

Alexander Hamilton's Constitutional Convention Speech, [18 June 1787](#)¹

*James Madison: Alexander Hamilton hadn't spoken until now because he wanted to show respect for those with more age and experience than himself and he was also in a delicate situation with respect to the other delegates from New York.*²

We're now in such a crisis that I am obligated to say what I think because our job is do our best to secure the public safety and happiness. And I kind of hate both the Virginia and New Jersey plans. I particularly dislike the New Jersey plan because it leaves too much power with the states which will hobble the ability of the national government to do what it needs to do.

The states sent us here to do a job: provide for the needs of the Union. For us to decline to do this because of the technicalities of our mandates would be to "sacrifice the means to the end."

So what should we do to provide for the happiness of our country? "The great and essential principles necessary for the support of Government" are:

1. There needs to be a motivation for both the people and states to support it. Right now that's not happening—the states are interested more in themselves than the Union.
2. "The love of power. Men love power." When forced to choose, the states have always tried to keep and maximize their own power than give it up. But it's only the demagogues who hate the idea of a strong national government. The people at large actually don't mind all that much.
3. The people need to feel an attachment to the national government and right now their loyalties are to their states; that's obvious to everyone.
4. The national government needs to have power to *force* the states to comply with national laws. A government of only a legislature is not able to enforce its legislation and individual states don't have the resources to supply an army that's able to force compliance.
5. People have an attachment to the government that provides them services. Right now, that's the state governments. So long as that's the case, the national government will not be successful.

So what can we do about this? The only answer is "complete sovereignty in the general Government."

Does the New Jersey Plan accomplish this? No. Actually it might make things worse. It doesn't supply a way for the national government to enforce its rules, particularly with taxation. Where's the money going to come from, then? Taxes on commerce? There's not enough of that to supply a consistent revenue stream. Also, the "one state one vote" idea is terrible. There's no way that big states like Virginia are going to agree to that, and even if they did, they'd stop taking it

¹ As paraphrased by Dr. Benjamin Knoll, January 2020

² The other two delegates, John Lansing Jr. and Robert Yates, were both moderates who quickly came to the conclusion that the Convention had exceeded its mandate and authority and left the convention in early July.

36 seriously pretty soon. Also, one-state-one-vote is an affront to the concepts of justice and “every
37 human feeling.” Bad principles in government work slowly, but surely, to destroy it.

38 So no, the New Jersey Plan is not going to work.

39 So what should we do instead? I’ll admit, I’m not optimistic. This is a large country and it’s
40 going to be expensive to run a national government unless we could shift some of the taxation
41 from the states to the national government. Actually, if we did away with state taxes altogether
42 and shifted all of them to the national government we’d be in good shape. But that idea’s a non-
43 starter with the public so I’m not going to propose it as a realistic idea. I’m not actually sure that
44 we’re going to be able to figure *anything* out that will work for what we need.

45 So this is what I think, and I don’t hesitate to share this as it represents my own private opinion:
46 the British government is the best in the world, and we need something like it in America.

47 I hope that reasonable people will bear with me, and remember that public opinion can change
48 quickly. After all, we all thought the Articles were sufficient when they were implemented and
49 now we all recognize that we were wrong. I’m fairly confident that before too long we’re all
50 going to be saying that the British Constitution is the only one strong enough, in the words of
51 one writer, to “unite public strength with individual security.”

52 In every society there are divisions between the few and the many and so separate interests will
53 inevitably arise: the bankers and those who get loans, for example. There’s always the many and
54 the few. Give power to the many and they’ll oppress the few, give it to the few and they’ll
55 oppress the many. To fix this, *both* the many *and* the few should have power so each can defend
56 themselves against the other.

57 The British have survived so long because their Constitution is excellent. We should take notes.

58 Their House of Lords is “a most noble institution.” Its members are from the aristocratic class,
59 are rich, and have lifetime appointments. Thus, they have a *strong* interest in keeping things
60 stable and peaceful: that’s what keeps them afloat. This makes for a “permanent barrier” against
61 every effort from either the lower classes or the King to engage in risky endeavors that threaten
62 the peace or security. If our Senate has fixed terms, it will not have the “firmness” enough to
63 accomplish the same goal. That’s why our Senators should have lifetime appointments, too.

64 Reasonable people disagree as to this incentive structure, I admit. Some people think that if
65 Senators were to serve for seven years that would be enough to isolate them from the “amazing
66 violence and turbulence of the democratic spirit.” But don’t be so sure; sometimes ideas can
67 catch up like wildfire and become irresistible to the masses. My friends from New England know
68 what I’m talking about!³

69 Further, lots of people are saying that a strong republic cannot also have a strong executive. I
70 think they’re wrong. In fact, a strong republic *needs* a strong executive! The English model is

³ A reference to Shay’s Rebellion

71 pretty much the ideal here. The King of England is a hereditary monarch and has a *lot* of money
72 and a *lot* of land. Because he's guaranteed his throne and is rich, he won't have any reason to be
73 swayed by foreign powers and he'll have interest in preserving the peace and order at home.
74 After all, republics tend to be susceptible to meddling and corruption, especially from outsiders.
75 This is because when naïve and weak people get to be in charge it's easy to flatter and
76 manipulate them.⁴

77 Therefore, what should we do? We should prioritize as much stability and permanency in the
78 system as republican principles will admit:

- 79 1. One branch of the legislature should be appointed for life, or at least during good
80 behavior.
- 81 2. The chief executive should also have the position for life.

82 Some of you think that seven years will be enough to incentivize the Senators and/or chief
83 executive to think in the long-term best interests of the whole. I disagree—I think that only a
84 lifetime appointment will achieve this. If they are in office for only seven years they won't be
85 able to have enough power to be able to do the things that they need to do to ensure stability and
86 peace.

87 But if they're appointed for life, will that still be a "republic"? Sure. So long as they're all
88 selected by the people... or at least a process that *begins* with the people.

89 If the chief Executive has a lifetime appointment, he'll have more incentive to behave and take
90 care of the republic because that's what will give him his power. Thus, it will be safer to trust
91 him with that power.

92 Some people might say I'm calling for an "elective Monarch" and this will only result in the
93 same problem we had with King George. I disagree because "monarch" can mean a lot of things.
94 You can have a strong or weak monarch, one with term limits or one for life, etc. So whether you
95 have an Executive with term limits or one with a lifetime appointment, you have a "Monarch"
96 either way. We're just splitting hairs and arguing definitions at this point.

97 Others have argued that monarchies always bring along with them ambition, corruption, etc.
98 where the monarchs seek their own advantage over that of the whole. Again, I disagree.
99 *Sometimes* that has been true, but not always. There are just as many examples throughout
100 history—if not more—where monarchs have behaved themselves and ruled in the best interests
101 of their people. And we can figure out a way to make sure that this doesn't happen with our
102 monarch.

103 Now, I'm well aware that my proposal here is far beyond what you all have in mind. From my
104 vantage point, though, the Union is in crisis and crumbling as we speak. Just look around at
105 what's going on! Before too long the people are going to get over their "fondness for

⁴ "Men of little character, acquiring great power become easily the tools of intermeddling Neighbours."

106 democracies.” When that happens, they’re not going to be satisfied with the Virginia Plan.
107 They’re going to wish that we had gone *at least* as far as I am proposing.

108 Either way, I’m not making this a formal proposal. I just wanted to go on record to give a
109 “correct view” of my ideas and give you all some ideas that we can incorporate into the Virginia
110 Plan as we’re going forward here. So here they are:

- 111 1. Congress should have an Assembly and a Senate
- 112 2. The Assembly members are elected for three year terms directly by the people
- 113 3. The People also vote for Senate Electors from a certain number of districts across the
114 republic. These Senate Electors will pick the Senators.
- 115 4. The Senate Electors *or* State legislatures will then pick Executive Electors who will then
116 select the chief Executive who will serve for life.; this “Governor” may veto laws, have
117 foreign policy power, be the Commander in Chief of the military; have pardon power;
118 make cabinet appoints subject to Senate approval
- 119 5. If the Governor dies or is removed, the President of the Senate becomes Governor.
- 120 6. A Supreme Court will have twelve judges who are their appointments for life.
- 121 7. Congress will have power to institute state-level courts.
- 122 8. The Governor, Senators, and all other government officers will be liable to impeachment
123 for corrupt or poor conduct. All impeachments will be tried by the Supreme Court.
- 124 9. Any state law that is contrary to a national law will be “utterly void.” To prevent this
125 from even happening the governor of each state will be appointed by the national
126 government and will have veto power over state laws.
- 127 10. No state will have any standing army; this is reserved for the national government only.