

BOOKS

[*Hamilton's Curse: How Jefferson's Arch Enemy Betrayed the American Revolution—and What It Means for America Today*, Thomas J. DiLorenzo, Crown Forum, 256 Pages]

Centralist American

By Alan Pell Crawford

"WE PRACTICE HAMILTON from January 1 to July 3 every year," the historian James Thurslow Adams wrote in 1929. "On July 4 we hurrah like mad for Jefferson. The next day we quietly take up Hamilton again for the rest of the year as we go about our business." Today, of course, we not only practice Hamilton but hurrah for him, too. The last decade has produced a gusher of admiring looks at the ambitious upstart whom John Adams called a "bastard son of a Scots peddler," and there is much to admire about Hamilton the man. Lacking the advantages of the well-born and well-to-do Founders, Hamilton proved to be as brilliant and capable as any of them and more influential than most. Yet today's admirers—Ron Chernow, John Steele Gordon, Richard Brookhiser, and Michael Lind, notably—revere Hamilton's economic program, which they credit, accurately, for American capitalism as we know it.

DiLorenzo does not regard Hamilton's legacy in the same favorable light, and the evidence he marshals in this spirited polemic is persuasive. Hamilton is the architect of our economic, financial, and even political system, and this is indeed in many ways unfortunate. A critic of the Articles of Confederation, proponent of the Constitutional Convention, and advocate for ratification of the Constitution that replaced the Articles, Hamilton, as a pamphleteer and first secretary

of the Treasury, made no secret of his desire to create an "energetic" executive-for-life, enthroned atop an oligarchy based on a model of European mercantilism. Hamilton was a realist, who understood, though not without regret, that monarchy—which he preferred to the republican form of government his fellow Founders favored—would never fly with Americans who had just fought a war against the British crown.

Even so, Hamilton won most of his battles, especially when, as a member of George Washington's cabinet, he clashed with the more republican—we would say democratic—Thomas Jefferson, Washington's secretary of state. In Washington's councils, the foundations of the American economic system were laid, and the long-term effect, DiLorenzo writes,

reads like a catalog of the ills of modern government: an out-of-control, unaccountable, monopolistic bureaucracy in Washington, D.C.; the demise of the Constitution as a restraint on the federal government's powers; the end of the idea that the citizens of the states should be their masters, rather than the servants, of their government; generations of activist federal judges who have eviscerated the constitutional protections of individual liberty in America; national debt; harmful protectionist international trade policies; corporate welfare (that is, the use of tax dollars to subsidize various politically connected businesses); and central economic planning and political control of the money supply, which have instigated boom-and-bust cycles in the economy.

Hamilton's arguments—in *The Federalist* (1787-1788), in his *Report on Manufactures* (1791), and in his *Opinion as to the Constitutionality of The Bank of the United States* (1791)—"are repeated to this day by academics, politicians, and others who favor a bigger, more activist government with unbridled

executive powers." In almost every case, DiLorenzo, a Loyola College economics professor, declares that the programs and policies these neo-Hamiltonians support have had lamentable economic effects and woeful political consequences, which we suffer from to this day. This is all argued forcefully and, for the most part, convincingly.

Still and all, the case seems rather more complicated than DiLorenzo makes out, and *Hamilton's Curse* would have benefited from a more precise and comprehensive explanation of the real choices that Americans faced. There is far too little of Jefferson and Jefferson's alternative. And what DiLorenzo does include about Jefferson is not always accurate. In this book, the third president appears only rarely and then merely as an example of all the blessings that the nation rejected when it threw in its lot with Hamilton. Whatever objectionable policy Hamilton supported, Jefferson opposed.

But this was not always the case. The two men certainly differed in their broader visions of America's future. They were often in opposition but not always. It would surprise some of Jefferson's right-wing admirers, for example, to learn that he was not dogmatically opposed to progressive taxation. A good way of "silently lessening the inequality of property," Jefferson wrote to James Madison, "is to exempt all from taxation below a certain point, and to tax the higher portions of property in geometric profession as they rise."

Nor was Jefferson the unqualified advocate of secession that paleoconservatives and neo-anarchists like to believe. Under "Jeffersonian federalism," DiLorenzo writes, "peaceful secession was always considered to be an essential part of any genuinely federal compact." Perhaps in theory. But in practice, Jefferson denounced secessionists. At the time of the Hartford Convention, when New England Federalists, opposed to the War of 1812, threatened to secede, Jefferson also became a Hamiltonian "nationalist." He gave voice to what DiLorenzo would regard as mys-

tical, proto-Lincolnian utterances about “the union of our country” and condemned those who encouraged “rebellion, civil war, dissolution of the government, and the miseries of anarchism.”

Although he denounced the Hartford conferees as the “Marats, the Dantons and the Robespierres of Massachusetts,” who wished “to anarchise us,” Jefferson was not worried by them. “No event, more than this,” he wrote of official tolerance of their secessionist threats, “has shown the placid character of our Constitution. Under any other, their treasons would have been punished by the halter. We let them live as laughing stocks for the world, and punish them by the torment of eternal contempt.”

Hamilton’s Curse would have been more persuasive had the author shown us how and why Hamilton prevailed—why his arguments seemed more compelling in their day than Jefferson’s or how moneyed interests were able to overwhelm the Jeffersonian opposition. DiLorenzo suggests that the realities of power politics somehow doomed the

Jeffersonian program, though he does not exactly say so. The author attributes much of Hamilton’s success to his “clever manipulation” of words, but too often DiLorenzo himself prefers to imply rather than argue.

Those with whom the author disagrees, be they past or present, are routinely presented as not just mistaken but as rogues and scoundrels whose motives are driven by self-interest if not outright malevolence. In DiLorenzo’s telling, the “totalitarian-minded” Hamilton and his followers use “ruses,” “phony rhetoric,” “smokescreens,” and “schemes.” They employ these devices to “fool” their countrymen into approving their dubious “capers.” They rely on “strong-armed tactics” and “bribes.” When the constitutionality of a law is upheld, it’s a “rubber-stamp” from the Supreme Court. The effect is to reduce Hamilton and those who share his notion of what America should be to con artists engaged in an immensely clever, get-rich-quick plot.

For instance, the “scheming” John Marshall, chief justice of the Supreme Court from 1801-35 is presented as Hamilton’s stooge, who “smeared” theories of state sovereignty. Deploying the “Hamiltonian Big Lie,” he “fabricated a false history of the American founding.” This alleged falsehood was Marshall’s opinion in *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819), which rested on the claim that, in DiLorenzo’s paraphrase, “the states were never sovereign and that the Constitution was somehow the result of a national plebiscite,” ratified not by the states but, as Marshall wrote, by “the whole people.”

McCulloch v. Maryland was indeed a monumental—and perhaps monumentally wrongheaded—decision, but to present it as simply another in the long list of Hamiltonian “tricks” does not explain enough.

This argument fails to tell us, for example, why such a “false history” would appear to be true—to intelligent and well-informed people inside of government and out—so soon after ratification had taken place.

The overall effect of this unduly rancorous presentation is decidedly Hobbesian. It is not surprising, however, that those who regard Hamilton’s legacy as destructive feel as alienated and angry toward contemporary America as they do. Precisely because Hamilton’s side won, and won so early in the game, America today is indeed Hamiltonian (and Lincolnian). This presents paleos such as DiLorenzo—also the author of two critical studies of Lincoln—with a serious problem. Their argument seems less with Hamilton (or Lincoln) than with America itself.

Perhaps as a result, some of DiLorenzo’s recommendations for “ending the [Hamiltonian] curse” are unhelpful. It is highly unlikely, for example, that Americans in the 21st century would repeal the 17th Amendment, abolishing the popular election of U.S. senators and returning to a system in which they are chosen by appointment by state legislatures.

That said, one does sympathize with those who retain an attachment to political liberty as it once was in this country, and who feel that they have been betrayed. The contribution they can make today is not political, one suspects, but literary and historical. They can remind us, as DiLorenzo does quite ably in this provocative and original book, of the price we have paid for the world we have chosen.

And their ranks will surely grow. Shortly after Gore Vidal’s novel *Burr* was published, the libertarian Karl Hess was asked at a gathering of Washington conservatives what he thought of Jefferson’s disgraced vice president. “My only real beef with Burr,” Hess replied, “was that he didn’t shoot Hamilton sooner.” Hess uttered those words more than 30 years ago, when conservatives professed to believe that deficit spending was bad. One can understand why, these days, those who really do regard public debt as a menace might agree. ■

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[George Kennan: A Writing Life, Lee Congdon, 151, 183 pages]

Literary Ambassador

By Walter Hudson

IN HIS FAMOUS 1947 ARTICLE, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," George Frost Kennan (under the now famous pseudonym Mr. X), sought to explain the motivations behind the Soviet dictatorship. For insight, he sought not Marx or Trotsky, but Edward Gibbon: "From enthusiasm to imposture ... how the conscience may slumber in a mixed and middle way between self-illusion and voluntary fraud." Near the end of his article, Kennan turned to Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, that towering work of familial decay and doom. Kennan speculated that, just as the Buddenbrooks family had shone most brilliantly at the point when its inner decay was most advanced, so did the Soviet Union appear on the surface to be most terrifyingly powerful even as it bore within it the seeds of its own destruction. Self-deception, hubris, and ignorance—human frailties took control of the engine of dialectical materialism. Marxism, according to Mr. X, was "a highly convenient rationalization for [Russian revolutionaries'] instinctive desires."

The informing sensibility of containment was, as Lee Congdon makes clear in *George Kennan: A Writing Life*, a literary one. Kennan was, first and always, a man of letters. Like Jefferson, he could not live without books. Congdon notes how he actually "released his frustration" by reading. Kennan's devotion to the Russian masters, especially Chekhov, was profound. He made literary pilgrimages to places where the great writer-doctor lived, seriously contemplated writing a book about him, and more than once, used Chekhov's story, "A Case in Practice," to show that the truth of the workers' plight was found not in Marxist abstractions, but in rather common human weaknesses.

With Congdon's help, we see Kennan's career and prolific output in a new way. Many books have picked apart Kennan's thought. The debate has gone on for decades about what containment really meant and whether Kennan was, as the Cold War revisionists claimed, really a hawk or, as the neoconservatives argued, a revisionist. But Kennan, despite spending the first part of his long life as a diplomat and policy planner in the State Department, was always defined by his sense as a writer, not as a strategist or policymaker. As Congdon says, "he gave so much of himself to his writing, official and personal, and labored with such determination to perfect his style."

Indeed, with no other major public figure of the last century do we have such a rich and diverse source of writing. Congdon reviews Kennan's written words carefully, giving unfamiliar readers a fruitful introduction. One part of this writing is public. This includes the public-policy statements, most famously the Mr. X article that helped define the Cold War. Down the years, these became increasingly pessimistic pronouncements about the state of the West, the arms race, and America's befuddled relations with the Soviet Union—books with titles such as *The Cloud of Danger* and *The Nuclear Delusion*.

Then there are the histories, mostly dealing with 19th- and early 20th-century high diplomacy and the early years of the Soviet Union. In his elegant prose, Kennan went against the grain of the various "new history" trends of his era. He focused on personalities as much as events. Despite the density of their scholarship, his historical works make compelling reading. His two volumes on early U.S.-Soviet relations are modern historical classics.

To help us understand these policy pronouncements and scholarly explorations, Congdon places his subject in a literary-historical context. He fits Kennan squarely into the tradition of political realists, especially Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, Walter Lippmann and Henry Kissinger. He shows us Kennan's resemblance to Oswald Spengler and his

pessimism; to Gibbon and his arguments for self-control and moderation; to Freud and his notions of the subconscious and of desire's ability to limit human reason. Congdon also notes his admiration for Rachel Carson. Kennan's conservationist impulses made him an agrarian-environmentalist and even gave him metaphors for policy: "We must be gardeners and not mechanics in our approach to world affairs," he once wrote, "We must come to think of the development of international life as an organic and not a mechanical process."

Then there are Kennan's personal writings: his two volumes of memoirs; his more informal reflections (appropriately called *Sketches From a Life*); his fascinating, almost strange "personal philosophy," *Around the Cragged Hill*, in which he argued, among other things, that the United States should be broken up into smaller governing entities. And then we have his last book, a history of his own family entitled *The Kennans: The First Three Generations*. Written as he neared his centenary, wisdom and fealty combined to produce both a moving tribute to his New England ancestors and a reflection on what he thought a realized life should be. Commenting on his forefathers, he wrote, "They seemed all to have been 'whole' persons, content with their background, afflicted with neither inferiority nor of superiority vis-à-vis others, pretending to be nothing other than what they actually were."

To be "whole," to know and rest assuredly in oneself, was Kennan's goal. Congdon contends that Kennan's sense of himself came as an intensely literate and literary man. He tirelessly worked on his daily journals and labored over his diplomatic dispatches. He did not report like a diplomat or a government functionary; he tried to make sure his observations were both accurate and artful. It is the reflection in Kennan's writings that makes them so compelling and allows them to transcend the political limits of their time.

If we take these public and personal writings together, we begin to understand that Kennan was arguing for a