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Book Review

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Brookhiser, Richard. Alexander Hamilton, American. New York: Free P, 2000.

Author's Purpose: Richard Brookhiser is devoted to rescuing the character and chronicle of Alexander Hamilton. A complex man, Hamilton is many things to many people. His politics are an amalgam of conservative and liberal ideals depending on context and perspective. Brookhiser has written for several publications, including *National Review*, *The New York Observer*, *The New York Times*, and *Atlantic Monthly*. He also served as curator of a Hamilton exhibit at the New York Historical Society in 2004-2005. Brookhiser's intention is to elucidate the cloud of Hamilton's life and bring him to light. This is done by rolling out a thesis on that age-old question: What is an American?

Chronological and Topical Scope: Alexander Hamilton, American covers Hamilton's life from his disputed birth year (He claimed 1757, documentary evidence points to 1755) to his death on the wrong end of Burr's pistol. The book encompasses his early life and hardship on St. Croix, his formative years in New York, his impressive record in the American Revolution, his ideas and love affair with words (as well as more inappropriate affairs), and his public life. Brookhiser organizes the book into thematic chapters which follow this path: *St. Croix/Manhattan*, *War*, *Laws*, *Treasury Secretary*, *Fighting*, *Losing*, *Words*, *Rights*, *Passions*, and *Death*.

Sources: Brookhiser relies heavily on *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (Syrett et al.), family biographies, and a multitude of primary sources, such as *The Federalist Papers*. He also cites Forrest McDonald, Michael Lind, and John Steele Gordon.

Author's Thesis and Main Points: Brookhiser can be seen as a Hamilton revisionist. As a long-time contributor to the *National Review*, his conservative-leaning perspective compels him to fight for the salvation of a man forgotten and demonized at times by the left. The Portrayal of Hamilton as an enemy of democracy (he did call it a "disease.") has led Brookhiser to help forge a new identity for the founder; that of American. There is considerable homage paid to the idea of American exceptionalism and the American Dream in particular. In fact Brookhiser's thesis follows that line. In essence, the author looks to show that Hamilton is the quintessential American; that he embodies that American dream like no other in the nation's early history. "None had come from so far back," and Hamilton "wanted to generalize his experience." (p. 3) Unlike other founders, he had adopted this new nation as his own. He did not see the separate "countries" of Massachusetts, Virginia, or New York, though he was certainly sensitive to the influence of regionalism. His nationalist spirit paved a long and sometimes lonesome road to the modern American Republic – and Brookhiser acknowledges as well as exults this. The current political climate of historical research leaves many authors to their own biases, and this author is no different. As the stream of revisionism meanders into the 21st century, new tributaries are being formed. The struggle between hero worship and myth destruction has left many grappling with their perspective of a nation they call home. Brookhiser's view of what America *is*, though not new, is off the current beaten path. His book leads the charge for celebrating what is *right* with this country – in more ways than one. Hamilton embodies for Brookhiser, and for many what a "great" American is (p. 3).

Hamilton's early life was absolutely crucial in shaping his outlook on later affairs. His poverty and struggle gave him a proverbial "chip on the shoulder." That chip would never be shaken off, right down to

the shot lodged in his spine. Hamilton was as energetic as he thought government should be when it came to proving the merits of his ideas and accomplishments. He left St. Croix without looking back and adopted a new country, though Brookhiser points out repeatedly that Hamilton never quite shakes the feeling of otherness. This is another connection between his subject and his audience; a need to feel accepted. Like so many Americans, that search for connection in a melting pot is exhausting. Hamilton writes pamphlets as "A Friend of America," demonstrating his status as an outsider. Hamilton's intense sense of personal loyalty and his near obsession with preserving his "name" are evidence that he was consistently engaged in proving himself, as well as searching for an identity (p. 209). In General Washington, in his wife, and in deep friendships with John Laurens, Edward Stevens, and the Marquis de Lafayette, we see this passionate connection to others. These are not necessarily insecurities, as Hamilton was very confident in his principles, but rather traits of a man who worked incessantly to breathe confidence of his principles into those around him.

His audience would not continue to be only those near him. Despite this yoke, Hamilton ambitiously and energetically contributes to the American cause. He had come from the "fringes to the center" in New York, and he wasted little time finding a use for his talents (p.20). After being accepted at King's College (he found his self-prescribed accelerated program rejected by the College of New Jersey) Hamilton found himself ensconced in the political turmoil that was 1770's Manhattan. His school, though a haven for Loyalists, gave him ample political opportunity; though he found Samuel Seabury's musings a more substantial object for denunciation. Seabury's condemnation of the Continental Congress in 1774 under the pseudonym "A.W. Farmer" was a scorching attack at the perceived radicalism of Bostonians and the Congress itself. He worried that such measures would leave the weak colonies vulnerable to the full wrath of the British Empire. Hamilton's "A Farmer Refuted," and "A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress," handedly point out the flaws of Seabury's arguments. In "Farmer," Hamilton disputes the idea of the Colonial weakness. He instead contends that Britain sees the Colonies as an "economic threat," and holds

a "jealousy for [America's] dawning splendor." (p. 24) In "A Full Vindication," Hamilton pens what Brookhiser calls his most eloquent prose. "The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for among old parchments or musty records. They are written, as with a sunbeam, in the whole *volume* of human nature, by the hand of the Divinity itself, and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power." (p. 24) Hamilton also references slavery, though only in the context of oppression or limited freedom. Brookhiser's admiration of Hamilton's early brilliance is not shy, and is very contagious. The reader does, by this point have a very favorable opinion of the man on the \$10 bill. The author also gives details of Hamilton's work and study ethic, branding him an insatiable lifelong learner. There is an unabashed awe and respect for the cerebral nature of this great man, and the reader follows suit.

Brookhiser does not ignore some of Hamilton's imperfections. There is a sense that all of Hamilton's mistakes stem from his mode of thinking on a different plane. Hamilton often overestimates others (p. 25). In early life, he assumes that others are prone to the same "enthusiasm in liberty" and "industry" that he is. Brookhiser's chapter on *Words* shows that to be a gross misconception. Hamilton's contribution to the *Federalist Papers* alone was near 100,000 words. His relationship to words was one Brookhiser called "intimate and inexhaustible." (p. 156)

Nonetheless, Hamilton misjudged people repeatedly, whether it was the wife of Maj. John Andre, who committed treason with her husband (only to command Hamilton's sympathy) or Maria Reynolds, who is the central character in Hamilton's most emotionally troubling hours. His affair, and successive blackmailing, conducted by Mrs. Reynolds and her husband is another example of Hamilton's parallel mind. He knew the moral bankruptcy of his act, and seemed to be truly rent with guilt, but he also saw no need to cover it up when his integrity as a public servant was questioned. He openly admitted in a series of public letters that he had been unfaithful, for the purpose of clearing allegations of misconduct in office. These weaknesses, as Brookhiser relays them, seem to come out as strengths. This is a man who has a different set of principles. A man who is fully and unselfishly committed to serving the public. Between his apparent

unimpeachable public character, his eloquence on the topic of natural rights, and his later vehement defense of the Freedom of Press in *The People v Croswell*, Brookhiser weaves the image of a man who in no way resembles the power hungry, authoritarian, monarchist of Hamilton's past.

Hamilton's contribution to the Constitution, in particular his contributions to the *Federalist Papers*, are another key point in Brookhiser's portrayal. Though Hamilton is oft remembered for his defense of the monarchy, it is clear that his aggressive push for a "proper executive," his reports on public credit and manufactures, as well as his National Bank, are all bulwarks of the industrial, capitalist America with a strong centralized government that we now know. Brookhiser focuses on this consistently, further supporting his thesis.

The remainder of the book covers Hamilton's often public disagreements with Jefferson, Burr, and others. The central theme is one of a man with unflappable principles. It is a man whose main source of frustration is the ignorance of others. He fought against it with words. He fought against it with laws (his arguments at the Constitutional Convention included establishing checks against mob rule and the essential nature of an electoral college). Until his death in 1804, Hamilton defended ideas. He defended his positions. He defended his "name." Brookhiser has shown us a true American. He has shown us an American who used the freedom and opportunity of the country he loved to live an extraordinary life, with extraordinary accomplishments. From clerk, to Aide-de-Camp, to war hero, to Secretary of Treasury, to lawyer, to husband, to journalist, to myriad other roles and responsibilities, Hamilton can objectively be honored for what he brought to the table: unmistakable genius, energy, ambition, foresight, and a blueprint for a what is often a murky, multifaceted identity.

Critique: Richard Brookhiser is clearly a Hamilton "fan." His analysis of the Secretary's triumphs and misgivings usually lends favor to his virtues. There is clear posthumous vengeance for the decades of historians who over criticized or underestimated Hamilton. His foes, such as Jefferson and Burr, are

skillfully picked apart. Jefferson is all but branded a hypocrite, and Burr is directly cast as a narcissist.

Those things accounted for; there is genuine passion with which Brookhiser presents Hamilton. There is forthright and candid assessment of Hamilton's flaws and talents. The flaws are not ignored, but at times they are, one could say, objectively forgiven. The author sees no reason to disregard blemishes in character, but also sees no need to magnify them. Brookhiser clearly has Hamilton's legacy in mind as he tells his story, but, in this reader's opinion, he is able to maintain credibility and integrity as an historian. The book is a quick, flowing read, which is entertaining and inspirational. In proving the essential American quality of a man like Hamilton, Brookhiser has achieved another possibly unintended objective. He causes the reader to introspectively analyze what an American is. In turn, the reader finds an identity of their own.