Defying the Odds

A Brief Overview of the Life of Alexander Hamilton

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Tragically taken away from the grand picture of early America, there was not a single Founding Father as colorful, talented, brilliant, or audacious as Alexander Hamilton. His tenacity served him well throughout his short life and rose above his contemporaries in terms of his understanding of what he believed America would be someday. Despite continuous unfortunate circumstances, Hamilton overcame the challenges thrown his way with characteristic perseverance.

Alexander Hamilton was born on the island of Nevis in the heart of the Caribbean. Danish law decreed that James Hamilton and Rachel Lavien were not officially married, which meant their two sons, James Junior and Alexander, were illegitimate. Haunted by his parentage, Alexander never mentioned it, hoping those who knew him would judge him based on his character rather than his pedigree (Brookhiser 15). Raised in St. Croix, Hamilton was surrounded by sugar plantations manned by slaves of African descent. The inhumane conditions fostered a hatred for the institution of slavery in a young Hamilton which shaped his ideas when he lived in North America. James left Rachel to raise their two sons on her own in St. Croix, but Rachel died of yellow fever, leaving the two boys to fend for themselves. After a devastating hurricane rocked St. Croix, Alexander penned a poem which attracted the attention of readers. Impressed with the young man, Hamilton’s employer raised funds for a one-way voyage to the British North American colonies. Hamilton first went to a grammar school in New Jersey then transferred to King’s College in New York City, now known as Columbia College. He turned up just in time for the event that would shape America forever.

Arriving in October of 1772, Hamilton caught a whiff of the unrest in the colonies and heard the whispers of revolution in the air. However, he went to school in a predominately Tory
town, meaning many citizens of New York supported England. In 1776 New York called for artillery volunteers, so Hamilton applied for the commanding position. Receiving said position, his dedication caught the eye of a Rhode Island general named Nathanael Greene. Greene introduced Hamilton to the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, George Washington. This was the beginning of a long relationship with the Virginian general. Proving his mettle was not easy however, and after six months of hard fighting Hamilton’s company was reduced to twenty-five men (Lodge 14). Impressed with the dashing young artillery captain, Washington promoted Hamilton to lieutenant colonel and made him one of his aides, one of the thirty-two he had over the course of the war (Brookhiser 29). Hamilton’s induction into Washington’s staff “…was the beginning of a twenty-two year relationship, the most important of his career” (Brookhiser 31). Although Hamilton quit Washington’s staff shortly before the war ended, he was back in Washington’s “family” eight years later when the first president of the new United States invited him to serve in his newly formed cabinet. As the Revolutionary War drew to a close, the state of New York chose Alexander Hamilton to be one of their delegates to Congress.

The year of 1786 was difficult on Hamilton. His tenure as a New York representative was not fruitful, and he quit eight months later. He continued writing articles during this time under the pen name “Continentalist”. This was the prelude to the more popularly known pen name Publius, the pen name Hamilton used while writing the Federalist Papers. Hamilton opened a law office on Wall Street but he argued cases all over the state of New York – sometimes with another young lawyer named Aaron Burr. Hamilton was elected to the State Assembly of New York where he fervently called for a Constitutional Convention until James Madison told him to phrase it differently. At the time, Madison and Hamilton got along well but this would change quickly as Madison agreed more and more with Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson
constantly disagreed with Hamilton when they worked together on the same presidential Cabinet. However until he started working under Washington, Hamilton had much to do concerning the idea of a stronger document than the flimsy Articles of Confederation that would unite the new States of America.

For seven years Hamilton had called for a Constitutional Convention (Brookhiser 62), but his dreams did not become a reality until the summer of 1787. He spent five months at the Constitutional Convention but only gave one speech during the entire convention, which basically called for a strong executive office and praised the British form of government. His work lay elsewhere; specifically in the job of writing essays supporting a United States Constitution. This series of papers, known as the Federalist Papers were a collective effort contributed to by John Jay, James Madison, and Hamilton. Hamilton had presented the idea to Gouverneur Morris and William Duer, but Morris refused and upon reconsideration Hamilton rescinded his offer from Duer. The original plan was for Jay, Madison, and Hamilton to split up twenty-five essays between them, but when they finished, the grand total was eighty-five. Jay managed five before he became ill; Madison wrote twenty-nine; Hamilton finally quit after completing fifty-one. Excessive writing was a talent of Hamilton’s, one he employed often during his tenure as Secretary of the Treasury.

George Washington appointed Hamilton to his cabinet as the nation’s first Secretary of the Treasury in 1789. Completing Washington’s cabinet were Thomas Jefferson, the first Secretary of State, Henry Knox, the first Secretary of War, and Edmund Randolph, the first Attorney General. Jefferson, the Virginian politician who coauthored the Declaration of Independence, quickly put himself in opposition to the young upstart Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton set immediately to work getting rid of the national and state debt. In 1790 his greater
than twenty thousand word “Report on Credit” stunned the House of Representatives into silence (Brookhiser 88). The House took months to go through all the details due to the strident opposition. James Madison, a loud voice in the House, agreed with some of Hamilton’s plan but stubbornly refused to pass the rest of it. The debate dragged on for weeks. Running into a harried Hamilton outside Washington’s office, Thomas Jefferson invited Hamilton to his house to talk matters over with Madison, and Hamilton conceded. In exchange for passing assumption, Madison and Jefferson requested Hamilton bid for the capital to be moved to a spot on the Potomac River, a waterway dividing Virginia and Maryland. Despite his misgivings, Hamilton agreed.

While his wife Elizabeth visited upstate New York, Hamilton entertained the attention of a Mrs. Maria Reynolds. When Mr. James Reynolds caught wind of the affair, he bribed Hamilton into buying his silence. Not wanting his wife to find out, Hamilton paid Mr. Reynolds off, but continued to see Maria. To Hamilton’s dismay, his enemies, the Anti-Federalist Party, found out and, fearing Hamilton used Treasury money, demanded he give a complete account of his finances. Determined to clear his name, Hamilton wrote seven reports totaling sixty thousand words, not including the enormous amount of sums that described the entire financial history of the United States, in the space of three weeks (Randall 415). Afraid his enemies would further use the knowledge of the goings-on, Hamilton published a full confession of his association with Maria and James Reynolds. In Alexander Hamilton Henry Cabot Lodge writes “At the cost of bitter grief to himself and to all whom he most loved, he published a pamphlet in which he told the whole unpleasant story” (276). However admirable or self-serving this confession was, the affair effectively ruined him.
Despite his failures, Hamilton made his mark on the political enterprise known as America in positive ways. Richard Brookhiser in his book *Alexander Hamilton, American* comments “Along the way, Hamilton worked with or against other founders who were either great, or significant: Washington, Madison, Jefferson, Adams…Aaron Burr” (9). Hamilton was an indispensable help to Washington during his years as commander-in-chief of the army and of the country. The villain to Hamilton’s hero, Jefferson balanced out Hamilton’s voice in Washington’s cabinet and would not have been president without Hamilton’s endorsement. Unfortunately, that endorsement sent Hamilton’s new foe Aaron Burr over the edge.

John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Aaron Burr were the runners-up for the election of 1800. Believing Burr had no set beliefs, Hamilton shockingly threw his coveted endorsement to Jefferson. Unlike Burr, Jefferson had ideals for the nation that he would attempt to incorporate over the next eight years. In a sad twist of fate Hamilton was unable to see this because an angry Burr challenged him to a duel. Hamilton, Burr accused, had sullied his name for far too long and had to own up to it. As was custom, Burr and Hamilton’s duel took place across the river in New Jersey because dueling was illegal in New York. Reluctant, Hamilton set his affairs in order, then commenced with the duel on a gloomy, foggy morning. Hamilton’s shot was far and wide, but Burr’s struck Hamilton in the stomach, tearing through his liver and diaphragm and stopping at the spine (Brookhiser 212). Alexander Hamilton, genius, orphan, immigrant, soldier, lawyer, author, politician, adulterer, and duelist died at the age of forty-seven, surrounded by more than twenty of his friends and family (Chernow 708).

Hamilton certainly did not fit into the typical archetype of Founding Father. His origins, upbringing, and education were wildly different from the other Founding Fathers such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. However, Hamilton was like them in one respect; his unmatched
brilliance and desire to make the new republic work. Even though he was not granted more time, he left a distinct mark on the undertaking of a brand new nation that defied the set laws of empires.
Works Cited


