In the fall of 1786 the fifty-four-year-old president of the Potomac Company, George Washington, late commander in chief of the American army (resigned December 23, 1783, after eight years of active duty) was seriously broke. Majestically, he had refused any salary from the revolutionary American government so seldom in useful Congress assembled. But it had always been agreed that should their cause be victorious, Congress would pay the General’s expenses, which it did, with some awe at Washington’s meticulous bookkeeping and lavish way of life—Congress had to cough up $100,000.

Now the General was retired to his Virginia plantation, Mount Vernon. Despite one hundred slaves, Mount Vernon yielded insufficient revenue, while various western lands on the Ohio River
were costing the General more than they brought in. Worse, since he was the world’s most famous man he was also the most visited at home by both countrymen and wide-eyed Europeans. He was an indulgent host; unfortunately, neither his wealth nor that of his wife, Martha Custis, could pay for so royal a way of life. At one point, he seriously considered retreating north to Niagara; if that did not keep his admirers at bay, he was willing to flee even farther into Canada in order to escape his expensive fame. But a few trips away from Mount Vernon made it clear that there was to be no escape for him anywhere; he was to be famous for life and, probably, for all he knew or suspected, thereafter. Glumly he wrote, “My living under the best economy I can use must unavoidably be expensive.” Plainly, Mount Vernon was to be “a well-resorted tavern, [frequented by] any strangers who are going from North to South or from South to North.” Yet his crops were sparse. Bad soil. Too little fertilizer. He needed to be, he complained, Midas-like, “one who can convert everything he touches into manure as the first transmutation towards gold.”

Reluctantly (apparent reluctance was his style whenever something desirable came his way), Washington had accepted the presidency of a joint Virginia-Maryland company to develop the navigability of the Potomac River—the so-called River of Swans—upon whose bank sat Mount Vernon itself. In early 1785 Washington was offered valuable shares in the company for himself and his heirs. He accepted only with the proviso that he might give whatever dividends that came his way to charities. This letter of stern
condition became, as intended, the most highly publicized part of the legislature’s official grant. The ongoing, self-nurtured image of Washington as a modest and even selfless hero had made him for sixteen years the iconic—today’s overused word—center of the world’s stage. When word spread that he had refused the kingship of the newly founded American Union, an astonished King George III noted that if this story was true, “He will be the greatest man in the world.” The story was, we are told, true; and so he was. Others felt that he had been tempted but for two things: for George III to be succeeded by George IV (or even I) had a slightly surreal, even retrogressive ring to it; finally, there was no heir, no Prince of Virginia plotting in Tidewater, prey to chiggers.

Before 1789 the thirteen former British colonies were held uneasily together by certain fraying Articles of Confederation. Like the squire of Mount Vernon, most of the States were now broke, and it seemed impossible for the weak Confederation to raise sufficient revenues to pay off the interest and principal of the debt incurred during eight years of war. What to do? On February 28, 1785, a worried Washington wrote the Confederation’s secretary for war, Henry Knox, that in the absence of a serious federal government, “we are no more than a rope of sand, and shall as easily be broken.” When fellow Southerners warned that a stronger Union would mean New England’s “tyranny” over the South, Washington wrote, “If we are afraid to trust one another under qualified powers, there is an end of the Union.”
The question pending was by whom and to what end were the powers of such a Confederation or Union to be qualified.

Washington knew that something would have to be done more soon than late to strengthen the Articles of Confederation: others agreed. Immediately, there was a division between those eager for a new centralized federal arrangement and those who wanted the States to be only loosely affiliated. The first group became known as Federalists; the second, as supporters of states’ rights, were Anti-Federalists, later to be known as Republicans. The first were mostly men who had made their mark in the Revolution; they were young; they tended to be lawyers, a new aristocracy—at least that was how they were regarded in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. The Republicans were often rural magnates like Patrick Henry of Virginia. Washington, the embodiment of Federalism, was also first among the rural magnates, while the author of the Declaration of Independence, the former governor of Virginia Thomas Jefferson, was—with his famous pursuit of happiness for all but slaves and other untidy human fractions—a focal point for future Republicanism. Happily for the Federalists, as of 1786 Jefferson was the Union’s minister to France and so out of range unlike the thin-skinned Washington who, although above the political battle, nevertheless subscribed to ten newspapers not by any means friendly to the president of the Potomac Company, currently under attack for having spent fifteen guineas for a pair of French pheasants—a terrible unp
triotic waste of money. Actually, the birds were a present from Louis XVI, to be delivered by Washington’s old friend and wartime colleague Lafayette. One can imagine a tabloid of today telling its readers, on page six, how fifteen American “peasants” had been bought by President Chirac.

On May 18, 1786, Washington wrote John Jay, “That it is necessary to revise and amend the Articles of Confederation, I entertain no doubt; but what may be the consequences of such an attempt is doubtful yet something must be done, or the fabric must fall, for it certainly is tottering.” In September a meeting of representatives from the thirteen States was requested by Virginia to assemble at Annapolis, capital of Maryland. They were instructed to report on “the trade and commerce of the United States” and nothing more. But a New York delegate, the thirty-two-year-old lawyer Alexander Hamilton, arrived with a three-year-old draft of a constitution in his pocket. Unfortunately, and to Washington’s dismay, only five state delegations showed up, less than a quorum. Undismayed, Hamilton kept busy. He allied himself with the other brilliant delegate, the thirty-five-year-old James Madison of Virginia. Madison and Hamilton were more or less as one for a strong federal government. But it was Madison who had fought in the Virginia legislature for interstate conventions, and now the one at Annapolis proved to be the key. Washington’s anxiety was somewhat mitigated when twelve delegates, headed by Hamilton (Washington’s former military aide),
had taken it upon themselves to call for a second assembly to
meet the second Monday of the following May, 1787, to review
and revise the Articles of Confederation.

Meanwhile, the rickety Confederation was appalled when Mass-
achusetts was revolutionized by one Captain Daniel Shays, a revo-
lutionary hero whom Lafayette himself had presented with an
expensive sword. But by September of 1786 Shays was obliged to
sell the sword. Massachusetts was in a general depression. Worse,
its Commonwealth taxes were more onerous than those so re-
cently paid to the faraway King George. When new signs of rebel-
lion in Rhode Island were reported, Madison, the future Repub-
lican, was now very much in Federalist mode. He wrote Jefferson
in Paris: “Many gentlemen, both within and without Congress,
wish to make this meeting subservient to a plenipotentiary Con-
vention for amending the Confederation. Tho’ my wishes are in
favor of such an event, yet I despair so much of its accomplish-
ment at the present crisis that I do not extend my views beyond a
commercial reform.”

Meanwhile, Captain Shays, having sold Lafayette’s sword to
feed his family, took up the terrible swift sword of revolution.
With an army of veterans, he prepared to seize the national ar-
mony at Springfield. En route, jails were broken into and debtors
freed. The rhetoric of the Shaysites was calculated to terrify the
merchant class: “That the property of the United States has been
protected from confiscation of Britain by the joint exertion of
all, and ought to be the common property of all.” In this crisis, there
were no Federalists, no future Republicans: only frightened men of property. Most, by now, wanted to create a strong new nation where no revolt like that of Daniel Shays could ever again happen and where tranquility, if not happiness, was the common pursuit.

In February 1787 Washington was officially notified that Congress, in response to the efforts of Hamilton and Madison, had named the second Monday in May for a convention to meet in Philadelphia “for the sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation.” This was disingenuous. From the start of the famous Constitutional Convention, the prime movers, Hamilton and Madison, were actively engaged not in revising these (to them) inadequate articles but in replacing them: Washington’s rope of sand was to be replaced by a supple chain of bronze.

Finally, New York State joined forces with those of Massachusetts to put down Shays’s rebellion, which was now threatening to abolish all debts, divide up property, print paper money, and even reunite with England. “I am mortified beyond expression,” Washington wrote “Light Horse” Harry Lee of Revolutionary fame, “when I view the clouds that have spread over the brightest morn that ever dawned upon any country.” To the suggestion that his great influence should be invoked, Washington wrote, “In order to appease the present tumults in Massachusetts . . . I know not where that influence is to be found and, if attainable, that it would be a proper remedy for our disorders. . . . Influence
is no government.” Nevertheless, Shays’s revolt was defeated by the Massachusetts militia February 2, 1787.

On November 5 Washington made his moves. He wrote to James Madison, now a member of the Virginia House of Delegates, “Without some alteration in our political creed, the superstructure we have been seven years raising at the expense of so much blood and treasure, must fall. We are fast verging to anarchy and confusion.” But despite the best efforts of Madison and Hamilton, Congress would agree only to the Annapolis Convention’s proposal that there be a meeting of delegates from all the States at Philadelphia in May “to take into consideration the Trade and Commerce of the United States.” Hamilton’s attempt to extend this narrow mandate was stopped by the Virginians. Madison had been for biding their time until . . . Washington’s letter, which made all the difference. Madison could now enlist the country’s greatest man as favoring, in the Annapolis Convention’s phrase, “a general revision of the federal system.” Building upon Washington’s “some alteration in our political creed,” Madison himself was, he wrote, “leaning to the side of hope.” For one thing, the Virginia Assembly had voted for “general revision.” It had also voted to send seven delegates to Philadelphia, led by General Washington.

Washington was reluctant, as always, to go. This time he had a new sort of excuse. He had been expected to attend the triennial meeting of the Society of the Cincinnati in May at Philadelphia. But due to rheumatism and long-neglected business affairs, he
had said that he could not be present. The Society was made up of those officers who had served with him in the Revolution. It had also been founded as a hereditary affair of knightly men. For Jefferson it was too aristocratic by half. Washington agonized to his friends over the hurt feelings of the Cincinnati once they realized that he preferred making a new constitution to further bonding with them. Madison played the General delicately. Perhaps little Jemmy (five-foot-six) already understood that it was necessary for Big George (six-foot-three) to imitate such classical heroes as Cincinnatus himself, who, after winning victories for Rome, gave up his dictatorship and went home to raise cabbages in manly obscurity.

During this time of anguish, trapped between two sets of duty, Washington had a row with his mother, a woman as strong-minded as he. She asked him to send her fifteen guineas. He did so—reluctantly, as it was all the cash that he had on hand: “It is really hard upon me when you have taken everything you wanted from the plantation, by which money could be raised, when I have not received one farthing directly nor indirectly from the place for more than twelve years if ever, and when in that time, I have paid . . . (during my absence) two hundred and sixty odd pounds, and by my own account fifty odd pounds out of my own pocket to you, besides (if I am rightly informed) everything that has been raised by the crops on the plantation.” Thus the father of his country to its unwitting grandmother.

As Washington—perhaps sensing that the biographer Parson
Weems would one day immortalize him as “the boy who could not tell a lie”—continued to fret about what the Cincinnati might think of him if they knew he had chosen to ignore them in order to birth a new nation. By mid-March, he said he would remain home, true to his word to them. Apparently, the rheumatism was indeed so bad that he could not turn over in bed without pain; he also wore one arm in a sling. Pressure to go to the Constitutional Convention came from Madison. From Knox, dire warnings that the convention without him would be as irrelevant as Annapolis. Simultaneously, Washington was worried about what his non-attendance might be attributed to. Antirepublicanism? Pro-monarchism? Finally, day after day, those ten newspapers reported to him that every state seemed to be sending its most illustrious sons. Yet had he not vowed, upon retirement, to never more “intermeddle in public matters”? How could the people ever again trust him if he . . . ?

On April 9 he crossed the Rubicon. He would go to the Constitutional Convention even though “under the peculiar circumstances of my case [it] would place me in a more disagreeable situation than any other member would stand in, as I have yielded, however, to what appeared to be the earnest wishes of my friends, I will hope for the best.” Not a word about begetting a new exceptional nation where happiness would forever reign. Worse, Mother was seriously ill. He hurried to her home in Fredericksburg. Mother was better. He also visited one of his farms, and investigated a new method of growing potatoes. On May 9 he left
for Philadelphia, unaccompanied by his wife, known to all of classless America as Lady Washington. Martha does not figure as greatly as Mother in Washington’s archetypal life. A nephew was left in charge of Mount Vernon.

The General was made much of on his journey north. The millionaire banker Robert Morris insisted that Washington, “America’s first millionaire,” should stay with him at Fifth and Market streets.

“On my arrival,” Washington noted in his diary, “the bells were chimed.” On the other hand, to his annoyance, only the Virginia and Pennsylvania delegates had arrived by what was to have been the first day of the convention. Madison was soothing. Bad weather. Muddy roads. Persevere. By May 25, seven of the states’ delegates, a quorum, were on hand, and the convention could organize itself, Washington was unanimously chosen to be president of the convention. He took his chair. The weather continued bad.

On Monday, September 17, 1787, the Committee on Style and Arrangement, presided over by one of the most active of the delegates to the convention, the elegant, eloquent, antidemocratic Gouverneur Morris of New York, presented the finished Constitution to the president of the Potomac Company. It is interesting that another New York delegate, Hamilton, had not stayed on through the hot Philadelphia summer. He had a greater task ahead. He would explain—that is, sell—the Constitution to the people in the coming months. The United States of America
would become a republic (“if we can keep it,” said Benjamin Franklin).

Governance was triune: a legislative branch composed of a Senate—two senators from each state—and a House of Representatives elected every two years by those men of property qualified to vote in the States. There was also a judiciary headed by a Supreme Court whose functions were not entirely clear. Finally, there was an executive branch whose chief would be called the president. Since the president was bound to be Washington, he was also commander in chief of the armed forces. Might not a future president overthrow the state with his military forces? In 1790 the army numbered less than seven hundred men; it was decided that the future must look to itself.

An amendment to reduce the majority required to override a presidential veto from three-fourths to two-thirds was voted down despite Washington’s objection. The word *veto* did not appear in the text. Madison preferred the phrase *to negative*. Gouverneur Morris was highly critical of the style and arrangement of Article III, creating the Supreme Court, which he himself had written. “The Congress shall have power to declare the punishment of Treason, but no Attainder of Treason shall work Corruption of Blood or Forfeiture except during the Life of the Person attainted.” Gnarled prose no doubt certain to be soon clarified by our twenty-first-century Court, in the pellucid prose, one prays, of that model associate justice Clarence Thomas.

At the last moment, three delegates would not sign the draft.
Inventing a Nation

Each wanted to call a second convention but since upon reflection the whole thing might simply fall apart, the prime movers pledged that the Constitution, if accepted unanimously now, would be added to later (“engorged” was the verb). Thus, the old Articles of Confederation were replaced by an as yet unengorged Constitution, which is, to this day, often subject to disengorgement, particularly of George Mason’s original Bill of Rights. After all, Mason had written the state of Virginia’s 1776 constitution whose “Declaration of Rights” contained the doctrine of “inalienable rights” (borrowed from John Locke) which Jefferson most famously made a cornerstone of his Declaration of Independence. Theoretically, if not practically, Mason also opposed the Constitution’s implicit approval of slavery as well as its approval of the continuance of the slave trade for the next twenty years. Later, he opposed Virginia’s ratification of the Washington-Madison-Hamilton (inspired if not by them blessed) Constitution. Then, once the republic was in place, he refused to serve as one of his state’s senators. He has had few political heirs.

Madison had kept notes of the original convention debates. He also outlived the other framers, which meant that by the 1820s he was the last recognized authority on what the founders had in mind when they drafted that Constitution to which, in the First Congress of the new republic, ten amendments, the so-called Bill
of Rights, were added. Although the language of amendments and constitutional articles is admirably plain, interested interpreters have often displayed great ingenuity in fiddling with their meaning. Whenever Madison was quizzed about “original intent,” he had a stock answer: if you are really curious as to what the delegates had in mind, study the debates at the time of ratification. Everything, he felt, was argued out in the thirteen legislatures and what was originally meant is generally quite clear. Obviously, contemporary politics often have a blurring effect or, as Jefferson confessed, he—and others—were so concentrated for so long on the evils of monarchy that they came to believe that anything that was not monarchical was republican and so acceptable, which was nonsense. Although Jefferson was not a convention delegate, he later objected that the president was eligible to succeed himself without limit. He would have favored something like the later Twenty-second Amendment, which limits that magistrate to two terms. Jefferson also believed—uniquely—that this world belongs, solely, to the present generation. Hence, every twenty years or so, new laws should be promulgated at a constitutional convention. A grown man, he noted in his best biblical parable style, should not be forced to wear a boy’s jacket. With characteristic tact, James Madison, who had plainly found one constitutional convention quite enough for a single lifetime, pointed out the impossibility of achieving a viable republic if its laws were to be periodically set aside in favor of new ones. In fact, so disturbed was he by Jefferson’s metaphysical—even existen-
tial—notions that he made the case against too frequent conventions in the Federalist papers.

Federalist No. 49 is attributed to Madison, although Hamilton later claimed it was his handiwork. The essay strikes this reader as a continuation—even summing up—of Madison versus Jefferson on too frequent constitutional conventions. De-\murely, Madison praises his fellow Virginian. Then, “One of the precautions which he \[Jefferson\] proposes, and on which he appears ultimately to rely as a palladium to the weaker departments of power against the invasion of the stronger, is perhaps altogether his own . . . ”—for Madison, in such matters originality is invariably suspect—“ . . . and as it immediately relates to the subject of our present inquiry, ought not to be overlooked. His proposition is that whenever any two of the three branches of government shall concur in opinion, each by the voices of two-thirds of their whole number, that a convention is necessary for altering the constitution, "or correcting breaches of it", a convention shall be called for the purpose.” The author of 49, at this point, adverts to David Hume. “If it be true that all governments rest on opinion, it is no less true that the strength of opinion in each individual, and its practical influence on his conduct, depend much on the number which he supposes to have entertained the same opinion. The reason of man, like man himself, is timid and cautious when left alone, and acquires firmness and confidence in proportion to the number with which it is associated.”

In the next essay, Federalist No. 50, currently attributed to
Madison, one hears, oddly, more the energetic voice of Hamilton, while in No. 51 one gets such Hamiltonian locutions as “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” In fact, this might be his philosophy of republican government in a phrase. “The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.” Then a—pious?—generality: “Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It has ever been and ever will be pursued until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit.” This is also reflective of Sir James Steuart, in the previous generation. “The best way to govern a society, and to engage everyone to conduct himself according to a plan, is for the statesmen to run a system of administration the most consistent possible with the interest of every individual, and never flatter himself that his people will be brought to act . . . from any other principle than private interest.”

Although Alexander Hamilton was a born political theorist, he played little part in the great business at Philadelphia. Since each state voted as a single unit and since, within his state delegation,
he was outvoted by the Anti-Federalist interest, he spent much of his time back home in New York City, where he practiced law when not attending court at Albany. He would bide his time.

John Adams referred unkindly to Hamilton as “the bastard brat of a Scotch peddler,” while even the Godlike Jefferson called him “base-born.” Plainly speaking, both men were accurate. Rachel Fawcett, Alexander’s mother, was married not to his father but to another. Everything else is confused, including the year of his birth. He thought it was 1757. Other “evidence” points to 1755—on the island of Nevis in the Lesser Antilles. James Hamilton of Ayrshire in Scotland fathered two sons with Rachel, who had been married, according to Alexander’s grandson, to John Lavien, “a rich Danish Jew . . . who treated her cruelly.” Rachel, a beauty, had numerous affairs with other men and, in due course, Lavien divorced her. Although Alexander resembled his putative father James—an athletic redhead—it was also rumored in that most scandalous of centuries, the twentieth, that his actual father was the twenty-three-year-old George Washington, who was traveling among the West Indian islands at the time of his conception. Other rumors declared that he was Lavien’s son. Finally, thanks to Hamilton’s dedication to the abolition of slavery, he was declared to be of black descent. In any case, it can be safely said that of the national founders he was the one true exotic.

When Alexander was thirteen, Rachel died. A year earlier the pubescent Hamilton had gone to work for two young New York bachelors, David Beckman or Beekman and Nicholas Cruger,
who kept a store in St. Croix. The boy Hamilton was a brilliant bookkeeper and manager. He was also involved in the partners’ traffic in African slaves and local mules. In 1769 he wrote a friend, “My ambition is prevalent. . . . I contemn the grov’ling condition of a clerk to which my fortune contemns me and would willingly risk my life tho’ not my character to exalt my station.” He also wrote, “I wish there was a war.” He had read Plutarch. He knew how swiftly one could rise in war. And he must rise. Then his employers exalted his station. He was sent, at seventeen, to King’s College (now Columbia) in New York City. He promptly joined in the debate over the colonies’ secession from England. Then he helped organize a company to fight in the Revolution, risking life but not character. He so impressed Washington that the General chose him as aide-de-camp and private secretary, treating him as the son he was never to have, assuming Alexander was not his son. By 1789 Hamilton had become a lawyer; he had also married into the wealthy Schuyler family. Unlike the Virginians, he was seldom seriously broke.

It would appear that the principal fact of Hamilton’s life was his illegitimacy and then orphanhood at thirteen. In a sense, he was something of a professional orphan, instinctively using his intellectual and personal charms to enchant potential protectors. Already, at thirteen, he was a precociously competent man of business. Later, he proved to be exactly what a childless middle-aged man of a slow cautious nature would want in an aide or secretary. Since Hamilton always tended to go to the top of what-
ever tree confronted him, he bedazzled the commanding general of the American army as he had charmed the two bachelors in St. Croix, as well as the island priest, the Reverend Hugh Knox, who gave him letters of introduction to New York worthies. But what did Hamilton see in Washington other than the demonstrable fact that he had been chosen commander in chief largely because, as John Adams sourly put it, “He was always the tallest man in the room.”

Washington’s gifts were not immediately evident. He seemed unable to win battles, not that he had much help from troops always ready to desert, or from the corrupt Continental Congress that kept him ill-supplied. “On our side,” he wrote Congress in September 1776, “the wars should be defensive.” He had little choice. He was in constant retreat, which annoyed his glory-hunting aide. But Washington was winning in his own way. If he could hold together his army long enough, the British would tire and go home. In the end, only Washington’s majestic presence kept the army together. He was also lucky in his British counterparts: mediocrities to a man. (One British observer noted, “Any general in the world other than General Howe would have beaten General Washington; and any general in the world other than General Washington would have beaten General Howe.”) Finally, the French fleet came to Washington’s aid at Yorktown, and that was the end of that revolution. Although the British still held New York and other attractive properties, they eventually went home, as Washington had known they would.
By Yorktown, young Hamilton had distinguished himself in the field. After a row with Washington, who had accused him of keeping him waiting at the top of a flight of stairs, Hamilton quit as aide and went to war. Washington was duly shaken. Of this rupture, Hamilton wrote his father-in-law, the wealthy political magnate Philip Schuyler, “I always disliked the relation of an aide-de-camp to his general, as having in it a kind of personal dependence.” Plainly, Hamilton was maturing. He was tired of being a childless man’s bright little boy. But when he saw what he wrote, he crossed out relation and substituted office, then he cut the phrase to his general. He continues: “For three years past I have felt no friendship for him and professed none. The truth is our own dispositions are the opposites of each other, and the pride of my temper . . . could not suffer me to profess what I did not feel.” Of Washington’s invitation to a “candid conversation” Hamilton writes, “When advances of this kind have been made to me by the General, they were received in a manner that showed at least I had had no inclination to court them, and that I wished to stand rather upon a footing of military confidence than of private attachment.” This is powerful stuff—indeed, this is classical playwriting at its best—and had the United States ever developed a true civilization (cellophane and Kleenex were never quite enough), our very own Racine would have known how to tell this story of Ganymede wanting to play Zeus, with the added excitement for the audience that, unknown to Ganymede, Zeus is his father. Well, why ask for the moon, as the hero-

Gore Vidal

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ine of a great film said, when we have the stars—not to mention all those stripes?

On September 17, 1787, the Constitution was sent to the thirteen States to be ratified. In New York a special convention was held at Poughkeepsie; and Hamilton was there to ensure its ratification despite the Republican element, led by the state’s governor George Clinton. When Hamilton promptly, characteristically, went on the attack, Washington warned him off. They needed the powerful Clinton for their republic. Meanwhile, Hamilton decided to write a series of essays, anticipating objections. He would, as was the custom then, publish pseudonymously in newspapers. The first essay was signed “A Citizen of New York.” He envisaged around twenty essays with the overall title \textit{The Federalist}. But by the time the first was published, October 27, 1787, he knew that he would need help. Not since Machiavelli had so ambitious and thorough a system been conceived as the apparent work of a single intelligence.

Hamilton turned to John Jay, who agreed to help. Jay had not been in Philadelphia, but he was knowledgeable in foreign affairs. Hamilton then approached Gouverneur Morris, an inspired notion, but Morris had business to do in Virginia. Hamilton then turned to James Madison, whose notes must have been of great use to the enterprise. “A Citizen of New York” took early retirement, and “Publius” took his place. The joint use of the name of Publius Valerius was certainly calculated to please Jefferson and even Clinton. After the expulsion of the Tarquin kings from
Rome, Publius Valerius had helped create the Roman Republic. He was then chosen as one of the first two consuls. When his co-consul died, it was rumored that Publius would make himself king. To prove that he was no monarchist, he promulgated a law that anyone attempting to make himself king could be slain with impunity by any citizen. Publius’s nickname was Publicola—“friend of the people.”

“Publius’s” main task was one of definition. Today’s political babble seems to believe that democracy and republic are synonyms. They are not. As Publius tried to make clear, they were as much polar opposites as monarchy and democracy. For the founders, democracy meant Athens, where all the citizens would meet to discuss and pass on the laws. The voice of the people was indeed god. This was possible in a small city-state like Athens but impractical in a large nation of three million people ever expanding over a large area of North America. It is seldom noted that in 1776 every fourth Englishman was an American. Had England allowed Americans to elect members of Parliament, annulling the cry “no taxation without representation,” there might have been no revolution. But in the end, geography decided the matter. Between election and a transatlantic journey, the American member of Parliament would always be too far from home to represent home. So now home was to have its very own government in the form of a three-part republic, so carefully checked and balanced that no Caesar, much less mob, could easily hijack it.
Some historians looking back on the making of the republic refer to “the great collaboration,” meaning Jefferson and Madison. But the actual collaboration was between Madison and Hamilton during the period when the Constitution was up for ratification. There was also an ongoing collaboration between the squire of Mount Vernon and his former secretary-aide, Hamilton. Washington then posed as a passive eminence, worrying about his debts and new ways of growing potatoes (in fields of clover), he was using Hamilton (and Madison) to shape events to his liking.

Washington-Hamilton. Now that we are safely lodged in the twenty-first century, the New Age of the last unlamented century behind us, we need not do in-depth readings of those we know of only through fame’s glare, which simultaneously illuminates and blurs.

Although the hostile “Republican” Governor Clinton presided over the convention, Hamilton was well known to the delegates as “Publius,” coauthor with Madison of eighty-five essays (Jay wrote five) published in two volumes called The Federalist. He led the debate for the Feds. Melancton Smith for the Antis. Smith thought the Constitution favored too much “the natural aristocracy” rather than “the middling classes.” Hamilton promptly raised, as it were, the ante: “In free . . . republics the will of the people makes the essential principle of the government; and the
laws which control the community receive their tone and spirit from the public wishes. It is the fortunate situation of our country, that the minds of the people are exceedingly enlightened and refined.” This took the wind out of the Antis’ sails. It was the later Federalist Hamilton who noted that “your people, sir, is a great beast.” Now he carefully circled the subject. All agreed that the ancient democracies were easily swayed by the demagogue, while “the true principle of a republic is, that the people should choose whom they please to govern them.” Finally, Hamilton’s great proposition—how to use human greed and energy—(energy was a favorite word that energetic season)—to serve the state. “Men will pursue their interests . . . it is as easy to change human nature as to oppose the strong current of selfish passions. A wise legislator will gently divert the channel and direct it, if possible, to the public good.” Incidentally, true Hamiltonians like Stephen F. Knott (*Alexander Hamilton and the Persistence of Myth*, University Press of Kansas, 2002) cannot trace Hamilton’s beastly view of the people to any reliable source. Knott makes the case that Hamilton always favored representative government with checks and balances to contain “majority tyranny” in which he resembled Jefferson.

Then, dramatically, word came to the delegates that New Hampshire had ratified the Constitution, the ninth state to do so. A quorum had been attained: the Republic of the United States was a fact. But New York and Virginia had still not ratified. An Anti-Fed promptly announced that since nine states had
endorsed the Constitution, let them go try the experiment on their own. New York would stay put. On July 2, while Clinton was in midspeech, a messenger arrived with a letter from Madison to Hamilton: Virginia had ratified. Despite Federalist cheers, Clinton continued to delay ratification. Then word came from New York City that all the bells were ringing, and the city's leaders were threatening that should upstate delay ratification, the city—the state's wealth—would secede and join the new Union. On July 23 Melancton Smith gave in. New York State ratified. There was much celebrating in New York City, the capital of the new nation. A parade featuring a ship called *The Hamilton*, on a float, sailed triumphantly along Wall Street as its ghost still does today. This was to be the high point in the life of the “bastard brat” from the West Indies.