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Though he never met Donald Trump, Alexander Hamilton knew the man

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By Charles R. Church

Alexander Hamilton, a bastard born on Nevis, a small Caribbean island, was both an intellectual dynamo and a brave man of action. During the American Revolution, after first serving with distinction as an artillery captain, Hamilton later was promoted and became Washington's invaluable adjutant.

After the war, Hamilton, abetted by James Madison and John Jay, was the primary author of "The Federalist Papers," which Thomas Jefferson surprisingly (he and Hamilton were fierce political enemies) called "the best commentary on the principles of government which ever has been written."

After the U.S. Constitution, in large measure owing to those papers, finally was ratified, and Washington became our first president, Hamilton, as secretary of the treasury, among other triumphs created a national bank to put the nation, at last, on a sound financial footing.

We shall never know what more he might have achieved, for in 1804 he was killed in a duel with the nefarious Aaron Burr on a rocky ledge in Weehawken, NJ. (Hamilton shot first, into the air; Burr then took careful aim.)

Whatever we remember about Hamilton, surely no one imagined that he would describe precisely the character of another president, who would not take office until more than two centuries had passed.

During Hamilton's long tenure as secretary of the treasury in the course of Washington's two terms in office, Washington often sought his advice about financial and political matters. Their rich trove of correspondence has been preserved, and one exchange gives rise to the point I wish to make.

On July 29, 1792, Washington wrote from his Mount Vernon estate to Hamilton in strict confidence, during a time when he was longing to retire from government, about complaints he

had received regarding the government. (Five dollars will get you 10 that Jefferson was the source.)

Some complaints cited dire fears that certain elements in their small nation wanted to strip away from the Constitution limitations on the powers of Congress with an intention to effect change from a republican form of government to a monarchy along British lines.

Hamilton replied on Aug. 18, 1792, enclosing his “Objections (21 had been cited by the president) and (his) Answers Respecting the Administration of the Government.” His 14th Answer labeled the idea of introducing a monarchy or aristocracy as “madness.” The people could only be brought to it by “convulsions and disorders” arising from the acts of demagogues. The “only path to a subversion of the republican system ... is, by flattering the prejudices of the people and exciting their jealousies and apprehensions, to throw affairs into confusion and bring on civil commotion”

Who would do such a thing?

“When a man unprincipled in private life [and] desperate in his fortune [who is] despotic in his ordinary demeanor [and] known to have scoffed in private at the principles of liberty ... is seen to mount the hobbyhorse of popularity to join in the cry of danger to liberty [and] to take every opportunity of embarrassing the [government, while] bringing it under suspicion, [and] to flatter and fall in with all the nonsense of the zealots of the day, it may justly be suspected that his object is to throw things into confusion [so] that he may ‘ride the storm and direct the whirlwind.’” Among the nation’s enemies are those who “flatter the follies of the people.”

Might the quoted words describe anyone we know? Of course they do.

Though I can’t swear to Trump’s having “scoffed in private at the principles of liberty” — I doubt he’s even spoken or thought about them, as such — from what’s in the public record I believe that he would have scoffed in such a way, if asked for what passes as his thoughts on the matter. But I embrace with ardor the notion that Hamilton — if not perfectly, then nearly so — could describe the type of man who could (and would) threaten the polity, and that Trump fits the description perfectly.

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