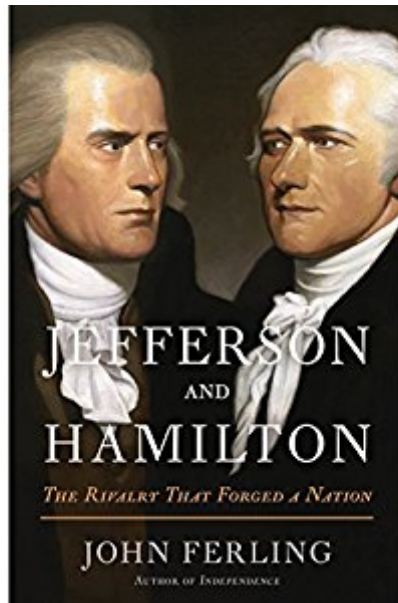


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Jefferson And Hamilton: The Rivalry That Forged A Nation



Synopsis

A spellbinding history of the epic rivalry that shaped our republic: Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and their competing visions for America. From the award-winning author of *Almost a Miracle* and *The Ascent of George Washington*, this is the rare work of scholarship that offers us irresistible human drama even as it enriches our understanding of deep themes in our nation's history. The decade of the 1790s has been called the age of passion. Fervor ran high as rival factions battled over the course of the new republic - each side convinced that the others' goals would betray the legacy of the Revolution so recently fought and so dearly won. All understood as well that what was at stake was not a moment's political advantage, but the future course of the American experiment in democracy. In this epochal debate, no two figures loomed larger than Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. Both men were visionaries, but their visions of what the United States should be were diametrically opposed. Jefferson, a true revolutionary, believed passionately in individual liberty and a more egalitarian society, with a weak central government and greater powers for the states. Hamilton, a brilliant organizer and tactician, feared chaos and social disorder. He sought to build a powerful national government that could ensure the young nation's security and drive it toward economic greatness. Jefferson and Hamilton is the story of the fierce struggles - both public and, ultimately, bitterly personal - between these two titans. It ended only with the death of Hamilton in a pistol duel, felled by Aaron Burr, Jefferson's vice president. Their competing legacies, like the twin strands of DNA, continue to shape our country to this day. Their personalities, their passions, and their bold dreams for America leap from the page in this epic new work from one of our finest historians.

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Customer Reviews

One of my professors in college was Broadus Mitchell. He was the foremost Hamiltonian scholar of his day, author of multiple biographies of Hamilton and associates. Not surprisingly, my freshman year at Hofstra's New College with Broadus Mitchell was an intensive study of Alexander Hamilton and the founding of America. The textbook was (surprise!) one of the several biographies of Hamilton authored by Broadus Mitchell. When I had been given the opportunity to review this book, I was intrigued. I wondered what the author could tell me I hadn't read elsewhere and if he could tell the story better or differently, perhaps offer some fresh insights. I have patience with history books. I don't expect it to read like fiction. Much to my delight, John Ferling's opening chapters in which he compares and examines the youth, upbringing and psychological makeup of both men is beautifully written -- entertaining and lively. Perceptive. Astute. What drove them, what inspired them to become the men who built America. All was going swimmingly well until the war began. The Revolutionary War. I am not a war buff and was not expecting a play-by-play of the revolution. But there it was. Battle by battle, troop movement by troop movement. I could feel my brain switch from engaged to stupefied. I'm not sure why the full details of the war are included. Aside from showcasing Hamilton's military career (doable in a few paragraphs), it adds little to my understanding of either man. As far as I'm concerned, it mainly adds hundreds of pages where a page or two of summary would have sufficed. If you are a military history buff, you might like it. If not, skip the war and move on. It's a long book that includes a lot of great material. When Ferling is writing about the character and personality of his two extraordinary subjects, he's lively and illuminating, but when he lapses into "authoritative" mode, it bogs down. Seriously dull. I read a lot of history, stuff that other people think is boring and which I find fascinating so it's got to be pretty stultifying before I think it's boring. Yet it's too good to miss, so skip sections in which you aren't interested and read the rest. It is extremely uneven with sections so gripping I couldn't put it down and others so dreary I couldn't stay awake. I am disinterested in battles and troop movements, so maybe I'm the wrong person to judge, but I cannot see how this material adds anything useful. Jefferson never fought in the war. Hamilton did, but he was not a "military man." Even though he had a distinguished war record, being a warrior was not a core piece of his character or particularly relevant to his story. Several hundred pages could (and should) be deleted. Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton were two of the most influential men in American history. The author said it well

when he commented (sorry, this isn't a quote ... I'm paraphrasing) that there are lots of statues dedicated to Jefferson, but we live in Hamilton's world. True enough. Hamilton was the consummate advocate of a strong central government with economic control through a central bank. Jefferson advocated extreme individual freedom, leaving most government to local authorities. It amuses me that Hamilton is the darling of the GOP while Jefferson is the Liberal ideal. Given Hamilton's belief in strong central government and Jefferson's preference for isolationism, individualism and decentralization -- well, it pretty much defines our nation's massive problem with cognitive dissonance. If you're a history buff with a serious interest in early American history, there is much to like. It is said that "Both men were visionaries, but their visions of what the United States were diametrically opposed." It may have been true in 1780, but it has long ceased to have any current relevance. In the end, the strands of their opposing philosophies have gotten twisted into a single ball of thread, both necessary to our American dream. Jefferson and Hamilton is the story of the struggle -- public and ultimately personal -- between two major figures in our country's history. It ended when Alexander Hamilton died in a duel with Aaron Burr, Jefferson's vice president. Worth reading for sure, but not light entertainment. This is history buff material. Fortunately, there are still a few of us around.

In the preface to *Jefferson and Hamilton - The Rivalry That Forged a Nation*, author John Ferling writes that when he began the book, he held Jefferson in higher esteem than Hamilton. While Ferling admits that he grew more appreciative of Hamilton during the course of his work, his partiality toward Jefferson is palpable throughout this book. As a consequence, what one finds in *Jefferson and Hamilton* is an unbalanced portrait of these two pivotal figures responsible for America's founding as well as its enduring political legacy. Ferling's Hamilton is seen as being primarily motivated by self-interest. Overly ambitious, he is obsessed with power and glory. Even worse, however, Hamilton's writings, speeches and policies camouflaged his true monarchical tendencies. At a dinner with Jefferson, Hamilton supposedly said that the greatest man that ever lived was Julius Caesar. Serious Hamilton biographers such as Ron Chernow and Forrest McDonald find the story to be dubious as Hamilton's papers reveal a disapproving view of Caesar. Chernow writes that whenever Hamilton wanted to insult Jefferson as a populist demagogue, he would liken him to Julius Caesar. Yet, Ferling accepts this account without skepticism because it fits his narrative of Hamilton as a proponent of autocracy. If Hamilton truly harbored a deep passion for a British-style monarchy or autocracy in the United States, he certainly didn't show it during the election of 1800 when he backed Jefferson over Burr because Hamilton believed the latter would

destroy the Constitution and erect in its place despotism. In contrast to the dark and intriguing Hamilton, Jefferson is shown almost always in a favorable light as an indefatigable champion of democracy and egalitarianism (for at least white males anyway). Consider this: "While Hamilton's focus was on a strong and independent United States, Jefferson dreamed of making the world a better place." Was Hamilton's vision incompatible with making the world a better place? Not to this reviewer. Ferling's judgments of the unsavory activities undertaken by both are equally uneven. Hamilton's back-channel communications with Britain's first minister to the United States, George Hammond are described by Ferling as "scandalous and indefensible" and should have led to his dismissal as Treasury Secretary. In contrast, Jefferson's employment of journalist Philip Freneau at the State Department to whom Jefferson then supplied information and subtext used by Freneau in his *National Gazette* to castigate Washington and his policies are not condemned. While it needs to be teased from the text, the truth is that Jefferson was every bit as manipulative and scheming as Hamilton. Unlike Hamilton, however, Jefferson was smart (or cowardly) to stay behind the scenes and encourage others fight the battles so as to look removed from it all. As brilliant as Jefferson and Hamilton were, both men made serious errors of judgment. The problem with this book is that Hamilton is called to task for most of his failings while Jefferson, except for his racism, is left mostly unblemished. Even after the excesses and atrocities of the French Revolution became widespread and systematic, Jefferson remained obstinately militant in his support of the revolution. Ferling doesn't explore this. While rebuking Hamilton for his support of the Alien and Sedition Acts, he remains silent toward Jefferson's prosecution of Federalist editors for seditious libel during his presidency. When not finding fault with Hamilton, Ferling does manage to occasionally wander into the modern political scene mostly to take shots at what he labels right-wing or conservative politics. His effort to brand Senator John McCain as an "extreme conservative" would be laughable if it wasn't so absurd. What is surprising is that Ferling concludes that "next to Washington, Hamilton was the most important figure in the establishment of the American Republic." Perhaps this is only a concession to reality. Despite this allowance, Ferling muses over whether the American economy would have taken the shape that it has anyway without Hamilton's economic foundations. This assumes that the United States would not have fallen apart during its formative years from internal and external threats without the successful economic programs designed by Hamilton to bind loyalty of industry, creditors and states toward the national government. With sectional differences and predatory empires at America's borders, this would have been a very grave possibility. Jefferson and Hamilton - The Rivalry That Forged a Nation does not really bring anything new into the literature. But that is to be expected considering the number of biographies and histories written about these

two men. What I found interesting is that these two fierce adversaries saw each other as intelligent and able men and thought well of each other. Unlike the vain and solipsistic John Adams, Jefferson and Hamilton were able to see beyond ideology and recognize the tremendous capabilities and contributions each made to America's founding.

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