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A More Perfect Union

James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and the Commerce of Change

By Brian Flanagan

A hush fell over the old Dutchess County Courthouse in New York as Alexander Hamilton crossed the floor to deliver his announcement. For several weeks, Hamilton -- New York's lone signer of the proposed Constitution of the United States -- had valiantly fought in the state's ratifying convention against the anti-federalist majority. Led by Governor and Convention Chairman George Clinton, the New York anti-federalists had persisted in their attacks on the Constitution, warning of the document's monarchical bent, endangerment of the states, and promotion of a powerful and tyrannical central government. "I dread the consequences of the non adoption of the Constitution," Hamilton had written in June of 1788. "I fear an eventual disunion and civil war."[i]

The road to constitutional reform was indeed rife with peril. Since 1778, when they began to advocate enlarging federal authority by amending the Articles of Confederation, Hamilton and fellow nationalist James Madison, of Virginia, had on three separate occasions risked their reputations to seek change:

- In 1783, Hamilton and Madison attempted to drive reform as representatives in the Congress of the Confederation, but repeatedly failed to overcome opposition.
- In 1786, Hamilton and Madison led a meeting of state representatives in Annapolis, Maryland, in an effort to reform the national government from outside Congress. All but twelve delegates from five states boycotted the meeting.
- Even in the aftermath of the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, where Hamilton and Madison led debates and helped craft the proposed Constitution of the United States, only 39 of 55 delegates agreed to sign the final document, and the nation was soon divided between two powerful camps -- federalists in favor of ratifying the new Constitution and anti-federalists vehemently opposed.

George Washington presided over the Philadelphia Convention, but Alexander Hamilton (seated, front left) and James Madison (seated in front of red coat) were critically important to its success.

Now, two days before Independence Day 1788, Hamilton rose in the New York ratifying convention to read proudly a letter from his friend and colleague James Madison. "This day put an end to the existence of [Virginia's] Convention," Hamilton announced on behalf of Madison. "The [e]nclosed is a copy of the Act of Ratification."[ii]

The moment marked a high-point in Hamilton and Madison's collaboration. New York followed Virginia later that month, becoming the eleventh state to ratify -- two more than required to establish a new government under the Constitution. Significantly, the most strategically important states in the North and South, Hamilton's New York and Madison's Virginia, had wavered but ultimately gone federalist. Against the odds, the United States had forged a new government.

How had such a change in national sentiment occurred in half a decade? The answer lies partly in the shrewd management of the 37-year-old Virginian and the 33-year-old New Yorker.

The Commerce of Change

Many modern observers contend that far-reaching organizational and societal changes can be effectively managed by individuals. Given the right circumstances and a canny approach, agents of change can forge and implement new vision for their organizations, from small private firms to large national governments. Recently, numerous business writers have prescribed their own approaches to managing change in the *private* sector -- with adaptable elements for the *public*. With few exceptions they hold several principles in common. In a democratic society, in an age that values authority based on popular will, there is a growing consensus that effective change must proactively involve people outside of decision-making circles. Management theorist Gary Hamel writes that private companies that successfully reinvent themselves are "the ones that are open and democratic."[iii]

Ultimately, successful revolutions hinge on their popularity. Change agents must be able to (1) convince others of a need for change, (2) develop a shared vision among a core of individuals committed to change, and (3) package and "sell" the vision widely. At the heart of *change management* theory is a buying and selling of ideas.

Selling Change. The first task, according to these business writers, is to convince a critical mass of individuals that change is an imperative. "Sell the problem that is the reason for the change," writes consultant William Bridges.[iv] "The people must acknowledge that there is a problem and understand the cost of not addressing it...."[v] Business writers Steve Hoisington and S. A. Vaneswaran write that managers must "Clarify the importance and urgency for the need to change."[vi] Leadership expert John P. Kotter of the Harvard Business School adds that managers must "raise a feeling of urgency so that people say 'let's go....' "[vii]

Buying Change. Second, a core of influential individuals -- from a range of geographic and operational areas -- must buy the need for change and begin shaping a new vision. "[Leaders] initiate a process in which employees are able to revise and buy into new compact terms," writes Paul Strebel, director of the Change Program at the International Institute for Management Development.[viii] "With urgency turned up," writes Kotter, "the more successful change agents pull together a guiding team with the credibility, skills, connections, reputations, and formal authority required to provide change leadership."[ix]

Selling Vision. Third, leaders must reduce resistance to change by convincing the larger body to adopt the new vision. "Unless managers define new terms and persuade employees to accept them," writes Strebel, "it is unrealistic for managers to expect employees fully to buy into changes that alter the status quo."[x] The Harvard Business School teaches that "They must... be able to communicate [the] vision to others in ways that make the benefits of change clear."[xi]

Buying Vision. Finally, once the vision has become popular, steps can be taken to implement change. Or as Kotter writes, the goal is "to get as many people as possible acting to make the vision a reality."[xii]

Hamilton and Madison grasped and applied this commerce of successful change in the public sphere 200 years ago.

Selling Change: Hamilton and Madison Make a Pitch

Writing a new constitution was not a popular proposition in the 1780s. The *Spirit of '76* survived and most states jealously guarded their sovereignty. Since the loose confederation of the government as it existed was thought an ideal model for preserving their independence, governors, legislators, and the people in most states aligned against change.

Forging a Partnership. Madison and Hamilton shared a common cause by September 11, 1786, the start of the Annapolis Convention, but they arrived by different routes. As General Washington's aide-de-camp during the War, Hamilton witnessed first hand the consequences of Congress's dependence on the states for revenue -- his poorly provisioned men often verged on starvation. Hamilton became an early advocate for federal reform, writing, even before the Articles of Confederation were ratified, "... the confederation is defective and requires to be altered; it is neither fit for war, nor peace."[xiii]

Madison was not as early to the cause, but after grappling with commercial disputes between states in the early 1780s, he joined Hamilton in

Congress pressing for increased federal control: "I conceive it to be of great importance that the defects of the federal system should be amended," Madison wrote, "The suffering part, even when the minor part, can not long respect a Government which is too feeble to protect their interests."[xiv]

By the eve of the Annapolis Convention, called by the Virginia General Assembly, the two men were seasoned by experience in the national and state legislatures. They were both convinced,

> *We ought without delay to enlarge the powers of congress.... Nothing but a well-proportioned exertion of the resources of the whole, under the direction of a common council, with power sufficient to give efficacy to their resolutions, can preserve us from being conquered people now, or can make us happy people hereafter.*[xv]

Madison and Hamilton were not alone in their convictions but they were still in the minority. The Annapolis Convention did not attract sufficient numbers to reach a quorum, but convening during the early days of Shay's Rebellion, it brought a core of nationalist critics of the current government together at a crucial moment. The nation's impotency in the face of domestic crisis was revealed to all. Hamilton and Madison seized the opportunity to call for a larger meeting in Philadelphia to "render the constitution of the Federal Government adequate to the exigencies of the Union...."

Championing the Cause. At this point the real sales pitch began. Shay's Rebellion helped spell the need for federal reform, but most still believed the proper seat for change was Congress. On the one hand, Madison and Hamilton understood that with unanimity required to revise the Articles in Congress, any individual state could veto unwanted change. On the other hand, they understood that without adequate endorsement, the Philadelphia Convention would flounder like Annapolis had. They had to draft a compelling statement in favor of the Convention, legitimize the proceedings with a Congressional endorsement, and win early support from states and prominent Americans.

Madison's efforts over the coming months were rewarded. First, after Hamilton drafted a passionate statement proposing the Philadelphia Convention on behalf of the Annapolis Convention, Madison tempered its tone to appeal more generally before sending it to Congress and the states. Madison then returned to his seat in the Virginia House of Delegates and fought for his state's support of a Philadelphia Convention -- which he received on December 1. On behalf of Virginia, Madison drafted an enthusiastic endorsement and recommended that other states follow.

The greatest selling point of Virginia's endorsement was that it appointed an exceedingly distinguished delegation, indicating the earnestness with which the state approached the Convention. The delegation of notables included Governor Edmund Randolph, George Washington, George Mason, Richard Henry Lee, Patrick Henry, and Madison himself. The group struck a balance between nationalists and advocates for state and local interests, which quieted the suspicions of opponents to the Convention.

Next, Madison, again elected to the Congress of the Confederacy, took his seat and fought for unconditional Congressional authorization of the Philadelphia Convention -- which he won on February 21, 1787.

With the legitimacy conferred on the Convention by Congressional authorization, the support of Virginia and its delegates, and early indications of a balanced representation in Philadelphia, other states joined the cause. "The appointments for the Convention go on auspiciously," Madison wrote to Thomas Jefferson in March. "Since my last [letter] Georgia, S. Carolina, N. York, Massts. and N. Hampshire have come into the measure."[xvi]

Hamilton did not enjoy quite the degree of success in New York that Madison did in Virginia. He won enough support in the state's assembly to appoint a New York delegation to Philadelphia, and was himself included among its members. He could not, however, convince his colleagues to balance the delegation. By appointing three men, including John Lansing and Robert Yates -- both opposed to Hamilton's designs -- New York indicated that it would not support significant reform at the Convention.

Hamilton and Madison worked together to win the most important victory in the prelude to the Philadelphia Convention. They convinced the reticent George Washington to leave his retirement join the Virginia delegation. Perhaps more than any other factor, the presence of the nation's most prominent figure in Philadelphia sold the need for change.

Making a Final Pitch. Madison's final efforts occurred in Philadelphia in the days preceding the Convention. Using his extensive knowledge of ancient and modern confederacies, Madison drafted "Vices of the Political System of the United States." Noting that all confederacies before it had eventually fallen prey to civil war or tyranny of the majority, Madison argued that the U.S. faced one of these fates if a new constitution, striking the right balance of powers, was not adopted. "The great desideratum in Government," wrote Madison, "is such a modification of the Sovereignty as will render it sufficiently neutral between the different interests and factions, to controul one part of the Society from invading the rights of another, and at the same time sufficiently controuled [sic] itself, from setting up an interest adverse to that of the whole Society."[xvii] Distributing his essay to the arriving delegates, Madison made his final pitch for urgently needed change.

Buying Change: The States Meet in Philadelphia

A sufficient number of states bought the need for change, in some form, before the Philadelphia Convention. Twelve of thirteen states sent delegates to debate how the Articles of Confederation should be altered.

Assembling a Coalition. As the 55 delegates poured into Philadelphia, some of the greatest minds in the United States began a national conversation. Author Malcolm Gladwell has written that ideas and the rules of behavior in a society can be dramatically altered by "a small number of very special people."[xviii] He categorizes these people as Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen -- people with long-reach, a wealth of knowledge, and the ability to package ideas attractively. Certainly these talents were represented at the Convention. Benjamin Franklin, among them, called it "the most august and respectable assembly he was ever in in his life."[xix]

Joining Franklin, Washington, Madison and the impressive Virginia delegation, and Hamilton and the New York delegation, were James Wilson of Pennsylvania, John Dickinson of Delaware, William Livingston of New Jersey, John Rutledge and Charles Pinckney of South Carolina, and Roger Sherman of Connecticut, among others.

Engineering the Debate. On May 25, 1787, the Convention reached a quorum. One of its first actions was to name George Washington president of the proceedings. His name gave their acts instant credibility. Washington then appointed a small committee led by Hamilton to draw up rules and procedures for the Convention. On May 29, Edmund Randolph presented the Virginia Plan, indicating an intention to replace rather than revise the Articles. Authored by Madison, the plan "made a clean break with the past and contained the basic design of the future U.S. government."[xx] He proposed a separation of powers between a one-person executive branch, a bicameral legislative branch, and a national judiciary. If Washington leadership provided order and Hamilton's committee provided the ground rules, Madison's plan gave the Convention a starting point for all future debates.

These early acts were crucial to the work ahead. John P. Kotter has argued that next in importance to the quality of individuals leading change are a few factors, including "the very mechanical question of meeting format."[xxi] The shape of the three branches, their enumerated powers, and the precise method of election would all be subject to debate and compromise in the coming months. But Washington, Hamilton, and Madison built an orderly framework in which a new constitution could be authored -- they set the agenda.

Other proposals would be considered and rejected. The New Jersey Plan, for example, proposed a much less radical reformation of the Articles. Madison's plan survived. It was aggressively debated clause by clause, and at the end of July the "Committee on Detail" drew up a revised document reflecting decisions of the Convention. The committee's document was then debated and amended clause by clause. Finally early in September, the five-member Committee on Style and Arrangement -- which included both Hamilton and Madison -- arranged and polished the articles and added a preamble, giving the Constitution its final form.

Selling Vision: Hamilton and Madison Lead the Federalists

After much wrangling, leaders from twelve states shaped a new vision for the future. Sixteen delegates departed early or refused to sign the Constitution, and as the Convention concluded battle lines were drawn.

Organizing a Campaign. Foreseeing the struggle ahead, supporters of the new Constitution began selling their vision early. On September 17, thirty-nine delegates signed the document. The marks of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin -- the nation's two most famous and revered men -- recommended the vision. Within a month, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson -- the nation's two most experienced constitution-builders -- sent their support for the new vision from abroad.

The inspired and inclusive language of the document was itself a selling point. "We the People of the United States," reads the preamble authored by Gouverneur Morris,

> *... in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*

Still, great opposition to change made necessary a large-scale campaign for ratification -- arguably the first national campaign in U.S. history. Madison returned to the national legislature in New York; Hamilton also returned to New York. With Rufus King, Gouverneur Morris, and other framers present, New York became the federalist campaign headquarters. "Though they organized no formal party," writes Madison biographer Ralph Ketcham, "they coordinated activity in the various states, acted as a clearinghouse for information, and planned responses to the increasingly active anti-federalist publicists."[xxii]

Guiding the Campaign. It soon became evident that in a battle with the well-organized but particularistic anti-federalists in New York and Virginia, federalists could gain the upper hand with a united and consistent message. An ambitious writing project -- originally conceived to help elect federalist delegates to the New York Ratifying Convention -- was adopted by the federalists as their guide.

The Federalist Papers, an 85-essay, comprehensive explication of the Constitution, was yet another collaborative effort between Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, this time with the aide of John Jay. Initiated by Hamilton, *The Federalist* was first published in serial in four New York newspapers between October 27, 1787, and April 2, 1788. They were also published in a dozen newspapers throughout the states, and together in two volumes released in March and May of 1788. Growing to 175,000 words in all, *The Federalist* essentially became "a two-man enterprise."[xxiii] Hamilton wrote fifty-one essays and Madison wrote twenty-nine. (Jay wrote the remaining five.)

The project failed in its original purpose -- the people of New York elected an anti-federalist majority to the Ratifying Convention -- but the volumes were distributed widely to delegates in New York and Virginia. They provided federalists with a comprehensive resource that anti-federalists lacked -- a selection of what we now call the *Anti-Federalist Papers* appeared for the first time in 1965. Even the authors would often draw from *The Federalist* in the debates to come.

Persuading the Opposition. Madison and Hamilton were both elected delegates to their respective state conventions. By the time Virginia and New York convened, eight of the nine states required to approve the new Constitution had already ratified. But the battle was far from over. Ratification was unlikely in Rhode Island, which had boycotted the Philadelphia Convention, and in North Carolina. New Hampshire ratification was in doubt. Anti-federalist victories in Virginia or New York -- two of the largest and most important states -- would doom the new government to insignificance and imperil the Union.

Anticipating the oratorical gifts of their populist opponents, and their opponents' preference for sweeping rather than focused arguments, Hamilton and Madison developed their strategy. Both managed to slip a technical provision into their convention rules requiring that the Constitution be debated clause by clause. The provision became a "tactical bonanza,"[xxiv] giving the authors of *The Federalist* an edge over George Clinton and Melancton Smith in New York; Patrick Henry and George Mason in Virginia. Federalists also conceded that a Bill of Rights -- including a provision guaranteeing religious freedom -- would be considered by Congress after ratification, disarming a potent anti-federalist objection to the Constitution.

Still, even after New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify, Virginia and New York were locked in debate. Madison and the Virginia federalists fought to the end, refuting sweeping anti-federalist attacks and reasoning through each clause of the Constitution. Finally, on June 24, Madison exclaimed before the Convention, "Might not the nine states say with a great deal of propriety -- 'it is not proper, decent, or right in you, to demand that we should reverse what we have done.... You cannot exist without us -- you must be a member of the union.' "[xxv] Debate ended in the Virginia Convention and by a thin 89-79 margin, the federalists won the day.

Hamilton was equally forceful in the New York Convention. "[He] is the champion," wrote one of his opponents, "He speaks frequently, very long, and very vehemently."[xxvi] "When we leave common sense, and give ourselves up to conjecture," Hamilton said criticizing his enemies in one of the twenty-six speeches he delivered, "there can be no certainty, no security in our reasonings."[xxvii] Leading the federalist charge against the anti-federalist majority, Hamilton managed to convert a dozen of his opponents to his side. He won ratification by an even more thrilling, razor-thin margin than Madison, 30-27.

Conclusion: Buying the Constitution

The U.S. Constitution became the law of the land on March 4, 1789. On that day, George Washington took the oath of office, as dictated by the new governing document, and became the first president of the United States. James Madison and Alexander Hamilton would continue to shape their country in the years following ratification. Joining the House of Representatives, Madison authored and guided the Bill of Rights into law. He later became the fourth president of the United States. Hamilton was appointed the nation's first secretary of the treasury and he is credited for building the modern American economy. The two collaborated with George Washington to write his farewell address, and together -- from opposite ends of the political spectrum -- joined with Thomas Jefferson in founding the American party system.

But before they became two of the most important and recognizable political figures in the young republic, Hamilton and Madison joined in a common cause. They convinced friends and enemies of the need for change, provided visionary leadership at the Constitutional Convention, and fought to see their project through ratification.

Almost fifty years later, Alexis de Tocqueville imagined an ideal democratic nation,

> *I conceive a society, then, which all, regarding the law as their work, would love and submit to without trouble; in which the authority of government is respected as necessary, not divine, and the love one would bear for a head of state would not be a passion, but a reasoned and tranquil sentiment. Each having rights and being assured of preserving his rights, a manly confidence and a sort of reciprocal condescension between the classes would be established, as far from haughtiness as from baseness.... There is one country in the world where the great social revolution I am speaking of seems to have attained its natural limits.... America.*[xxviii]

Tocqueville's words are a tribute to Hamilton's and Madison's work.

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[i] Alexander Hamilton to James Madison, June 8, 1788; Joanne B. Freeman, ed. *Alexander Hamilton: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2001), p. 485.

[ii] James Madison to Alexander Hamilton, June 27, 1788; Jack N. Rakove, ed. *James Madison: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1999), p. 407.

[iii] Richard Axelrod, "Democratic Approaches to Change Make a Big Difference in Turbulent Times." *Harvard Management Update* 6, no. 11 (2001): p. 3.

[iv] William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2003), p. 16.

[v] Ibid., p. 154.

[vi] Steven H. Hoisington and S. A. Vaneswaren, *Implementing Strategic Change* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), p. 91.

[vii] John P. Kotter and Dan S. Cohen, *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), p. 36.

[viii] Paul Strebel, "Why Do Employees Resist Change?" *Harvard Business Review* 74, no. 3 (1996): p. 89.

[ix] Kotter, p. 4.

[x] Strebel, p. 87.

[xi] Harvard Business School, *Harvard Business Essentials: Managing Change and Transition* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003), p. 36.

[xii] Kotter, p. 83.

[xiii] Hamilton to James Duane, September 3, 1780; Freeman, p. 71.

[xiv] Madison to James Monroe, August 7, 1785; Rakove, p. 38.

[xv] Hamilton, "The Continentalist III," August 9, 1781; Freeman, p. 106.

[xvi] Madison to Thomas Jefferson, March 19, 1787; Rakove, p. 63.

[xvii] Madison, "Vices of the Political System," April 1787; Rakove, p. 79.

[xviii] Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2000), p. 88.

[xix] Ralph Ketcham, *James Madison: A Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), p. 195.

[xx] Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), p. 230.

[xxi] Kotter, p. 54.

[xxii] Ketcham, p. 232.

[xxiii] Chernow, p. 248.

[xxiv] Chernow, p. 263.

[xxv] Madison, "Speech to the Virginia Ratifying Convention," June 24, 1788; Rakove, pp. 406-7.

[xxvi] Chernow, p. 263.

[xxvii] Hamilton, "Speech to the New York Ratifying Convention," June 27, 1778; Freeman, p. 511.

[xxviii] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 9-12.