

FEDERALIST NO. 70

Alexander Hamilton



From the beginning of the new nation, Alexander Hamilton believed that a single, vigorous executive was critical to its survival. Without a strong president, a nation, particularly a new one, would be more at risk from foreign attack and from internal dissention.

TO THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK:

There is an idea, which is not without its advocates, that a vigorous Executive is inconsistent with the genius of republican government.... Energy in the Executive is a leading character in the definition of good government. It is essential to the protection of the community against foreign attacks; it is not less essential to the steady administration of the laws; to the protection of property against those irregular and high-handed combinations which sometimes interrupt the ordinary course of justice; to the security of liberty against the enterprises and assaults of ambition, of faction, and of anarchy....

... A feeble Executive implies a feeble execution of the government....

Taking it for granted, therefore, that all men of sense will agree in the necessity of an energetic Executive ... the ingredients which constitute energy in the Executive are, first, unity; secondly, duration; thirdly, an adequate provision for its support; fourthly, competent powers.

The ingredients which constitute safety in the republican sense are, first, a due dependence on the people; secondly, a due responsibility.

Those politicians and statesmen who have been the most celebrated for the soundness of their principles and for the justice of their views have declared in favor of a single Executive and a numerous legislature....

That unity is conducive to energy will not be disputed. Decision, activity, secrecy, and despatch will generally characterize the proceedings of one man in a much more eminent degree than the proceedings of any greater number; and in proportion as the number is increased, these qualities will be diminished.

This unity may be destroyed in two ways: either by vesting the power in two or more magistrates of equal dignity and authority; or by vesting it ostensibly in one man, subject, in whole or in part, to the control and co-operation of others, in the capacity of counselors to him.

Toward Critical Thinking

1. What were the essential ingredients that Hamilton believed were critical for any president to have? Have recent presidents displayed those qualities?
2. Some people suggested that a way to guard against tyranny in the chief executive was to divide the executive powers between two or more individuals. How could such a proposal work? Has the work of chief executive today become too complex for a single individual?