MEET THE PRESS WITH BRIAN WILLIAMS:
HAMILTON V. JEFFERSON

Williams: Good morning. Today we have two very special guests on our show: Mr. Thomas Jefferson, President Washington’s Secretary of State and Mr. Alexander Hamilton, President Washington's Secretary of the Treasury. As all of us are well aware, except for some of the back country frontiersmen, that there has been an ongoing controversy between Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Jefferson. Could you give us your insight into how this controversy began?

Jefferson: Of course, Mr. Williams. I think the situation between Mr. Hamilton and me became problematic around the time he dreamt up that idea of a national bank. {Jefferson shakes his head in disgust and Hamilton sneers.} I support Amendment 10 to the United States Constitution which says that all powers not expressly delegated to the federal government are reserved to the states and to the people. I believe that the Constitution must be interpreted strictly. Nowhere does the Constitution give Congress the power to establish such a bank. For Congress or the President to take a single step beyond the Constitution’s limits is for them to grasp unlimited power. The incorporation of a bank and the powers assumed by this institution, have not, in my opinion, been delegated to the United States by the Constitution. They are not among the powers especially expressed or enumerated. . . nor are they within either of the general phrases which follow: 1)To lay taxes to provide for the general welfare of the United States or 2) to make all laws necessary and proper for carrying into execution the enumerated powers. Both of these powers can be carried into execution without a bank. A bank, therefore, is not necessary and consequently not authorized by the Constitution.

Williams: Okay, I see. Mr. Hamilton. How would you respond to Mr. Jefferson’s arguments?

Hamilton: Mr. Jefferson is very narrow-minded in his interpretation of the Constitution. If something does not jump up at him from the list of Congressional powers found in Article I Section 8 of the Constitution, Jefferson assumes that it should not exist. He is simply wrong. I believe that implied powers should carry the same weight as expressed powers. From my logic it follows that the power to establish a bank is provided for in the Constitution because the bank may be employed as a means of carrying into execution many of the expressed powers. A bank has a natural relation to the powers of collecting taxes, regulating trade, and providing for the common defense. Therefore, the incorporation of the bank is a constitutional measure.

Jefferson: I am sorry, Mr. Hamilton, but I must disagree. I believe that the Constitution must be interpreted strictly. . . Nowhere does the Constitution give Congress the power to establish such a bank.

Hamilton: I believe in a broad, flexible interpretation of the Constitution. Mr. Jefferson is misguided when he opposes me, because a bank is very much needed to carry into execution a number of expressed powers. The bank will facilitate commerce in the United States and all enlightened men should desire the prosperity brought by commerce and all who practice it. When merchants prosper, all prosper.
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Williams: So the basic difference here, as I see it, is ideological. Mr. Hamilton believes in a somewhat loose interpretation of the Constitution, while Mr. Jefferson prefers a more literal interpretation. I think this difference relates ideally to your views on the power of the government. Would you care to elaborate? Mr. Hamilton, please begin.

Hamilton: In order to get this young country growing, we need a strong central government. I favor an even stronger federal government than that which we already have; a stronger government which must come at the expense of the states.

Williams: Well, I am not sure that Mr. Jefferson will agree with you, sir. In fact, I am confident he will not!

Jefferson: After all the obstacles our young nation has overcome, how can Mr. Hamilton make such assertions? Power must lie with the state governments. We cannot afford to make decisions that will create further abuses of power like those that occurred when the colonies were under the control of the king. I do not have faith in a strong central government.

Williams: So, Mr. Jefferson, if you do not have faith in the new government, in what do you have faith?

Jefferson: My faith is more in the people of this nation than in the government. I trust this nation’s people. I have a tremendous amount of faith in the common man. “I believe man is a rational animal, endowed by nature with rights and an innate sense of justice. . . In brief, I have faith in the common sense of the people.” There is not a more virtuous man alive than the American farmer. “Farmers are the chosen people of God.” I cannot bring myself, however, to trust the rich and powerful.

Hamilton: Mr. Jefferson, I beg to disagree. My faith lies in the government and in the elite who will rule that government. “All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well born, the other the mass of the people. . . The people are turbulent and changing. . . Give, therefore, to the first class, a distinct permanent share in the government. They will check the unsteadiness of the second, and, as they cannot receive any advantage by a change, they will ever maintain good government.”

Jefferson: Mr. Hamilton, you are most incorrect. “Whenever you see exaggerated fortunes, you also see misery and stagnation. We must not convert the government into an instrument for extracting money from the weak for the benefit of the powerful.”

Williams: As our discussion has progressed it has become apparent that the two of you have very different visions of the future of the American economy. Could you elaborate?
Hamilton: I dream of a bustling nation full of commerce and industry, a nation that will make its mark on history. Industrialization will make for a general level of well being that no previous civilization has even approached. America will not remain a simple society of gentlemen farmers. The federal government will need to take on additional responsibilities. The salvation of the republic will come from the energetic actions the federal government takes to regulate commerce, currency, and banking. That is why I still support a protective tariff, despite the fact that Congress has seen fit to pass a tariff for revenue only.

Jefferson: When Americans exchange their farms for factories and their open spaces for slums, when they pile upon each other in cities, then individualism will be lost and people will consume one another.

Hamilton: Only when all kinds of industry are concentrated in the city can each person find his proper work. It is only the city, with its variety, that can give the individual choice and stimulation. What choices does an enterprising person have in a society of cultivators?

Jefferson: Hasn’t the government loaded the Americans with enough problems and enough debt? It can best serve now by keeping its hands out of our pockets. Salvation will come, not from the government, but from the traditional American virtues of thrift and hard work, if only our citizens are allowed to manage themselves.

Williams: I would like to bring this enlightening and interesting debate to a close. Would the two of you care to summarize your beliefs in a few succinct statements?

Hamilton: The acts of the United States must be supreme and binding on states as well as individuals, for the United States government was created as a contract entered into by the states. As you can see by his comments today, Mr. Jefferson favors a federal government bound hand and foot by his strict interpretation of the Constitution. I, however, urge a loose construction of the Constitution and a doctrine of implied powers which will enable the President and the Congress to act energetically and quickly should a sudden decision {such as the opportunity to purchase land} need to be made.

Jefferson: I believe in a strict interpretation of the Constitution. The United States government was created only as a compact among the states. The government should be given only those powers expressly delegated to it by Article I Section 8 of the Constitution and no more. Power should rest in the hands of the people.

Williams: And now it is up to you, the American people, to predict whether America will follow the Hamiltonian model or the Jeffersonian model, and whether the controversy between strict and loose construction will ever subside.