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TITAN *and* THE HOUSE OF MORGAN

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A L E X A N D E R
H A M I L T O N

capital fraught with danger, fearing a privileged enclave. Governor George Clinton envisioned the ten-mile square as the scene of a presidential "court" disfigured by royal trappings and marked by "ambition with idleness, baseness with pride, the thirst of riches without labor . . . flattery . . . treason . . . perfidy, but above all the perpetual ridicule of virtue."⁶⁶

The capital's location had already led to intensive lobbying and intrigue. It was a monumental decision for contestants, since it would confer massive wealth, power, and population upon the winning state. More important, it would affect the style of the federal government, which was bound to soak up some of the political atmosphere of the surrounding region. In a large country with poor transportation, the voices of local citizens would resonate loudly in the ears of federal legislators.

Complicating the debate was the expectation that there would first be a temporary capital, likely New York or Philadelphia, which would function as the makeshift seat of government while a permanent capital was readied. Notwithstanding his nationalist bent, Hamilton wanted New York to remain at least the temporary capital. In August 1788, he contacted his old mentor, Governor William Livingston of New Jersey, and expressed shock at reports that Livingston had capitulated to "the snares of Pennsylvania" and was leaning toward Philadelphia as temporary capital for the first Congress.⁶⁷ The northeastern states feared the enhanced power that would accrue to Pennsylvania if it housed the temporary capital, which might then prove permanent. Before Livingston, Hamilton dangled a tantalizing deal: if he supported New York City as temporary capital, Hamilton would endorse Trenton, New Jersey, as the long-term capital.

Hamilton's desire to have the capital in New York intensified as Washington's inauguration neared. In February 1789, he made a spirited campaign speech for his friend John Laurance, then running for Congress from New York City, and urged "that as the residence of Congress would doubtless be esteemed a matter of some import to the city of New York . . . *our representative* should be a man well qualified in oratory to prove that this city is the best station for that honorable body."⁶⁸ By January 17, 1790, with the uproar mounting over Hamilton's funding scheme, William Maclay believed that Hamilton, emboldened by his burgeoning power, was determined to retain New York as the capital: "I have attended in the minutest manner to the motions of Hamilton and the [New] Yorkers. Sincerity is not with them. They will never consent to part with Congress."⁶⁹

In this tussle, New York was a controversial choice. It was becoming so associated with Hamilton that his enemies branded it "Hamiltonopolis." For many southerners, Jefferson in particular, New York City was an Anglophile bastion dominated by bankers and merchants who would contaminate the republican experiment. These critics equated New York with the evils of London. Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia

booster, told Madison, "I am satisfied that the influence of our city will be against the [Treasury] Secretary's system of injustice & corruption. . . . Philadelphia will be better ground to combat the system on than New York."⁷⁰

The question of the capital served as a proxy for the question of whether America should assume an urban or agrarian character. Many southerners believed that a northern capital would favor the mercantile, monied urban interests and discriminate against agrarian life. Jefferson's pastoral dream of a nation of small, independent farms had a powerful appeal to the American psyche, however much it differed from the slaveholding reality of the south. Jefferson, Madison, and Washington wanted a permanent capital on the Potomac, not far from Mount Vernon. For Jefferson, this would plant the nation's capital in a bucolic setting, safe from abolitionist forces and the temptations "of any overgrown commercial city."⁷¹ Madison and Henry Lee speculated in land on the Potomac, hoping to earn a windfall profit if the area was chosen for the capital.

There were other political questions to consider. Should the capital be near the population or the geographic center of America? New York was scarcely equidistant from the northern and southern tips of the country—sixteen of the twenty-four original senators came from south of the city—and this would present hardships for southern delegates who had to travel long distances. The choice of the capital was also seen as a referendum on America's future growth. For those who believed that the country would expand westward—a view especially prevalent in the southern states, whose western borders functioned as gateways to the frontier—a northeast capital would poorly serve America's future political landscape. All these simmering issues came to the surface during the ensuing debate.

During the spring of 1790, quarrels over assumption and the national capital grew so vitriolic that it didn't seem far-fetched that the union might break up over the issues. The south increasingly fired at Hamilton the same vituperative rhetoric once directed at the British. In writing to Madison, Henry Lee stated that the battle to stop assumption brought back memories of the Revolution: "It seems to me that we southern people must be slaves in effect or cut the Gordian knot at once."⁷² Jefferson long remembered the sour mood that hung like a miasma over New York that spring: "Congress met and adjourned from day to day without doing anything, the parties being too much out of temper to do business together."⁷³

Of the two policies that Hamilton wished to promote—the federal assumption of state debt and the selection of New York as the capital—assumption was incomparably more important to him. It was the most effective and irrevocable way to yoke the states together into a permanent union. So when he saw that Madison possessed the votes to block assumption, Hamilton considered bargaining away New

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THE PENGUIN PRESS

New York

2004

The Penguin Press
a member of
Penguin Group (USA) Inc.
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014

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Illustrations credits appear on pages 789–90.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chernow, Ron.
Alexander Hamilton / Ron Chernow.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-59420-009-2

1. Hamilton, Alexander, 1757–1804. 2. Statesmen—United States—Biography.
3. United States—Politics and government—1783–1809. I. Title.

E302.6.H2C48 2004

973.4'092—dc22

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