

Letter from Alexander Hamilton to Harrison Otis, December 23, 1800

N York Dec^r. 23. 1800

Dr Sir,

I lose no time in replying to your letter of the 17 this day received.

My opinion is, after mature reflection, that if Jefferson and Burr come with equal votes to the House of Representatives, the former ought to be preferred by the Federalists. Mr. Jefferson is respectably known in Europe – Mr. Burr little and that little not advantageously for a President of the U States – Mr. Jefferson is a man of easy fortune – Mr. Burr, as I believe, a bankrupt beyond redemption, unless by some coup at the expence of the public, and his habits of expence are such that Wealth he must have at any rate – Mr. Jefferson is a man of fair character for probity – Very different ideas are entertained of Mr. Burr by his enemies and what his friends think, you may collect from this anecdote – A lady said to Edward Livingston ironically “I am told Mr. Burr will be President I should like it very well if I had not heard that he is a man without property –“Let him alone for that replied Edward – If he is President for four years he will remove the objection” – Mr. Jefferson, though too revolutionary in his notions, is yet a lover of liberty and will be desirous of something like orderly Government – Mr. Burr loves nothing but himself – thinks of nothing but his own aggrandizement – and will be content with nothing short of permanent power in his own hands – No compact, that he should make with any passion in his breast except Ambition, could be relied upon by himself – How then should we be able to rely upon any agreement with him? Mr. Jefferson, I suspect will not dare much Mr. Burr will dare every thing in the sanguine hope of effecting every thing –

If Mr. Jefferson is likely from predilection for France to draw the Country into War on her side – Mr. Burr will certainly endeavour to do it for the Sake of creating the means of personal power and wealth.

This portrait is the result of long and attentive observation on a man with whom I am personally well – and in respect to whose character I have had peculiar opportunities of forming a correct judgment.

By no means, my Dear Sir, let the Federalists be responsible for his Elevation – In a choice of Evils let them take the least – Jefferson is in every view less dangerous than Burr.

But we ought – still to seek some advantages from our situation. It may be advisable to make it a ground of exploration with Mr. Jefferson or his confidential friends and the means of obtaining from him some assurances of his future conduct. The three essential points for us to secure is. 1 The continuance of the neutral plan bonafide towards the belligerent powers 2 The preservation of the present System of public credit – 3 The maintenance & gradual increase of our navy. Other matters may be left to take their chance.

While I have my pen in hand, I will express some ideas to you about the Convention with France – I am far from approving several of its features but I am clear that it ought now to be ratified having been negotiated & that the not doing of it would ruin the Federal party, hazard our internal tranquillity, and leave the door open for a worse arrangement under the new Administration.

One question will be whether this Treaty is compatible with our engagements to Great Britain. I hold it to be the better opinion that it is. It seems to me that the annulling of our Treaties with France is a matter between her and us by which another power ought neither to gain nor lose – that in terminating these differences we might have gone back to the Status quo ante bellum & that no power not put in worse situation than before would have a right to complain.

Y^{rs}. with great aft & resp

A Hamilton

H.G Otis. Esq

Transcript Source: The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History