

**Jefferson and Hamilton Disagree about Government** Date: \_\_\_\_\_

ABOUT THE READING One of the issues that faced George Washington's new government was how to handle the country's finances. In February 1791 he asked two members of his cabinet for their ideas about a national bank. The excerpts below show their responses.

As you read note the different ideas each of the two men have about government.

**Thomas Jefferson**

*Jefferson was secretary of state. He believed in limited power for the central government. He spoke for the interests of farmers, who were often in debt. His supporters were later called Republicans.*

I consider the foundation of the Constitution as laid on this ground: That "all powers not delegated to the United States, by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States or to the people. . . ." To take a single step beyond the boundaries thus specially drawn around the powers of Congress is to take possession of a boundless field of power, no longer susceptible of any definition.

The incorporation of a bank, and the powers assumed by this bill, have not, in my opinion, been delegated to the United States by the Constitution. . .

It has been urged that a bank will give great facility or convenience in the collection of taxes. Suppose this were true: yet the Constitution allows only the names which are necessary, not those which are merely convenient for **effecting** the **enumerated** powers. If such a latitude of Construction be allowed to this phrase as to give any non-enumerated power, it will go to every one, for there is not one which ingenuity may not torture into a convenience in some instance or other.

*Source: Jefferson to Washington, February 15, 1791.*

**VOCABULARY**

delegated - given  
susceptible - open to  
facility - ease  
effecting - carrying out  
enumerated - specified

**Jefferson quotes the Tenth Amendment. This amendment says that the states and the people keep all powers not specifically given to the central government.**

**What does Jefferson think will happen if the Constitution is not followed strictly?**

1. Why does Jefferson oppose the national bank?

2. What does Jefferson think will happen if the Constitution is not followed strictly?

### Alexander Hamilton

*Hamilton was the secretary of the treasury. The national bank was his idea. He favored the interests of merchants and bankers. His supporters were called Federalists because they wanted a strong central government. Hamilton won this argument. The Bank of the United States was set up on February 25, 1791.*

This restrictive interpretation of the word necessary is also contrary to this sound maxim of **construction**; namely, that the powers contained in a constitution of government, especially those which concern the general administration of the affairs of a country, its finances, trade, defense, [etc.], ought to be construed liberally in advancement of the public good. . . The means by which national **exigencies** are to be provided for, national inconveniences **obviated**, national prosperity promoted, are of such infinite variety, extent, and complexity, that there must of necessity be great latitude of discretion in the selection and application of those means. . .

It leaves, therefore, a criterion of what is constitutional, and of what is not so. This criterion is the end, to which the measure relates as a means. If the end be clearly comprehended within any of the specified powers, and if the measure have an obvious relation to that end, and is not forbidden by any particular provision of the Constitution, it may safely be **deemed** to come within the **compass** of the national authority.

Source: Hamilton to Washington, February 23, 1791.

Why does Hamilton want to interpret the Constitution loosely?

How would Hamilton decide if a law was constitutional?

How do Jefferson and Hamilton differ in the way they interpret the Constitution?

How do these differences lead to different views about the role of government?

### VOCABULARY

**construction** interpretation

**exigencies** needs

**obviated** prevented

**deemed** judged

**compass** scope

The Constitution should be understood broadly. This attitude is needed in order to increase the public good.

The needs of the country are complex. The government must be able to be flexible to meet those needs.