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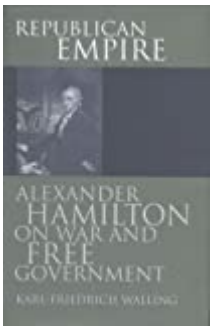


**Karl-Friedrich Walling.** *Republican Empire: Alexander Hamilton on War and Free Government.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999. xii + 356 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0970-3.

**Reviewed by** Doron Ben-Atar (Department of History, Fordham University)

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## War and Liberty in Hamilton's Thought

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*Republican Empire* is a sophisticated historical analysis of Hamiltonian thought. Versed in both historiography and the history of ideas, Karl-Friedrich Walling presents Alexander Hamilton as a theorist and practical statesman, who recognized the tensions between the political freedom in republics and the necessity of protecting peace, freedom, and prosperity through military action. Freedom in the United States has not been affected by the nation's military engagements, according to Walling, because the Founders –led by Hamilton – turned their back to Whig prejudice against standing armies and established a system of government that is realistic, responsible, and capable of mounting effective military campaigns.

While Hamilton suffered severe political setbacks in the final years of life, his legacy had a formative impact on the structure and content of American politics. As Walling concludes, "Hamilton won all the fundamental debates about American national security policy. Broad construction of the Constitution and executive power; judicial review; a credit-based manufacturing economy; military academies; an ocean-going navy; a rapidly expandable army in time of peace; and a national spirit rooted in Americans' devotion to both Union and liberty are now the cornerstones of our common defense." (p. 288) *Republican Empire*, then, establishes Hamilton as the most profound and farsighted American founder. I agree.

Eighteenth-century thinkers doubted the ability of republics to defend themselves against enemies. Founded upon feminine impulses of trade and cooperation, so the story went, republics could not stand up to the masculine, marshal spirit of enemies. Faced with military challenges from their enemies, republics were expected to choose between mounting effective defense and preserving political liberties. All republics that came before the United States succumbed to the state of war because by its very nature, war enhances the power of the executive and demands suppression of dissent at home. "The necessities, accidents, and passions of war," Walling writes, have contributed to the collapse of free governments from antiquity to the modern era. In more than two centuries of its existence as an independent nation, the United States has taken part in many foreign wars. All the same, the

United States has remained "the outstanding exception to the well-grounded historical axiom that war is the great destroyer of free governments" (p. xi). Walling believes that the political legacy of Hamilton allowed the nation to mount effective foreign wars without compromising liberties at home.

The American Revolution and the military struggle against Britain were Hamilton's formative political experiences. A recent young immigrant from the British West Indies, Hamilton plunged into the revolutionary struggle as a student at King's College. He dropped out to join the Continental army, where he quickly rose in the ranks. Unlike most of his peers, he had no experience on the state level and his loyalty was always founded on his commitment to the national cause. For young men like Hamilton, the Continental army emerged as the only repository of collective American nationalism.

While political conflicts between the states paralyzed the Continental Congress, citizens of those states effectively cooperated as members of the unified Continental army. Hamilton thereafter broke with the Whig opposition to maintaining standing armies in times of peace, for he came to see in the national army a protector of liberties against the parochial forces in American society. He envisioned a small professional standing army ready to protect the republic from internal and external threats. It was a highly sophisticated vision. As Walling writes, "the only ingredients of a modern, professional army missing from Hamilton's plan were a military academy and a general staff, both of which seemed too expensive at the time" (p. 69).

The ineffectiveness of the Continental Congress during the war years and its inability to ensure a steady supply to men fighting in Washington's army plagued the American military effort for most of the war. Congressional inability and/or unwillingness to finance the revolutionary war had forced the army to supply itself off the land. As E. J. Ferguson demonstrated, more than half of the cost of fighting the Revolution was covered through arbitrary appropriation of the property of American patriots by the Continental army. Hamilton, who was Washington's chief of staff, had first hand knowledge of this pattern of abuse. He concluded that if the American republic wished to avoid the fate of the Greek and Roman republics that were destroyed by war, it must develop an apparatus of military preparedness that did not threaten liberty. An ineffective government incapable of supporting its national defense posed a greater risk to liberty than standing armies. Only a strong and effective government "would not sacrifice the rights of its people to its strategic necessities" (p. 194).

With the war over, Hamilton settled in New York where he began to develop his legal and political careers. His courage and firm commitment to individual liberty were manifested almost immediately when he took the unpopular and risky public position against the persecution of former Loyalists. The anti-Tory orgy that followed the withdrawal of British forces from New York taught him the dangers of the tyranny of the majority. Similarly, he took the unpopular position against forceful reassertion of the state's authority in Vermont. In fact, Hamilton sponsored an unsuccessful bill in the New York legislature that recognized Vermont's independence provided that the state joined the Union and cease flirting with British Canada. His actions from his early days as a student protestor to his legal and political battles in the state of New York, established Hamilton's revolutionary credentials "three times over: first, when he employed the conventional Catonic synthesis of Whig vigilance and Lockean liberalism to justify resistance to England; second, when he steered his own course by advocating a responsible, confidence-inspiring national government to increase the tangible and intangible capabilities of the Confederation during the war; and third, when he returned to the first principles of the Revolution and opposed democratic despotism and republican imperialism in New York" (p. 92).

Hamilton left his greatest mark on American politics in the second half of the 1780s, when together with Madison he led the Constitutional movement from its early conceptualization at Annapolis through the ratification battles, and as Washington's Secretary of the Treasury from 1789 to 1795. The American executive was the combined brainchild of Madison and Hamilton. On the domestic front, as Madison would have it, Congress, the states, and the judiciary checked its powers. In the realm of foreign affairs, however, the Hamiltonian vision of a powerful President, commander of the Federal army, with freedom to devise policy and enact measures, prevailed. Hamilton recognized that defending the Union could threaten domestic liberties, for it is "in the nature of war to increase the executive at the expense of the legislative authority." His actions as a de facto prime minister in the Washington cabinet gave content and substance to the structure established in Philadelphia. His primary goal was to infuse the Federal executive with energy. Only an energetic executive was capable of setting the national agenda and establishing national and international legitimacy. It was Hamilton who made the Amer-

ican Presidency "both constitutional and republican" (p. 153).

Establishing the young republic as a first rate power in the family of nations then was his primary goal. Hamilton's empire, as Walling explains, did not imply military conquest of far away territories and the subjugation of their peoples. On the contrary, his republican empire was founded on the formation of an effective union of the existing states. Unlike his Republican rivals who craved the conquest of new lands to ensure the persistence of a republican political economy for generations to come, Hamilton's vision centered on consolidating and strengthening the Union. The situation under the Articles of Confederation was intolerable. "Republican government requires the rule of law, but the confederated form of union denied Congress the means of establishing the rule of anything but martial law. Either an army must put down resistance, or the government could not uphold its law. Either the Confederation would become a military despotism, or it would collapse."(p. 107). The only way to avoid such calamities is to establish an effective government that will have the appearance of having significant force at its disposal. As Hamilton famously declared, "whenever the Government appears in arms it ought to appear like a Hercules."

Hamilton recognized that the new national government had to demonstrate at home and abroad that it was not plagued by the paralysis of the Articles of Confederation. The new government would be accepted by the people only if it materially improved the daily lives of citizens, established and enforced the rule of law, and established its "natural cultural legitimacy" with the majority of its people. His vision of national greatness was rooted, first and foremost in the consent of the governed. Because the United States was composed of a multiplicity of semi-autonomous, culturally diverse communities, he centered his nationalization scheme on the only group that could bind the nation. Merchants, by the very nature of their activities, constituted that element most disposed to breadth of vision, and most sensitive to all of society's larger interests. Supplying the different regions with goods not locally available, they served artisans and farmers alike as natural allies.

The concerns of the "assiduous merchant, the laborious husbandman, the active mechanic and the industrious manufacturer," Hamilton wrote, become "intimately blended and interwoven" in the commercial order. Moreover, founding the new nation on an alliance between the government and the urban bourgeoisie was also a barrier to abuse of rights. Machiavelli had warned long ago that the coalition between landed aristocracy and the military threatened to undermine liberty. The commercial classes, on the other hand, by virtue of their allegiance to peaceful trade relations, are the best allies of peace and prosperity. Hamilton's financial program, which aimed first and foremost to attach the allegiance of the business classes to the new government, ensured that the new administration would be committed to peace and prosperity rather than to the missionary advocacy of worldwide republicanism.

Historical portrayals of Alexander Hamilton as a trigger-happy militarist eager to assert national authority through the use of a Herculean army are highly inaccurate. Hamilton was aware of the risks of military action and developed a sophisticated theory about the timing and limits for the use of power. He was instrumental in developing the American definition of a just war: when rights are violated, talk before employing coercion, impose sanction if the violations persist, and use violence only as a last resort.

Hamilton's support for energetic government originated not only in his military experience, but also in his desire to rekindle the public spirit of the revolutionary days. More than any American of his generation, Hamilton began the exploration of the modern "form of civic virtue that we call nationalism" (p. 45).

Walling's refutation of Hamilton's supposed militarism is most problematic when it comes to the events of the late 1790s. In the aftermath of the XYZ affair, as the nation prepared for a war with France, Hamilton led the struggle for the formation of a peacetime army that was used to crush the protests of Pennsylvania Germans in the Fries rebellion. Since France did not have the naval capability to mount an invasion of the United States, most historians concluded that Hamilton and the High Federalists intended to use the army against their domestic opponents. Hamilton's army of 1798, then, was the violator rather than protector of liberties. Walling retorts that this view enjoys an unfair historical hindsight; reasonable people in 1798 could have had "honest differences of opinion about the nature, direction, and extent of the French threat." (p. 226)

In other words, Hamilton seriously thought that France was about to invade. Yet, there is no real evidence that Hamilton thought a French attack was forthcoming. He did not plan a defensive war. No one could seriously consider the small Federalist army more than a symbolic response to the huge armies employed by France from

1792 to 1815. Finally, the idea of an invasion of the South from the French West Indies is even more ludicrous given the civil war in St. Domingue and the effective siege of the other French islands by the Royal Navy. A more fluid view of Hamilton, one that allows him to change through time, is better equipped to explain how the republican statesman of the 1780s and early 1790s came to stand for suppression of dissent and persecution of rivals in the final days of the eighteenth century.

There is a measure of self-serving patriotism in Walling's celebration of American exceptionalism, which makes foreigners, like myself, a bit uncomfortable. Walling's portrayal of the United States as the only bastion of virtue and freedom in the world follows in the tradition of four centuries of American chutzpa. Since the days when John Winthrop crowned the journey of one hundred marginal Englishmen into the boondocks a "city on a hill", Americans have been telling us that the United States is the best of all possible countries. The American record on liberty at war, however, is no cause for celebration. Freedom had many setbacks – from the Alien and Sedition Acts of the Quasi-war with France to the massive assaults on individual liberties of the Vietnam era exposed by the Watergate scandal, from the Baltimore riots during the War of 1812 to the anti-communist hysteria of the Cold War. And I have not mentioned the brutal, persistent, and willful suppression of the rights of African Americans, slaves and free, which was the cornerstone of American society and diplomacy well into the 1960s. Even in comparison to other nations at war, United States wartime assaults on liberty were hardly mild.

The author is also a modern political conservative and at times he takes issues with modern political disputes. For example, at one point Walling argues that there were many similarities between Hamilton of the late 1790s and the fate of George Patton and Douglas McArthur. All three were military men who dared tell the truth to their country and paid a dear personal and political price for their courage. Readers who think differently about modern politics and the legacies of Patton and McArthur need not worry that *Republican Empire* is political polemics masquerading as scholarship. It is not. Walling's wrong-headed views (from which he may still recover) do not detract from the intellectual quality of his analysis.

Walling's grand thesis – that Hamilton deserves much of the credit for the American ability to wage wars without destroying domestic liberties – assumes much about the power of ideas to shape the future. While I share the author's appreciation for Hamilton's thinking and find many of his insights useful, I cannot accept the argument that what Hamilton wrote and thought in the last quarter of the eighteenth century has shaped the relationship between liberty and war for the entire era of American history. The American style of politics and diplomacy is a work-in-progress of many individuals over many generations. I fail the see a direct link between what even someone as influential as Hamilton wrote in 1787, for example, and the toleration of dissent during the Gulf War.

These methodological and political disagreements aside, *Republican Empire* successfully places Hamilton's thought within English and Scottish discourses on rights. Walling's mastery of the history of ideas from antiquity to the present allows him to analyze Hamilton's views in the context of their foundations in Western culture. Walling's Hamilton is engaged in philosophical conversations with Plutarch, Machiavelli, Locke, Hobbes, Seabury, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Hume. Readers of *Republican Empire* are treated to an Alexander Hamilton who was not only a visionary statesman, but also a sophisticated theorist who had a unique ability to cut to the core of issues and make presentations that were consistently brilliant. Through a discussion of the interaction between what Hamilton said and wrote and what his peers said in response, *Republican Empire* takes readers through the debates over the legitimacy of Revolution, to the issues behind the Constitutional movement, to the founding of the Federal government, and to the collapse of Federalism in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

This is a highly demanding read. The book is dense and highly theoretical. It is thus addressed to the small group of historians and political theorists who are well versed in both theory and the history of the early republic. For the specialists, however, the depth and insight of Walling's analysis make the effort required to read such academic analysis wholly worthwhile. The complex and profound thought of Alexander Hamilton deserves such a serious first-rate study.

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