrowth of its author's predilections. Hamilton, then, was a man of action, of deeds, not of the salon and the study (though he certainly excelled at theory as well as at action).

This version of Hamilton differs from Walling's in its roundedness. For Walling, Hamilton's overriding concern was with the United States' ability to defend itself; he shared this fixation with others, notably George Washington and John Marshall, who had slogged through the war underfed, poorly housed, and short of money. For Harper, on the other hand, Hamilton emerges as a far more thoughtful man, one willing and able to respond to the situation at hand. Jefferson, by contrast, seems both unusually prone to court military confrontation, for which the country is unprepared, and doggedly determined to see to it that lack of preparedness continues to be the government's leading attribute. The Sage of Monticello was thus, in Harper's apt phrase, "a gambler with an empty bank account" (p. 87).

Perhaps the account of 1790s American foreign policy most like this one is the now-classic *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (1990) by Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson. Although that older volume's point of view is Jefferson's, its approach is distinctly Machiavellian/Hamiltonian, in Harper's sense. As Harper puts it, Hamilton was certain that the United States must ultimately be part of the European diplomatic system, like it or not. Not for him, then, the fanciful Re-

publican agrarian idyll of the Virginia political elite. In the end, of course, as Henry Adams noted more than a century ago, the War of 1812 vindicated the Federalist approach to foreign policy, and thus Hamilton's statecraft, by exploding all the key Republican political nostrums. A new government capable of playing the Europeans' deadly game had to be patched together quickly, because other conflicts were bound to come, Hamilton believed; if the United States was found unprepared, the result might be humiliation, disaster, or both.

In several instances, Harper demonstrates that Hamilton took the prudent, Machiavellian course. Thus, in the Nootka Sound crisis, Hamilton counseled that, lacking the ability to prevent British forces from crossing American territory, the federal government must consent to their passage. Hamilton's counsel in this instance followed Machiavelli's explicit advice. Jefferson, on the other hand, would have refused any such request, despite the likelihood that national humiliation and British anger would follow, as a British government that made such a request seemed certain to cross American territory despite denial of permission. Harper's consideration of the American response to this episode clarifies the leading actors' roles nicely; one is left with the distinct impression that President Washington was wise increasingly to trust Secretary Hamilton's advice in the area of foreign policy, as in most else.

The book repays a reading, then, for a slightly different appraisal of Hamilton than has been published before. It is not shockingly novel, but its nuance is enlightening.

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