



The Use of History, Then and Now

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During the first discussion, "History: Past and Future," the panelists at last month's AHI conference debated, among other things, the ways in which Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson used history. For a conference organized by a history professor and

begins with an end in mind and then makes his case accordingly. In essence, such a history is non-linear, guided more by theory than transpired events.

Properly responding to this claim, as Annette Gordon-Reed did, requires considering how Jefferson conceived

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a panel laden with historians, that question felt fitting but awkwardly put. While everyone in the room knew what Steve Ely, the moderator, was asking, I chafed against the phrase "use history."

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There seems to have been a mixed reaction to this line of enquiry. Some on the panel claimed that Jefferson was "creative" with his use of "history," asserting that the Virginian employed the past to assert philosophical principles. I do not doubt that these panelists were referencing the stock Jefferson put in the Anglo-Saxon myth, a Whig reading of history that drew virtue from an imagined past. Those who so conceive of Jefferson's use of history inevitably go on to draw parallels to his legal career. A lawyer, they say,

of himself. Yes, he studied law under George Wythe and earn a living as a lawyer. When Jefferson thought of himself, however, that was not the primary image that he saw. By his estimation he was a scientist, a naturalist with a strong desire to understand the world as it works. This was the Jefferson who responded to the Comte de Buffon in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. This was the Jefferson who commissioned Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to go west. This was the Jefferson who wrote a Farm Book, detailing his agricultural inventions. His belief in the Anglo-Saxon myth, however strong, was born more from his tendency to state things in the boldest terms possible. That he turned to the Anglo-Saxon myth was a product of his French mind-set.

While the panelists gave comparatively less attention to Hamilton and his use of history, their brief discussion bears mentioning. According to the panelists, Hamilton saw war as an inevitable part of life. In the past, he saw a long tradition of conflict and unrest. From that tradition, he extrapolated about human nature. That Hamilton, looking backward, sees much cause for despair does not surprise me in the least. His very history was one born of tragedy, beginning in squalor on the island of Nevis.

A Republic, If You Can Keep It: More on the Recent AHI Colloquium

DR. DAVID FRISK
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

"You must find Philadelphia much changed, Mr. Jefferson."

"More changed than I could have imagined, Mr. Hamilton. Not the city itself—all cities swallow everything ... that's no surprise to me; that's why I abhor them. But I have been, as you know, in revolutionary France, where the streets are filled with the sounds of liberty and brotherhood and the overthrow of ancient tyrannies of Europe. And to return from there to this, our cradle of revolution, and find the dinner-table chatter is all of money and banks and authorities is—an unwelcome surprise."

"Unwelcome perhaps, but necessary."

Hamilton's response to Jefferson (in the HBO "John Adams" series) is followed by his explanation of the new nation's need to grow its economy and finance its government. Jefferson then warns the Treasury secretary

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that if his plans were implemented, "the opportunities for avarice and corruption would certainly prove irresistible." "Well, there you have it," Hamilton counters. "As I have heard said: 'If men were angels, then no government would be necessary.'"

To understand these founders' often clashing beliefs about the American experiment, the next-best thing to time travel is the opportunity to hear a wide-ranging discussion by experts who have, to an extent, lived intellectually in the past in order to grasp it. Students who attended the Alexander Hamilton Institute's recent colloquium in Charlottesville, Virginia, titled "Hamilton v. Jefferson: On History,

continued on back

Freedom, and Republican Government,” were able to benefit from such a dialogue.

Like the AHI’s previous annual conferences, it featured a well-chosen panel of more than a dozen thoughtful scholars whose discussions based on a set of readings were structured—although not inhibited—by a moderator. Each theme in the conference title had its own session, with a fourth session allowing something of an overview.

The readings, spanning several decades, ranged from private letters to major public documents like Hamilton’s Federalist Papers 1 and 6 and Jefferson’s First Inaugural Address. They provided insights into each figure’s views on major events of the times, advisable governmental policy, political strategy, and how crucial principles of government should be applied.

Hamilton is known as one of the most practical American founders, and as having one of the most cautious perspectives on human nature—yet at the same time an especially favorable, optimistic view of strong government. He emphasized the new republic’s need to survive and economically prosper in a dangerous world.

Jefferson, in contrast, stressed the preservation of liberty and self-government. A relatively quiet man (not at all fond of public speaking, for example), he is widely believed to have been far less practical, too optimistic about human nature and especially the political instincts of the people, and too strict in his belief in minimal government.

Panelist Peter Onuf noted that whereas Hamilton believed the people’s “confidence” in the newly formed government would

be essential to national strength, Jefferson thought such confidence would be dangerous, since it would indicate too little vigilance. He warned: “free government is founded in jealousy [watchful suspicion] and not in confidence.” Yet as panelist Annette Gordon-Reed pointed out, Jefferson was the most talented politician of his era and founded a lasting political dynasty.

Studying the two founders together, and hearing in-depth about them together, makes particular sense because each exerted a different kind of influence on the early (and the modern) nation. Late in the conference, panelist John Ragosta cited and endorsed the view that “we are a Hamiltonian republic with a Jeffersonian soul.” The readings and discussions left all of us, I think, with a fuller understanding of the ways in which this is true.

Reflections on “Hamilton v. Jefferson: On History, Freedom, and Republican Government”

JUAN HERNANDEZ
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

The Alexander Hamilton Institute’s eleventh annual colloquium, “Hamilton v. Jefferson: On History, Freedom, and Republican Government,” took place recently in Charlottesville, Virginia. It was an extraordinary educational event.

AHI undergraduate fellows and other Hamilton College students traveled there on Thursday, November 15 for the two-day conference, where they heard prominent

Zuckert of Notre Dame, John Boles of Rice University, Carson Holloway of the University of Nebraska-Omaha, Colleen Sheehan of Villanova, Bradford Wilson of Princeton, Kevin Gutzman of Western Connecticut State, John Ragosta of the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, Andrew Porwancher of the University of Oklahoma, and Professor Ambrose. Dr. Steve Ealy of Liberty Fund,

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Students from Professor Paquette’s and Professor Ambrose’s “The Old South” course, along with Hamilton alumni plus undergraduates from other institutions, attended free of charge. The conference “was informative and explained many of the nuances relating to the Hamilton-Jefferson debate,” said Philip Gow, a student in the class. “It was great to see so many big-name historians in the same room arguing their points.”

The panel included many distinguished scholars: Peter Onuf of the University of Virginia, Annette Gordon-Reed of Harvard University, Joanne Freeman of Yale, Michael

a leading academic nonprofit organization, served as moderator of the four panel discussions, which were based on Hamilton’s and Jefferson’s own writings. All sessions included a question-and-answer period open to students and others in attendance.

Despite stormy weather on Thursday, all panelists except for Stephen Knott of the Naval War College were able to attend the conference, which began that evening with a reception and dinner at the Omni Charlottesville Hotel. Dr. Andrew O’Shaughnessy, vice president of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Carl B. Menges, Hamilton class of ‘51 and the AHI colloquium’s generous annual sponsor, and Professor Paquette, executive director

of the AHI, opened the evening with introductory remarks. Professor Gordon-Reed, author of *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*, gave the keynote address, “Hamilton, Jefferson, and the Judges: Courts in the American Republic.”

On Friday, due to the previous day’s weather, staff at the hotel graciously reorganized to ensure that the panelists and attendees could meet there instead of using the historic Montalto house, which was temporarily unavailable.

The colloquium’s first two sessions were on “History” and “Freedom,” dealing with differences in Hamilton’s and Jefferson’s visions of the past and future, and with the issue of slavery in the newly founded American nation. Later in the day, there were complimentary small-group tours of nearby Monticello, Jefferson’s home. The reception and dinner that night allowed panelists, students, and other guests to socialize further and enrich their educational experience.

With the fallen trees cleared by Saturday, the colloquium moved to Montalto for the final two sessions, on “Republican Government” and “Hamilton v. Jefferson: What Should You Know?” The first focused on the two founding fathers’ visions of American government. In the second and final session, the panelists summed up their observations. The conference concluded with unscheduled remarks from Professor Ambrose praising his longtime colleague Professor Paquette and noting his involvement in shaping Ambrose’s career, which prompted a standing ovation from the audience.

In addressing the students in “The Old South” class and the other attendees, Paquette noted: “I thank you all for making this event a memorable and special one. There will, in my estimation, never be another event with such an accomplished group of Hamilton and Jefferson scholars.”

As the photographer for the conference and a student of professors Paquette and Ambrose, I would like to thank the AHI, Mr. Menges and his family, the panelists, and all others who were involved.

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