

Scholar, Soldier, Statesman

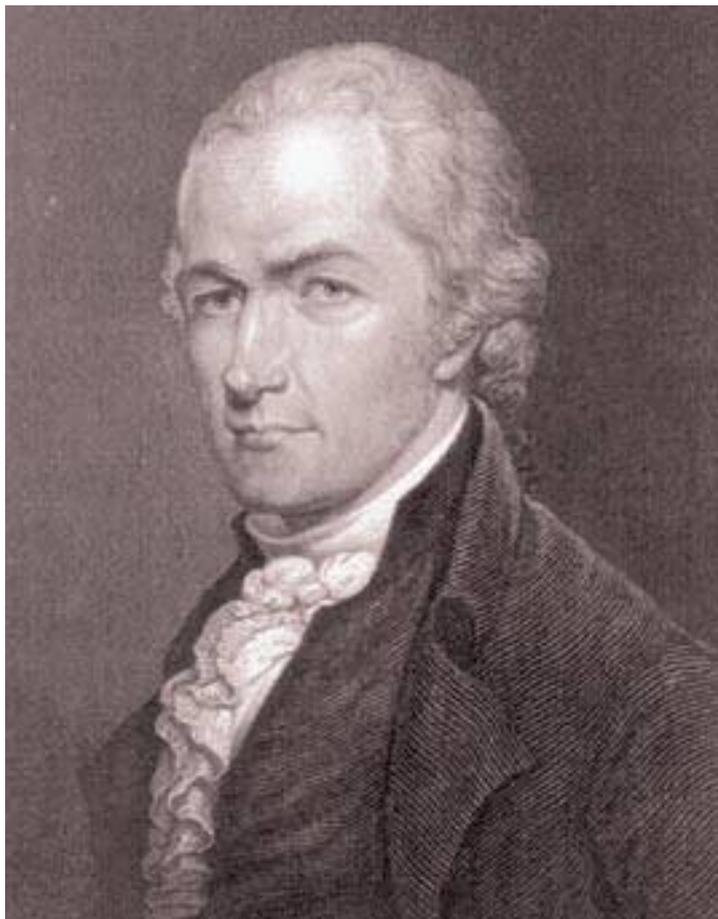
If James Madison represents the cool, contemplative head of the early republic's body politic, then Alexander Hamilton is undoubtedly its passionate, fiercely palpating heart.

by Joe Wolverton II, J.D.

Alexander Hamilton was born in 1757 on the British West Indian island of Nevis into a familial situation that was something less than ideal. His mother, Rachel Lavien, was a French Huguenot. The daughter of a successful physician, she was remarkable for her “great beauty, brilliancy, and accomplishments.” Hamilton’s father, James, was of noble Scottish blood, but by the time Alexander was born he had squandered his family’s modest wealth. Alexander Hamilton was known to have remarked that he had more claim to royal title and privilege than most of the monarchists he knew in America. Despite respectable bloodlines, however, Hamilton’s parents never married and his father abandoned his family when Alexander was eight years old.

The family’s financial misfortune dictated that Hamilton enter the workforce before he was 10 years old, a tender age, even by 18th-century standards. Hamilton’s early vocational training was in bookkeeping — he would exercise skills learned there throughout his life, even in the office of Secretary of the Treasury for the United States of America. Although Hamilton’s work provided the family with much needed fiscal stability, his mother did not permit work to prevent academic pursuits.

As a matter of fact, although work prevented Hamilton from studying as much as boys with less mature responsibility, he was a brilliant student, a quick study in the



Alexander Hamilton: Born into poverty in the West Indies, Hamilton used his tenacity, intelligence, and unwavering dedication to the cause of liberty to raise himself to the highest levels of government service, including becoming the first secretary of the treasury.

truest sense. His first tutor was a Jewish lady who taught Hamilton Hebrew, a language he mastered with such proficiency that before he was out of short pants he could recite the Ten Commandments in Hebrew. Lessons in French were also part of young Hamilton’s curriculum, and he demonstrated extraordinary skill in this language as well. Hamilton benefited from his mother’s purchase of a small library of 34 titles that an eager and anxious Alexander surely devoured.

Tragedy was a regular companion of Hamilton. When he was nine years old,

his mother died and he was left in the charge of a cousin, who died three years later. At the age of 12, Hamilton was on his own, poor, and without prospect of improving his station. While practically still in infancy, Hamilton had learned to work, and so by 14 years of age he was working as a manager at the shipping firm where he found employment. He served as a sort of accountant, and his aptitude attracted the attention of the owners who determined to aid Hamilton in his pursuit of a better lot.

Although Hamilton’s need to work and provide for himself while so young could be seen as unfortunate, the difficult circumstances through which he passed planted and nourished in him a loathing of laziness, dependency, drunkenness, and sloth. Hamilton steadfastly held that rejecting these vices and cultivating consistent, ordered, and dedicated labor would lead to prosperity and personal morality. This nascent but unwavering dedication to self-discipline was fostered

by lessons Hamilton received from his finest tutor, Reverend Hugh Knox.

Reverend Knox was a Princeton-educated Scot, who, in the Princetonian Presbyterian tradition, strove to inculcate Hamilton with three indispensable virtues: moral uprightness, individual responsibility, and intellectual fervor. Hamilton willingly accepted these principles as his own polestar — one he hoped would guide him toward fame. Knox intended for his young pupil to attend Princeton. Hamilton wanted to accommodate his teacher’s wish, but the regents of Princeton were unwilling to ac-

cept Hamilton's demand that he be allowed to move upward from class to class as he determined best, so Hamilton enrolled in King's College of New York (Columbia University), an institution far too Tory and too Anglican for the brash and fiery disciple of Scotch Presbyterians. Hamilton left college after fewer than two years' study, but he was so motivated and such a tireless student that he qualified for a bachelor's degree and began studying law.

The War for Independence

Hamilton's course in life was not set by experiences at King's College, how-

ever. The War for Independence broke out early in Hamilton's academic career, and although he met the requirements for graduation from King's College, his attention to military duties prevented him from ever receiving a degree. This lack in no way inhibited a man as determined and focused as Hamilton from achieving all the personal goals he set for himself. He bettered himself by reading voraciously and rehearsing to himself lessons learned from his study.

Hamilton's devotion to the cause of American freedom was the offspring of the marriage of his revolutionary zeal and

his desire for immortality. That is not to say that the fire of his motivations wasn't fueled by a sincere belief that his adopted country's struggle for liberty and independence was necessary and justified, for it certainly was.

Hamilton served in the army from ages 19 to 25, and his attention to duty, untiring work habits, and boldness garnered him the admiration of General George Washington. In 1777, Hamilton was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and assigned to function as General Washington's aide-de-camp. Hamilton served faithfully for four years in this capacity, and it was this intimate and often tumultuous relationship that was to be the hub around which the remainder of his life would revolve — for good or ill.

Hamilton's service to George Washington during the Revolutionary War can be marked as the genesis of his career in politics, a path from which he would never truly depart. After the war, Hamilton settled in New York and established a thriving law practice. Hamilton had educated himself in legal theory and looked to two authorities as his beacons in matters of law: Emmerich de Vattel and William Blackstone (it is interesting to take note that these two leading lights of legal thought were equally influential on Hamilton's sometime collaborator, sometime adversary, James Madison). Hamilton admired and appreciated Vattel's forceful, succinct, and direct style — a style Hamilton had adopted as his own.

Hamilton absorbed all the intellectual nourishment he found in the works of Blackstone, de Vattel, Jean Jacques Burlamaqui (whom he found to be less thorough than Vattel), and others. He then converted this nourishment into energy and expended it in his mission to become a potent ally of the American republic. He sensed, and rightly so, that the foundation upon which the temple of American government would be built was one whose strength would be a product of the principles he practiced personally and witnessed in the lives of many of his contemporaries. He truly believed that the best way to employ the understanding and insight proffered him by the hand of Providence and refined through his own persistent effort was to define, build, and buttress a nascent American nation.



Hamilton and Washington: In 1777, General George Washington personally invited a 20-year-old Hamilton to become his new aide-de-camp. Through this time of intimate association, Hamilton became one of Washington's closest confidantes.

Constitutional Convention

Hamilton's efforts in this regard were soon directed toward preparing for a Constitutional Convention to reform the ineffectual Articles of Confederation. Hamilton was known among his peers as an impassioned advocate for a strong, energetic national government; and the government under the current confederacy was weak and anathema to Hamilton's vision of America as a prosperous, commercially sound empire. Hamilton, echoing lessons he learned from de Vattel, declared at the convention of 1787 that there are three purposes of government: first, provide for the "great purposes of commerce, revenue, agriculture"; second, promote "domestic tranquility and happiness"; and third, demonstrate "sufficient stability and strength to make us respectable abroad." Hamilton was unafraid of controversy and he boldly declared his notion of proper, republican government and fought to see that his way was followed.

The final draft of the Constitution produced at the convention in Philadelphia was what Madison called a "bundle of compromises," conforming exactly to neither what Hamilton, Madison, or any other man there present believed to be the perfect Constitution. As a matter of fact, upon rising to sign the final resolution, Hamilton soberly announced, "No man's ideas were more remote from the plan than [mine] were known to be; but it is possible to deliberate between anarchy and convulsion on one side, and the chance of good to be expected from the plan on the other." Hamilton then proceeded to append his name to the document and left with sights focused firmly on ensuring its ratification.

Hamilton as Publius

It is now incontrovertible that Hamilton's most valuable contribution to the fabric of American history is his conception and co-authorship of what has become the seminal work of American political philosophy — *The Federalist Papers*. Therein, Ham-



Hamilton and Franklin: When illness prevented Benjamin Franklin from attending sessions of the Constitutional Convention, Hamilton and other delegates would meet underneath the mulberry tree in Franklin's yard to discuss pressing Convention matters with the venerable diplomat.

ilton persuasively encouraged the people of America to embrace the new compact. In the opening sentence of *The Federalist*, No. 1, Hamilton as Publius (the anonymous pseudonym under whose name *The Federalist Papers* were written) informed his fellow citizens that what was at stake was "nothing less than the existence of the Union, the safety and welfare of the parts of which it is composed, the fate of an empire, in many respects, the most interesting in the world." This was certainly ambitious considering America's size and relative weakness, but Hamilton was a visionary and foresaw the greatness America would achieve if she adhered to the principles of limited republican government and free-market commerce.

As to the enemies of the Constitution who cried that the Constitution encroached upon individual liberty, Hamilton declared with an understanding that was nearly prophetic, "History will teach us, that the former [zeal for the rights of the people] has been found a much more certain road to the introduction of despotism, than the latter [zeal for efficiency of government], and that of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics the greatest number have begun their career, by paying an

obsequious court to the people, commencing Demagogues and ending Tyrants."

Hamilton's last missive as Publius was aimed at awakening his countrymen to the momentous nature of the decision they were tasked with making, and he sought to assure an uneasy populace that the new Constitution was "the best which our political situation, habits and opinions will admit, superior to any the revolution has produced."

National Bank Controversy

All of the foregoing description of Alexander Hamilton's firm devotion and tireless labor on behalf of the cause of American freedom evinces beyond dispute the debt all Americans owe to him for the liberties they enjoy under the Constitution he helped craft and carry to ratification. That is not to say that every notion conceived in the cranium of Alexander Hamilton was worthy of admiration. Of all the innovative projects proposed by Hamilton, none was more controversial in his own time and ours than his push for establishment of a central national bank.

Hamilton insisted in letters and speeches that the only way to permanently construct the new republic on an unshakeable

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foundation was to boldly develop the unmatched financial resources available to the United States. Hamilton believed that the ineptness and impotency of the national government under the Articles of Confederation had harmed America's reputation in the world and that this harm could become irreparable unless the fledgling nation was quickly placed on a sound political footing.

With the aim of securing the ability of the United States to grow into the strong and dynamic national entity he envisioned, on December 14, 1790, Hamilton, in his role as the first Secretary of the Treasury, introduced the Report on the National Bank. Hamilton believed that the inflation rampant in America caused by devaluation of paper currency in the states after the War for Independence could be remedied by creating a bank capable of borrowing money from foreign money creditors and with enough strength and popular support to engender faith and confidence necessary to inspire potential creditors (foreign and domestic) to loosen the purse strings and loan America the money necessary, in Hamilton's opinion, to grow America into a world power.

Often in letters Hamilton argued that America's lasting independence would be won as much in the banks as on the battlefields. He feared that without a substantial influx of foreign capital, America would never be able to overcome the materiel shortages that plagued her throughout the War for Independence, and would remain vulnerable to European tyrants hungry

to gorge themselves on the natural resources so plentiful in America.

Hamilton's report pro-pounded three primary justifications for establishing a central bank. First, American trade and industry suffered from the lack of a uniform currency; second, the bank would be a depository for government funds; and third, the bank could make loans

to business and government, enabling both to remain viable, despite occasional economic downturns. Under Hamilton's scheme, control of the bank would be in private hands.

Hamilton worried, however, that a bank of this size and with this much power might require some measure of public (government) control. Basically, Hamilton's solution to the problem of lack of sufficient government oversight was to make the na-

tional government a minority shareholder in the new bank and to empower the government to appoint the bank's board of directors. Hamilton assured the Congress that this admixture of public oversight and private capital would transform the national banks into the "nurseries of national wealth."

Despite Hamilton's assurances of restraint and promises of unimaginable prosperity, the bill that sought to charter the national bank met with powerful and persuasive opposition. Chief among Hamilton's foes was his onetime friend and *Federalist* collaborator, James Madison. Madison's firm stance against the incorporation of a national bank carried great weight in the House of Representatives, as he was regarded as the guiding philosophical force behind the recently ratified Constitution.

Early in January of 1791, Madison rose to voice his dissent to Hamilton's far-reaching (Madison would say over-



The duel with Aaron Burr: On July 11, 1804 at a promontory near Weehawken, New Jersey, Vice President Aaron Burr shot and killed Hamilton during a duel provoked by Burr's belief that Hamilton had insulted him in letters. Hamilton died the next day, at 49 years of age.

reaching) plan to establish a central bank. Madison looked to the blackletter of the Constitution itself, “Reviewing the Constitution with an eye to these positions [the advantages of a national bank] it was not possible to discover in it the power to incorporate a bank.” Further, to presume that the “general welfare” clause of the Constitution authorized Congress to create a national bank “would give to Congress an unlimited power; would render nugatory the enumeration of particular powers; would supersede all the powers reserved to the state governments.” He summed up the argument succinctly, “If the power was not given, Congress could not exercise it.”

Madison could not have been more prescient, for we as modern citizens of the United States have seen the devastation wrought by the gross assumption of unfettered power perpetrated by a federal government that refuses to be bound by the powers enumerated in our noble founding document.

Thomas Jefferson, then a member of George Washington’s cabinet, joined his friend and fellow Virginian in opposing Hamilton’s scheme. Jefferson penned a well-crafted, detailed, and soundly reasoned resistance to the creation of a national bank. Like Madison, Jefferson argued that the Constitution delegated certain enumerated powers to Congress. Specifically, Jefferson averred, “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’ [10th Amendment]. 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.”

Although Madison, Jefferson, and Hamilton eventually reached a compromise that authorized the funding of the national debt, there can be no doubt that Jefferson and Madison stood firmly on sound constitutional footing. They were indeed correct that any proposed rupture of the proper boundaries placed on congressional power, no matter who be the source of such a suggestion, was dangerous, tended toward tyranny, and was contrary to the spirit and letter of the supreme law of the United States — the Constitution.



Hamilton’s tomb: Alexander Hamilton is laid to rest in the churchyard of Trinity Church near the corner of Wall Street and Broadway in New York City. The inscription describes Hamilton as a patriot, soldier, and statesman.

Duel at Weehawken

At the conclusion of the rancorous presidential election of 1800, neither John Adams (the incumbent president), Thomas Jefferson, nor Aaron Burr received a majority of the votes in the electoral college. Therefore, the House of Representatives was called upon to settle the matter. The House was hopelessly split, but after 36 tied votes Hamilton decided to throw his considerable weight in favor of Jefferson, despite their recent clash over the bank.

This resulted in the election of Jefferson by one vote on the 37th ballot. Burr was insulted and carried a consuming grudge against Hamilton. Hamilton explained that he supported Jefferson, his erstwhile enemy, over Burr because “at least Jefferson was honest.” This comment, along with veiled insults reportedly spoken by Hamilton in private and later reported in newspapers, added the proverbial insult to injury and Burr demanded an apology. Hamilton refused to apologize and after several attempts to ameliorate the situation, Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel.

On July 11, 1804, Hamilton, Burr, their seconds, and a physician met secretly (for dueling was illegal in most states) on a promontory in Weehawken, New Jersey. The exact sequence of events is still disputed, but the results are irrefutable: Burr shot Hamilton and the ricocheting ball ripped into Hamilton’s internal organs, causing mortal wounds. Hamilton died the next day in Manhattan. Aaron Burr, charged with

murder, fled west to escape punishment. Tragically, Hamilton’s eldest son, Phillip, was killed in a duel just two and a half years earlier while defending his father’s honor.

A Commendable Legacy

When weighed in the balance, Alexander Hamilton’s contribution to the permanent establishment of American freedom is commendable. From an early age, he recognized the value of hard work and tireless study. Although born into difficult circumstances, Hamilton knew that he could overcome any obstacles by taking advantage of every opportunity to demonstrate his remarkable talents.

Upon arriving in America, Hamilton quickly espoused the cause of liberty and fought and served honorably in the Continental Army. After aiding the creation of American self-government by throwing off the chains of British oppression, Hamilton recognized the need for a strong, dynamic government compared to the ineffective one existing under the Articles of Confederation, and he attended the Constitutional Convention of 1787 hoping to help provide a remedy to the malady of instability. Later, he was instrumental in achieving ratification of the glorious fruit of that assembly.

Modern Americans would be well-advised to emulate Alexander Hamilton’s dedication to education, love of liberty, and fierce determination to preserve the freedom of this mighty republic. ■