

TEACHER GUIDE

1800 DOC. #4: Letter from Alexander Hamilton

“The Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq., President of the United States,” personal letter from Alexander Hamilton published as pamphlet.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Information “leaks” have a long history of creating turmoil in U.S. politics. Modern day examples include the informant “Deep Throat” and his disclosures about the Watergate break-in, and Linda Tripp’s information about Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky. But “leaking” is nothing new. You can find examples going all the way back to 1800.

Alexander Hamilton was a leader in the Federalist Party and a member of President John Adams’ cabinet. He wrote this private letter to Federalist Party leaders in an effort to persuade them to support his favored candidate, Charles Pickney, in the 1800 election. The letter was somehow obtained by Republican candidate Aaron Burr and leaked to the press. It was printed in Republican newspapers shortly before the election and became a source of great embarrassment to both Adams and Hamilton.

The letter was a long one, 54 pages in all. In it Hamilton accused Adams of being weak in his dealings with France and of misjudgment in forcing the resignations of two cabinet members who supported Hamilton. Two brief sections from the beginning and end of the letter are offered here for review.

> **Project** the document and **have students read** excerpts on the student handout.

QUESTION	What is Hamilton’s main message in this letter? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
SUGGESTED ANSWER	Adams is an unfit President.
EVIDENCE	“He does not possess the talents,” “defects in his character which unfit him for the office of Chief Magistrate,” “undermining the ground which was gained for the government,” and the government “ might totter, if not fall under his future auspices”

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Letter from Alexander Hamilton Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq., President of the United States

Not denying to Mr. Adams patriotism and integrity, and even talents of a certain kind, I should be deficient in candor, were I to conceal the conviction, that he does not possess the talents adapted to the Administration of Government, and that there are great and intrinsic defects in his character, which unfit him for the office of Chief Magistrate.

It is time to conclude.—The statement which has been made, shews that Mr. Adams has committed some positive and serious errors of Administration; that in addition to these, he has a certain fixed points of character which tend naturally to the detriment of any cause of which he is Chief, of any Administration of which he is the head; that by his ill humors and jealousies he has already divided and distracted the supporters of the Government; that he has furnished deadly weapons to its enemies by unfounded accusations, and has weakened the force of its friends by decrying some of the most influential of them to the utmost of his power; and, let it be added, as the necessary effect of such conduct, that he has made great progress in undermining the ground which was gained for the government by his predecessor, and that there is real cause to apprehend, it might totter, if not fall, under his future auspices.

Letter from Alexander Hamilton

PowerPoint Slide
Text on student handout

QUESTION **Who published this private letter and for what purpose? Support your answer with evidence.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER It was published by his opponent, Aaron Burr, and Republican newspapers in order to discredit Adams.

EVIDENCE a leak such as this would disclose that there are serious differences within the ruling Federalist Party, undermine Adams' candidacy, and support the Republican cause

QUESTION **Why was this highly opinionated letter from one politician so disastrous for Adams?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Hamilton was a leader of Adams' own party, the Federalists.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Should it be legal to print secret or personal information about someone without their permission? Why or why not?

Is this letter primarily fact or opinion? How can you tell fact from opinion when you listen to talk radio or hear a news report?

ADDITIONAL INFO

Both Adams and Hamilton were hurt politically by the release of this letter which James Madison called a "Thunderbolt." It ended any hopes Adams might have had of election, and he called Hamilton, "the greatest intrigant in the world – a man devoid of every moral principle" (Boller 11).

Even though Adams was defeated in the election, there was an electoral tie between Jefferson and Burr. Constitutional election rules called for each elector to vote by ballot for two persons, with the second highest vote-recipient elected Vice President. The Republicans had planned on Jefferson as President and Aaron Burr as Vice President, but Jefferson and Burr ended up tied with 73 electoral votes each. It took 36 votes by the House of Representatives before Jefferson won the necessary majority to be elected President.

Hamilton actually supported Jefferson during this tie because he felt that Jefferson would be the lesser evil than Burr. This essentially ended Hamilton's career by destroying his credibility within his own party. Hamilton was subsequently killed by Aaron Burr in a duel.

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

Attack

Politicians must be careful not to make statements which could be used by their opponents, particularly in the era of audio and videotape. During the 1960 campaign, outgoing President Dwight D. Eisenhower was asked what policies his Vice President and Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, had contributed to his administration. Ike replied, "If you give me a week, I might think of one." The Democrats used Ike's words in campaign commercials that helped to defeat Nixon and elect John F. Kennedy.