

Jefferson and Hamilton Disagree about Government



ABOUT THE READING One of the issues that faced George Washington's new government was how to handle the country's finances. In February 1791 he asked two members of his cabinet for their ideas about a national bank. The excerpts below show their responses.



As you read note the different ideas each of the two men have about government.

Thomas Jefferson

Jefferson was secretary of state. He believed in limited power for the central government. He spoke for the interests of farmers, who were often in debt. His supporters were later called Republicans.

I consider the foundation of the Constitution as laid on this ground: That "all powers not delegated to the United States, by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States or to the people. . ." To take a single step beyond the boundaries thus specially drawn around the powers of Congress is to take possession of a boundless field of power, no longer **susceptible** of any definition.

The incorporation of a bank, and the powers assumed by this bill, have not, in my opinion, been delegated to the United States by the Constitution. . .

It has been urged that a bank will give great **facility** or convenience in the collection of taxes. Suppose this were true: yet the Constitution allows only the names which are *necessary*, not those which are merely *convenient* for **effecting** the **enumerated** powers. If such a latitude of Construction be

VOCABULARY

delegated given

susceptible open to

facility ease

effecting carrying out

enumerated specified

Jefferson quotes the Tenth Amendment. This amendment says that the states and the people keep all powers not specifically given to the central government.

Source: *Jefferson to Washington, February 15, 1791.*

Jefferson and Hamilton Disagree about Government, *continued* Primary Source

allowed to this phrase as to give any nonenumerated power, it will go to every one, for there is not one which ingenuity may not torture into a convenience in some instance or other.

What does Jefferson think will happen if the Constitution is not followed strictly?

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Why does Jefferson oppose the national bank?

2. What does Jefferson think will happen if the Constitution is not followed strictly?

Alexander Hamilton

Hamilton was the secretary of the treasury. The national bank was his idea. He favored the interests of merchants and bankers. His supporters were called Federalists because they wanted a strong central government. Hamilton won this argument. The Bank of the United States was set up on February 25, 1791.

This restrictive interpretation of the word *necessary* is also contrary to this sound maxim of **construction**; namely, that the powers contained in a constitution of government, especially those which concern the general administration of the affairs of a country, its finances, trade, defense, [etc.], ought to be construed liberally in advancement of the public good. . . The means by which national exigencies are to be provided for, national inconveniences obviated, national prosperity promoted, are of such infinite variety, extent, and complexity, that there must of necessity be great latitude of discretion in the selection and application of those means. . .

VOCABULARY

construction interpretation
exigencies needs
obviated prevented
deemed judged
compass scope

The Constitution should be understood broadly. This attitude is needed in order to increase the public good.

It leaves, therefore, a criterion of what is constitutional, and of what is not so. This criterion is

Source: *Hamilton to Washington, February 23, 1791.*

Jefferson and Hamilton Disagree about Government, *continued* Primary Source

the *end*, to which the measure relates as a *means*. If the *end* be clearly comprehended within any of the specified powers, and if the measure have an obvious relation to that *end*, and is not forbidden by any particular provision of the Constitution, it may safely be **deemed** to come within the **compass** of the national authority.

The needs of the country are complex. The government must be able to be flexible to meet those needs.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Why does Hamilton want to interpret the Constitution loosely?

2. How would Hamilton decide if a law was constitutional?

MAKE A COMPARISON

1. How do Jefferson and Hamilton differ in the way they interpret the Constitution?

2. How do these differences lead to different views about the role of government?
