Hamilton and Madison Deploy ‘Exigencies’ In Works Dated to 1787/88, 1790/91 and 1817-1836

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ABSTRACT.
In the second of three articles, the works of Madison and Hamilton, from The Federalist Papers through the bank bill debate, and continuing with Madison’s post-1817 works are surveyed. The survey covers 151 works (essays, speeches and letters) over 49 years which consist of 265,859 words. The results count 41 uses of ‘exigencies’ (and its affiliate ‘exigency’) in these works.

KEY WORDS: exigencies, ‘nature of government’ reasoning

A. INTRODUCTION. The reader will want to read Hamilton and Madison Deploy ‘Exigencies’ in Works Dated to 1787/88, 1790/91 and 1817-1836 Semantic Values Surveyed Through Quotations, 2 OCL 357. In that article quotations were supplied from The Federalist Papers, the bank bill debate and finally, given Hamilton’s death in 1804, Madison’s works.

B. RESULTS. At first glance, ‘exigencies’ seems to afford lesser opportunities. Jay never used the word in his eight thousand plus words over five TFP essays. Hamilton’s frequency of 28.5 compares roughly with Madison’s 12.5, given that Hamilton wrote 146,851 words of the total, while Madison penned 100,612 words. Table 357 is annexed hereto. See http://works.bepress.com/peter_aschenbrenner/

C. A LANDMARK WORD. ‘Exigencies’ landmarks the field of battle between semantics and feasibility and has done so since 1776. ‘Exigencies’ is an example of an harmonious value, but at the supra-constitutional level. In other words, it is above and beyond text.

The three values make their landmark appearances on May 10, 1776 July 4, 1776 and February 21, 1787. The Continental Congress’s resolution of May 10, 1776, in antecedent, introduces the core concept: “where no government sufficient to the exigencies of their affairs, hath been hitherto established,” Congress recommends that the states “adopt such government as shall, in the opinion of the representatives of the people best conduce to the happiness and safety of their constituents in particular, and America in general.” “This resolution,” John Adams wrote, “I considered as an epocha, a decisive event. It was a measure which I had invariably pursued for a whole year, and contended for, through a scene and a series of anxiety, labour, study, argument, and obloquy, which was then little known.” Adams’ call for independent states in North America to craft constitutional text, ennobles the popular expectation that these new governments – having challenged the most powerful government on earth – will preserve themselves through energetic action.

This expectation is placed on the same level as the popular right to create government (Adams’ contribution) and the popular right to alter or abolish it (Jefferson’s contribution). In short, one cannot fully appreciate the significance of July 4, 1776 without grasping the equally revolutionary thrust of Adams’ draft resolution of May 10, 1776.

D. A CONVENTION LAUNCHED. Finally, it was ‘exigencies’ that launched the Philadelphia convention. In “the opinion of Congress it is expedient that on the second Monday in May next a Convention of delegates who shall have been appointed by the several states be held at Philadelphia for the sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation and reporting to Congress and the several legislatures such alterations and provisions therein as shall when agreed to in Congress and confirmed by the states render the federal constitution adequate to the exigencies of Government & the preservation of the Union.”
E. IF GOVERNMENT MUST ACT OR PERISH: Then government must act. And extra text, if need be. Take this passage. TFP No. 44 finds Madison (in Justice Story’s retelling) a “distinguished statesman” who offers ‘nature of government’ reasoning:

We have now reviewed, in detail, all the articles composing the sum or quantity of power delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government, and are brought to this undeniable conclusion, that no part of the power is unnecessary or improper for accomplishing the necessary objects of the Union. The question, therefore, whether this amount of power shall be granted or not, resolves itself into another question, whether or not a government commensurate to the exigencies of the Union shall be established; or, in other words, whether the union itself shall be preserved.

F. COUNTING EXIGENCIES. We begin with (a) the 25 uses of ‘exigencies’ in TFP. Jay scores zero and Hamilton and Madison’s disputed essays (3) use one; Hamilton’s 18 in his 112,316 words (1: 6,239) tops Madison’s 9 ‘exigencies’ in his 63,107 words (at 1:7,011). (b) In the bank bill debate Madison never deploys ‘exigencies,’ while Hamilton offers 10 references (1:3,169) in his Opinion alone. (c) Madison’s purging of ‘exigencies’ appears (throughout his post-retirement 38,559 words) highly mannered, to say the least.

Here are the details: Six uses of ‘exigencies’ in post-1817 works reveal, in paraphrase, four references to the Continental Congress’s resolution of February 21, 1787. One oblique reference suggests that the New Jersey delegation echoed Congress’s recommendation in a “general provision for the exigencies of the Union.”

The remaining two references to exigencies may be marked down as pre-convention in provenance, carrying the reader back to the Continental Congress’s management of the revolutionary war. A “Committee consisting of a Member from each colony had been appointed to prepare and digest a form of Confederation, for the future management of the common interests, which had hitherto been left to the discretion of Congress, guided by the exigencies of the contest ….”

Madison is not eager to rekindle his reader’s vital connection between ‘nature of government’ reasoning and the word associated with a new birth of government in North America: ‘exigencies.’

G. STATUS. Complete.


The text of the Resolution of Congress appears in 3 Farrand 13-14, as Item 1 titled “Resolution of Congress” and dated February 21, 1787.

I. CITATION FORMAT. Please cite as 2 Our Constitutional Logic 357 or 2 OCL 357.

J. SERVER LOCATION. This file is maintained on the I/D server.

K. LAST REVISED. This file was last revised on March 4, 2013; it is version 006.

L. FILE FORMAT. The format of this file is MS Word 2010; the format of the associated table is also MS Word 2010.