



The Pacificus-Helvidius Debates of 1793-1794

Alexander Hamilton, James Madison

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The Pacificus-Helvidius Debates of 1793–1794 matched Hamilton and Madison in the first chapter of an enduring discussion about the proper roles of executive and legislative branches in the conduct of American foreign policy. Ignited by President Washington's Neutrality Proclamation of 1793, which annulled the eleventh article of America's Treaty with France of 1778, the debate addressed whether Washington had the authority to declare America neutral, despite an early alliance treaty with France. Hamilton argued that Washington's actions were constitutional and that friction between the two branches was an unavoidable, but not harmful, consequence of the separation of powers. Madison countered that Washington's proclamation would introduce "new principles and new constructions into the Constitution and contended that "the power to declare war and make treaties can never fall within the definition of executive powers. In the introduction, Morton Frisch asserts that the debate between Hamilton and Madison helped to clarify "certain constitutional principles that we now associate with executive power generally such as that foreign policy is essentially an executive function. Yet it is the open-ended character of our Constitution that has continued to allow different interpretations of the limits of the powers of government, a debate that continues to this day. Frisch writes in the introduction, "The open-ended character of some of the constitutional provisions afforded opportunities for extending the powers of government beyond their specified limits. Although not given prior sanction by the Constitutional Convention, such additions served to provide a more complete definition of powers without actually changing the ends of government.

The Liberty Fund edition brings together for the first time all the relevant original documents of this controversy: Washington's Neutrality Proclamation, the full text of the Pacificus and Helvidius letters, Jefferson's letter to Madison imploring him to answer Hamilton's arguments, and Hamilton's Americanus letters, intended as his final response to Madison's rebuttal. This edition is supplemented with an introduction by Frisch, which places the work in historical context.

Morton J. Frisch (1923–2006) was Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Northern Illinois University.

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