

War and free government have rarely coexisted for long over the course of human history. The United States seems, to date, to be the exception to this trend. In his noteworthy new book, *Republican Empire: Alexander Hamilton on War and Free Government*, Karl-Friedrich Walling gives primary credit for this achievement to the Founding Fathers in general, and Alexander Hamilton in particular. Walling argues that the traditional "militarist" interpretation of Hamilton, which generally sees Hamilton as a threat to American liberty during the founding era, is simplistic and short-sighted.

Many of Hamilton's contemporaries, including Jefferson, Madison, and Adams, saw Hamilton as a potential tyrant, bent on dictatorship at home and conquest abroad, and these perceptions have infiltrated the views of many modern historians. Walling, in contrast, sees Hamilton as a soldier-statesman who deserved to be trusted with the defense of his adopted country. For Walling, the unparalleled ability of the United States to combine tremendous strength and freedom owes much to the strategic sobriety of Alexander Hamilton. Contrary to the utopian vision of Thomas Jefferson and many of his allies, Hamilton understood that war was a fact of international life, and that the survival of the infant republic depended on developing and maintaining the potential to make war.

But Hamilton was not a mere militaristic state-builder. He was an 18th century liberal and therefore always understood the necessity of remaining within the bounds established by the Constitution. His goal was to establish a republican regime both fit for war and safe for liberty. To do so, Hamilton believed it was necessary to create a "republican empire," something that most of his contemporaries considered an oxymoron. The prevailing political tradition held that republics and empires were incompatible. Republics were free but short-lived because of instability arising from the presence of factions. Empires were secure, but security was achieved at the cost of freedom. It was Machiavelli who suggested that security required republics to transform themselves into empires, as Rome had done. Hamilton agreed, but unlike the Florentine, he sought to achieve this transformation by consent rather than force or fraud. Such a republican empire, in the form of a powerful indissoluble Union, would keep war at a distance, thus avoiding the militarization that had led to the downfall of earlier free governments.

The most glaring problem with this book is that Walling's attempts to balance history and historiography fail. Walling devotes so much effort to addressing the arguments of earlier historians that he seems to lose focus at times on his subject. If more of the historiographical debates in this work were confined to the endnotes, the reader would have a clearer view of Hamilton's political philosophy. What remains is a highly complex intellectual history whose immediate impact will be limited to specialists. Nonetheless, one would hope that this book is fully appreciated by Hamilton's biographers, as it deserves to lead to a more objective and more discerning view of Hamilton's place among the Revolutionary generation.

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