

Alexander Hamilton Written Primary Source Activity

The topic of *Federalist Number 7* is the danger of conflict among the states. What issues do you think the various states would be likely to go to war over if they were not united in a federal system in which the national government has authority over state governments?

For each of the excerpts below, indicate the issue Alexander Hamilton sees as a potential producer of conflict between the states.

1. Territorial disputes have at all times been found one of the most fertile sources of hostility among nations. Perhaps the greatest proportion of wars that have desolated the earth have sprung from this origin. This cause would exist among us in full force. We have a vast tract of unsettled territory within the boundaries of the United States. There still are discordant and undecided claims between several of them, and the dissolution of the Union would lay a foundation for similar claims between them all...

2. In the wide field of Western territory, therefore, we perceive an ample theatre for hostile pretensions, without any umpire or common judge to interpose between the contending parties. To reason from the past to the future, we shall have good ground to apprehend, that the sword would sometimes be appealed to as the arbiter of their differences...

3. The competitions of commerce would be another fruitful source of contention. The States less favorably circumstanced would be desirous of escaping from the disadvantages of local situation, and of sharing in the advantages of their more fortunate neighbors. Each State, or separate confederacy, would pursue a system of commercial policy peculiar to itself. This would occasion distinctions, preferences, and exclusions, which would beget discontent.

4. The public debt of the Union would be a further cause of collision between the separate States or confederacies. The apportionment, in the first instance, and the progressive extinguishment afterward, would be alike productive of ill-humor and animosity. How would it be possible to agree upon a rule of apportionment satisfactory to all? There is scarcely any that can be proposed which is entirely free from real objections. These, as usual, would be exaggerated by the adverse interest of the parties.

Which of the four issues do you think had the biggest potential to produce conflict among the states? Why?

How would you describe Hamilton's writing style?

What is another issue over which the states may have come into conflict?

What would be an advantage of giving states more power and having a weak central government?

Hamilton signed the essays "Publius," an ancient Roman name that means "the people." Why do you think he chose to write under this name rather than to use his own name?