Alexander Hamilton Attacks Governor George Clinton, 21 July–30 October 1787

In the spring and summer of 1787 the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia to revise and amend the Articles of Confederation. Three or four weeks after the Convention began its sessions on 25 May, it became known that, instead of amending the Articles, the Convention would establish a new government for the United States. Advocates of such a government in New York and Pennsylvania believed that the principal opposition to it would come from state officeholders who feared they would lose their power. The first known public attack on these state officeholders was made by a correspondent in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on 20 June, who warned officeholders to be quiet or else they would suffer the same fate suffered by Loyalists early in the American Revolution. This brief item was reprinted in the *New York Journal*, 28 June, and *Northern Centinel*, 2 July.

The most important attack on any state officeholder was made against New York Governor George Clinton in the *Daily Advertiser* on 21 July by Alexander Hamilton, a New York delegate to the Constitutional Convention on leave from that body. Writing anonymously, Hamilton claimed that Clinton had opposed the appointment of delegates to the Constitutional Convention and had "predicted a mischievous issue of that measure." According to Hamilton, Clinton had stated publicly that the Convention was unnecessary and that the "evils" it intended to remedy were imaginary. Hamilton rejected Clinton's alleged analysis of the Confederation's political and economic condition and defended the appointment of a convention that would create a strong central government able to address the many "evils" that had befallen America. Hamilton accused Clinton of having a "greater attachment to his *own power* than to the *public good*." New Yorkers were told to watch Clinton "with a jealous eye, and when he sounds the alarm of danger from another quarter, to examine whether they have not more to apprehend from *himself*."

Support for Hamilton's position came swiftly. "An Admirer of Anti-Federal Men," *Daily Advertiser*, 26 July, decried "the conduct of several leading men" who had "given the friends to liberty much uneasiness." He praised the Convention delegates and called upon Americans to have confidence in them. On 1 August the *Pennsylvania Herald* heard from a New York gentleman that "the antifœderal disposition of a great officer" in New York had seriously alarmed the people with "anticipation of anarchy and division." An anonymous verse printed in the *Massachusetts Centinel*, 18 August, accused Clinton of seeking "to wreck" the Union. Other newspapers outside New York—in brief and widely circulated articles—did not identify Clinton by name but instead criticized self-interested and scheming officeholders in general for their opposition to a convention that promised to create a vigorous central government. (See *New Hampshire Spy* and *Salem Mercury*, 7 August, and *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 8 August, all of which were reprinted in New York.) On 1 September, David Humphreys of Connecticut, who like Hamilton served as an aide-de-camp to George Washington dining the Revolution, complimented Hamilton for the "honest boldness" of his public attack on Clinton's Antifederalist views. Humphreys was disturbed by "popular Demagogues who are determined to keep themselves in office at the risque of every thing."

In early September the attack upon Clinton in New York was renewed, perhaps in anticipation of the completion of the Constitutional Convention's work. Soon after, Clinton and his supporters came to his defense, and, in turn, they were answered by Hamilton and his advocates. The debate lasted until mid-October. "Rough Carver," a parody of Antifederalist Abraham Yates, Jr.'s, use of the pseudonym "Rough Hewer," criticized those persons whose refusal to increase the powers of the Confederation Congress had endangered the Union to the point of its impending dissolution. According to "Rough Carver," opponents of a strong Union had "coolly" opposed all things that did "not bear the marks of *Self*"; they had "nothing in view but their own aggrandizement." He wanted Clinton—their "thick skulled and double-hearted Chief"—replaced as governor (*Daily Advertiser*, 3, 4 September).

Clinton's adherents responded slowly. On 6 September "A Republican" (possibly Clinton himself), writing in the *New York Journal*, answered Hamilton's initial 21 July attack. "A Republican" defended Clinton's right, as a "citizen of a free state" and a public officer, to speak "freely and unreservedly to express his sentiments on public measures, however serious the posture of our national affairs may be." Clinton's attacker, declared "A Republican," belonged to an "opulent and ambitious" party, a "lordly faction," that sought to undermine the state government so "that they may establish a system more favorable to their aristocratic views." "A Republican" concluded by quoting some verse from English poet Charles Churchill to suggest that Hamilton had penned the attack on Clinton. In the same issue of the *New York Journal*, "Adrastus" also hinted that he knew the identity of Clinton's attacker because the attacker's style was well known. He warned readers to guard against "so dangerous a member of society, who, with a smooth tongue and double face, is capable of concealing and executing the worst intentions beneath the mask of sincerity and friendship." "An Old Soldier," *Northern Centinel*, 10 September, and "Rusticus," *New York Journal*, 13 September, also defended Clinton.

While answering "A Republican" in the *Daily Advertiser* on 10 September, "Aristides" defended Hamilton, stating that no man was more "worthy of credit." When he attacked Clinton, Hamilton was "impelled, from pure principles." Hamilton, stated "Aristides," had not misrepresented Clinton's views and neither Clinton nor his defenders denied the charges. Clinton had definitely been hostile to all measures seeking to strengthen the central government. As governor, Clinton exercised too much power, while he and his "motley group" created a dangerous "system of *Connections and dependencies*." On 20 September "Anti-Defamationis," writing in the *New York Journal*, denounced "Aristides" and others for attacking Clinton, whose duty it was to criticize the Convention if he thought "evil instead of good would result from their deliberations."

Defending himself in a lengthy article for the *Daily Advertiser* on 15 September, Hamilton admitted writing the 21 July attack upon Clinton, stating that he had left his name with the printer "to be disclosed to any person who should apply for it, on the part of the Governor." His denunciations of Clinton were well founded because the governor's wish to retain his power would come at the expense of the nation's peace and happiness. In a free country, declared Hamilton, citizens had every right to question their ruler's conduct. How could one voice injure a man who possessed "all the influence to be derived from long continuance in office." Finally.

Hamilton insisted that his actions were consistent “with the strictest rules of integrity and honor.”

After Hamilton publicly acknowledged his authorship of the 21 July attack on Clinton, he was lambasted by “Inspector” in three satirical articles printed in the *New York Journal*, 20 September, and 4 and 18 October. According to “Inspector,” Hamilton (referred to as “Tom S**t”) was “overrated”; he was of low and illegitimate West Indian birth; he was an “upstart attorney” who advanced his military career by ingratiating himself with General George Washington, only to be summarily dismissed by Washington from his staff; he owed his position to his wealthy and influential father-in-law, Philip Schuyler (referred to, among other names, as Hamilton’s “immaculate daddy, Justice Midas”); his vanity led him to attack Clinton whom he wanted to see replaced as governor by Schuyler; he expressed monarchical views in the Constitutional Convention; he despised the common people; and as a lawyer he grew rich defending Loyalists (“traitors”).

“Inspector’s” description of Hamilton’s relationship to Washington distressed Hamilton so much that he wrote Washington, requesting that their relationship be put “in its true light.” In his response, Washington described “Inspector’s” charges as unfounded and told Hamilton that he held him in high esteem. However. Washington was dismayed that two such worthy characters as Hamilton and Clinton were at odds with one another.

On 6 and 9 October, two writers defended Hamilton in the *Daily Advertiser*. “Aristides” criticized the printer of the *New York Journal* for his partiality in printing “Inspector,” who should have signed himself “An Inquisitor” because of his “gross” and libelous attack on Hamilton, a man who was “invulnerable in *his own personal conduct*.” Moreover, the nation owed “some weighty obligations” to Hamilton, who had always acted judiciously, patriotically, and honorably in his professional and public life. “Philopolitis” noted that such “impotent and scurrilous” attacks on Hamilton would increase the public esteem for him since the charges against him were malignant and fabricated. “A Customer” in the *New York Journal*, 11 October, criticized “Aristides” and “Philopolitis” for not “referring to particulars” and instead listed Hamilton’s accomplishments.

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