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Hamilton's Passionate Rationalism

Alexander Hamilton's first *Federalist Paper* endorses ratification of the proposed constitution. His unifying point is that the use of reason—in the form of the people's "reflection and choice"—will lead to the truth, whereas their use of passion will lead to ruin. Hamilton attempts to persuade his readers to make the correct decision by reminding them of the sheer importance of the matter. He suggests that "good men" will want to make the correct choice in light of their "true interests" (33), while the adversaries of the Constitution will be ruled by passions, deceit, and even weak minds. He frankly warns his readers against "any impressions other than those which may result from the evidence of truth" (35); he offers them a chance to join him on the right side of the issue, which he implies he has arrived at by knowledgeable deliberation. Finally, Hamilton courts his audience by implying that they will use reason to reach the truth. By contrast, the opponents of the Constitution rely on their emotions and follow a "much more certain road to the introduction of despotism" (35).

In the first paragraph, Hamilton introduces the idea of truth—not in passing, but by asking whether "good government from reflection and choice" is at all possible (33). He indicates that the decision is of greater importance than just one country; the wrong decision would "deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind" (33). By broadening the implications of the question at hand, depicting it as "of the first magnitude to society" (34), and describing the Constitution as "the safest course for your liberty, your dignity, and your happiness" (36) and "favorable to the discovery of truth" (33), Hamilton paints himself as a messenger of independence and veracity, while he paints his opponents as obstacles to the discovery of truth. He chooses his words with meticulous care in this plea in order to instill the reader with a sense of higher purpose and almost martyrdom. The voter must make his choice within himself using reason, but in application, the consequences will reach infinitely farther than himself.

Hamilton even begins to preach, comparing politics to religion in his fourth paragraph. He makes this connection with the phrase "heresies in either [politics or religion] can rarely be cured by persecution" (34). He refers to political converts as "proselytes" (34) and uses religiously underscored words like "enlightened zeal" (35) to characterize the desire for efficient government. The ratification question is so monumental—as monumental as religion—that "the cause of truth" is at stake, not to mention the people's "happiness ... dignity ... [and] liberty" (36). The same reflection which interprets the bible in religious questions, is also to interpret the facts as Hamilton presents them in the political question. Hamilton puts his reader in the position of a political zealot, who actively crusades for the truth. This crusade adds more weight to Hamilton's argument in that the sense of higher purpose he wishes his congregation to feel is contrasted with the selfish nature of his opponents' "dangerous ambition" (35).

These opponents are stubborn, greedy, deceitful and feeble-minded due to their adherence to passions instead of reason. Where he practices "candor" (34), his opponents use "the loudness of their declamations and the bitterness of their invectives" (35). He refers to a class of men who oppose the Constitution out of fear of losing the political power they have already achieved in the states. They will "resist all changes" that would threaten their power (33). He also refers to another group of men who "hope to aggrandize themselves by the confusions of their country" (34). All these men are glutinous for power. The best Hamilton can say of them is that they have made honest mistakes; he sarcastically derides their "honest errors of minds led astray by preconceived jealousies and fears" (34).

Hamilton compares the jealousy of his adversaries to that of "violent love" (35). In this light they are "blameless at least, if not respectable" (34). They are not guided by reason in forming their own opinions, but are guided by "preconceived jealousies and fears" (34). If they are not dishonest, they are half-witted and subservient to fervent emotions. Later he accuses them of harboring "angry and malignant passions" (35). Since "passions and prejudices" are "little favorable to the discovery of truth" (33), these men can not possibly be honorable. These passions discussed are in direct opposition to his "unperplexed and unbiased" considerations in the people's "true interests" (33). In his fifth paragraph, Hamilton compares one kind of deceiving opponent of the Constitution to a demagogue and a tyrant, images that connote dictatorship. He contrasts this oppressor with himself in the sixth paragraph: his analysis ignores "any impressions other than those which may result from the evidence of truth"; (35) thus, his readers are in a position to judge the matter for themselves, while his opponent's risk being "led astray" (34) by an oppressor.

Through these rhetorical devices, Hamilton empowers his supporters. He appeals to their higher selves by returning to the notion that he "will freely lay before [them] the reasons on which [his convictions] are founded" and that his arguments "will be open to all and may be judged of by all" (36). He even offers to answer any questions so that his readers may be well informed. However, he also appeals to their democratic sentiments by calling them "fellow-citizens" and "countrymen" (35), indicating that he is on an equal footing with them. He is for the people, even if he is a

supporter of "the vigor of government" and the "security of liberty" (35). This language, suggesting reason as opposed to the passionate language used formerly to illustrate his antagonists, is a compliment to his readers' minds. He uses words like "consideration," "frankly acknowledge to you," and "I propose" (36) to illustrate the rationalism he expects to share with them.

Hamilton uses imagery and rhetorical language effectively in order to discredit his adversaries in the eyes of the people. His main tool is a rationalistic "truth" which he detaches from his opponents and associates with himself. He also portrays "truth" religiously, and connects the Constitution and its supporters with the highest cause. Hamilton passionately defends and elevates the people's use of reason. But he equally passionately believes that the people's reason is admirable only when it leads to the conclusion that the United States needs a strong, vigorous, central government.

All page citations refer to *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Penguin Books, 1961)

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