

Alexander Hamilton - "The Farmer Refuted"

February 25, 1775

INTRODUCTION

In "The Farmer Refuted" a precocious Alexander Hamilton defends the revolutionary cause with a zeal that would take him to lead soldiers in a charge at Yorktown. The lengthy essay exemplifies the founding generation's fervent embrace of natural rights and natural law, or "natural liberty," that justify revolution and provide the principles of legitimate government. As he writes to his Tory opponent (the Farmer): "The fundamental source of all your errors, sophisms and false reasonings, is a total ignorance of the natural rights of mankind."

Hamilton (1755/57?-1804) was coauthor of *The Federalist* and other major founding documents, the first Secretary of the Treasury, a founder of the Federalist Party, and a military and political confidante of George Washington. His rise from a penniless immigrant from the Caribbean to the highest levels of New York society embodies the opportunity of colonial America. His spiritedness and sense of honor led him to die in a duel with Aaron Burr, then-Vice President of the United States.

In denying the supremacy of king or parliament over the colonies, Hamilton denounces the Farmer's charge that natural right allows the strong to crush the weaker, as a wolf devours a sheep. Tory Samuel Seabury, writing as A.W. Farmer, had argued that the colonists were obliged to remain obedient British subjects, and that natural rights meant the rule of the strong over the weak.

To the contrary, Hamilton urged, the colonists should stake their all on the basis of universal natural rights, not their traditional rights as Englishmen. "The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for, among old parchments, or musty records. They are written, as with a sun beam, in the whole *volume* of human nature, by the hand of the divinity itself; and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power." Americans, just as Turks, Russians, Frenchmen, Spaniards, or any other people, may assert their independence, "shake off the yoke of servitude," and "model their government, upon the principles of civil liberty." The natural rights

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standard justifies revolution and, moreover, defines legitimate government.

Hamilton explains that “*Civil liberty is only natural liberty, modified and secured by the sanctions of civil society.*” Accordingly, “the first and primary end of human laws,

is to maintain and regulate [that is, derive the rule of law from] these *absolute rights* of individuals.” God and nature provided men with natural rights so that they may preserve themselves from arbitrary rule and thus enjoy their reason, personal liberties, and property.

“The Farmer Refuted; or, a more comprehensive and impartial View of Disputes between Great Britain and the Colonies”

Anonymous Pamphlet

[Alexander Hamilton]

February 25, 1775

I shall, for the present, pass over to that part of your pamphlet, in which you endeavour to establish the supremacy of the British Parliament over America. After a proper éclaircissement of this point, I shall draw such inferences, as will sap the foundation of every thing you have offered.

The first thing that presents itself is a wish, that “I had, explicitly, declared to the public my ideas of the *natural rights* of mankind. Man, in a state of nature (you say) may be considered, as perfectly free from all restraints of *law* and *government*, and, then, the weak must submit to the strong.”

I shall, henceforth, begin to make some allowance for that enmity, you have discovered to the *natural rights* of mankind. For, though ignorance of them in this enlightened age cannot be admitted, as a sufficient excuse for you; yet, it ought, in some measure, to extenuate your guilt. If you will follow my advice, there still may be hopes of your reformation. Apply yourself, without delay, to the study of the law of nature. I would recommend to your perusal, Grotius, Puffendorf, Locke, Montesquieu, and Burlamaqui. I might mention other excellent writers on this subject; but if you attend, diligently, to these, you will not require any others.

There is so strong a similitude between your political principles and those maintained by Mr. Hobb[es], that, in judging from them, a person might very easily *mistake* you for a disciple of his. His opinion was, exactly, coincident with yours, relative to man in a

state of nature. He held, as you do, that he was, then, perfectly free from all restraint of *law* and *government*. Moral obligation, according to him, is derived from the introduction of civil society; and there is no virtue, but what is purely artificial, the mere contrivance of politicians, for the maintenance of social intercourse. But the reason he run into this absurd and impious doctrine, was, that he disbelieved the existence of an intelligent superintending principle, who is the governor, and will be the final judge of the universe.

As you, sometimes, swear *by him that made you*, I conclude, your sentiment does not correspond with his, in that which is the basis of the doctrine, you both agree in; and this makes it impossible to imagine whence this congruity between you arises. To grant, that there is a supreme intelligence, who rules the world, and has established laws to regulate the actions of his creatures; and, still, to assert, that man, in a state of nature, may be considered as perfectly free from all restraints of *law* and *government*, appear to a common understanding, altogether irreconcilable.

Good and wise men, in all ages, have embraced a very dissimilar theory. They have supposed, that the deity, from the relations, we stand in, to himself and to each other, has constituted an eternal and immutable law, which is, indispensibly, obligatory upon all mankind, prior to any human institution whatever.

This is what is called the law of nature, “which, being coeval with mankind, and dictated by God him-

self, is, of course, superior in obligation to any other. It is binding over all the globe, in all countries, and at all times. No human laws are of any validity, if contrary to this; and such of them as are valid, derive all their authority, mediately, or immediately, from this original." Blackstone.

Upon this law, depend the natural rights of mankind, the supreme being gave existence to man, together with the means of preserving and beatifying that existence. He endowed him with rational faculties, by the help of which, to discern and pursue such things, as were consistent with his duty and interest, and invested him with an inviolable right to personal liberty, and personal safety.

Hence, in a state of nature, no man had any *moral* power to deprive another of his life, limbs, property or liberty; nor the least authority to command, or exact obedience from him; except that which arose from the ties of consanguinity.

Hence also, the origin of all civil government, justly established, must be a voluntary compact, between the rulers and the ruled; and must be liable to such limitations, as are necessary for the security of the *absolute rights* of the latter; for what original title can any man or set of men have, to govern others, except their own consent? To usurp dominion over a people, in their own despite, or to grasp at a more extensive power than they are willing to entrust, is to violate that law of nature, which gives every man a right to his personal liberty; and can, therefore, confer no obligation to obedience.

"The principal aim of society is to protect individuals, in the enjoyment of those absolute rights, which were vested in them by the immutable laws of nature; but which could not be preserved, in peace, without that mutual assistance, and intercourse, which is gained by the institution of friendly and social communities. Hence it follows, that the first and primary end of human laws, is to maintain and regulate these *absolute rights* of individuals." Blackstone.

If we examine the pretensions of parliament, by this criterion, which is evidently, a good one, we shall,

presently detect their injustice. First, they are subversive of our natural liberty, because an authority is assumed over us, which we by no means assent to. And secondly, they divest us of that moral security, for our lives and properties, which we are intitled to, and which it is the primary end of society to bestow. For such security can never exist, while we have no part in making the laws, that are to bind us; and while it may be the interest of our uncontrolled legislators to oppress us as much as possible.

To deny these principles will be not less absurd, than to deny the plainest axioms: I shall not, therefore, attempt any further illustration of them.

[...]

The fundamental source of all your errors, sophisms, and false reasonings, is a total ignorance of the natural rights of mankind. Were you once to become acquainted with these, you could never entertain a thought, that all men are not, by nature, entitled to a parity of privileges. You would be convinced that natural liberty is a gift of the beneficent Creator to the whole human race, and that civil liberty is founded in that, and cannot be wrested from any people without the most manifest violation of justice. *Civil liberty is only natural liberty, modified and secured by the sanctions of civil society.* It is not a thing, in its own nature, precarious and dependent on human will and caprice, but it is conformable to the constitution of man, as well as necessary to the *well-being* of society.

[...]

Thus Sir, I have taken a pretty general survey of the American Charters; and proved to the satisfaction of every unbiassed person, that they are intirely, discordant with that sovereignty of parliament, for which you are an advocate. The disingenuity of your extracts (to give it no harsher name) merits the severest censure; and will no doubt serve to discredit all your former, as well as future labours, in your favourite cause of despotism.

It is true, that New-York has no Charter. But, if it could support it's claim to liberty in no other way, it

might, with justice, plead the common principles of colonization: for, it would be unreasonable, to seclude one colony, from the enjoyment of the most important privileges of the rest. There is no need, however, of this plea: The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for, among old parchments, or musty records. They are written, as with a sun beam, in the whole *volume* of human nature, by the hand of the divinity itself; and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power.

The nations of Turkey, Russia, France, Spain, and all other despotic kingdoms, in the world, have an inherent right, when ever they please, to shake off the yoke of servitude, (though sanctified by the immemorial usage of their ancestors;) and to model their government, upon the principles of civil liberty.

[...]

Had the rest of America passively looked on, while a sister colony was subjugated, the same fate would gradually have overtaken all. The safety of the whole depends upon the mutual protection of every part. If the sword of oppression be permitted to lop off one limb without opposition, reiterated strokes will soon dismember the whole body. Hence it was the duty and interest of all the colonies to succour and support the one which was suffering. It is sometimes sagaciously urged, that we ought to commiserate the distresses of the people of Massachusetts; but not intermeddle in their affairs, so far, as perhaps to bring ourselves into like circumstances with them. This might be good reasoning, if our neutrality would not be more dangerous, than our participation: But I am unable to conceive how the colonies in general would have any security against oppression, if they were once to content themselves, with barely *pitying* each other, while parliament was prosecuting and enforcing its demands. Unless

they continually protect and assist each other, they must all inevitably fall a prey to their enemies.

Extraordinary emergencies, require extraordinary expedients. The best mode of opposition was that in which there might be an union of councils. This was necessary to ascertain the boundaries of our rights; and to give weight and dignity to our measures, both in Britain and America. A Congress was accordingly proposed, and universally agreed to.

You, Sir, triumph in the supposed *illegality* of this body; but, granting your supposition were true, it would be a matter of no real importance. When the first principles of civil society are violated, and the rights of a whole people are invaded, the common forms of municipal law are not to be regarded. Men may then betake themselves to the law of nature; and, if they but conform their actions, to that standard, all cavils against them, betray either ignorance or dishonesty. There are some events in society, to which human laws cannot extend; but when applied to them lose all their force and efficacy. In short, when human laws contradict or discountenance the means, which are necessary to preserve the essential rights of any society, they defeat the proper end of all laws, and so become null and void.

[...]

I am inviolably attached to the essential rights of mankind and the true interests of society. I consider civil liberty, in a genuine, unadulterated sense, as the greatest of terrestrial blessings. I am convinced that the whole human race is entitled to it, and that it can be wrested from no part of them without the blackest and most aggravated guilt.

[...]

A SINCERE FRIEND TO AMERICA.