

**Book Review for Ron Chernow's Hamilton
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Over the past summer, I completed a lengthy but riveting book on one of the founders, Alexander Hamilton. Being over seven hundred pages, Hamilton gives the reader a thorough biographical sketch of one man's life. Chernow thoroughly describes Hamilton's personal life and links it to how it shaped Hamilton's professional life. This includes his views on slavery, support of immigrants and an obsession with personal honor. While pivotal, this review will focus on Hamilton's role in the Revolution, his role in writing and helping ratify the Constitution, and his role in shaping US economic policy. In concluding, I offer some ways I would use this book in the classroom. Finally, I will construct three questions that I wish could be asked of Hamilton, and create three responses based how I think Hamilton would answer.

With Hamilton joining Washington's staff in 1777, a 20 year partnership was born. Hamilton and Washington "were unbeatable and far more than the sum of their parts" (88). It seems the service Hamilton gave to Washington during the war gave him significant credibility while Washington was President. Chernow makes the argument that Hamilton was something akin to a Prime Minister with significant influence over the final big decisions of the Washington Administration.

Another significant point from this time period was Hamilton gained a world view as an American, and this will be a significant theme through the book. Where politicians in the early republic could feel more loyal to their states, Hamilton's "American nationalism" always kept him focused on what was best for the entire nation. It seems that men who served in the Continental Army, for the most part, gained this world view.

While serving as a pivotal aide de camp to Washington, Hamilton gained a “wide angle view of economic, political and military matters” (90), and skills learned from personal experience and voluminous reading. Hamilton would put these views and skills to good use during his reign at the Treasury.

A final pivotal chapter during this phase of Hamilton’s life was his departure from Washington’s staff. It is telling in two different ways. One, it shows his obstinacy and sharp temperament (demanding a battlefield commission, his abrupt treatment of Washington). Second, it shows his political acumen. Hamilton knew that to be politically viable and run for office he needed to distinguish himself with service in the war.

A second phase of the Hamilton story could discuss his years in the Continental Congress during the Articles. Of greater significance however, is his role in the organization, writing and ratification of the US Constitution. (A side note: after taking this class and reading this book, I have a much greater appreciation for Constitution Day). As Chernow notes, Hamilton had a “unique flair for materializing at every major turning point in the early history of the republic” (200), and this would include events leading to the Constitutional Convention, like the Annapolis Conference. With Hamilton and other nationalists at this gathering, they realized the need for a stronger central government.

Overall, one could assess his role as pivotal. However, it was not without flaws. Chernow detours from the glowing and heads towards the embarrassing. Hamilton seems to have supported a Senate and Presidency for life based on good behavior (232). In addition, Hamilton argued the British form of government was the best in the world (233). It seems paradoxical that a person from such a difficult childhood would not trust

the ‘masses’, but many others felt the same way. In addition, Chernow gives Hamilton a pass by arguing many other Founders “offered harebrained ideas” (234), including no presidency and a hereditary presidency. Hindsight also helps. No republic in world history had succeeded for any significant period of time.

Hamilton’s greatest contribution to the constitutional debate, of course, was The Federalist Papers. Hamilton supervised the whole project, wrote a majority of the Federalist Papers while still maintaining a law practice, a Herculean effort (249). Within the Federalist papers, Hamilton articulately made the argument for scrapping the Articles, argued for the benefits of a strong union, supported a Constitution that was a flexible document and commented on the Senate and executive and judicial branches (254-258). The Federalist Papers, in the eyes of this writer, serve three purposes. First, the Federalist Papers give us a greater insight today into the thinking of the founders at the Constitutional Convention. Second, they persuaded New Yorkers (and other states) to ratify the Constitution, which was their original purpose. Finally, they Federalist Papers are a testament to Hamilton’s genius.

With the Constitution ratified and a new government to be formed and staffed, Hamilton once again played a pivotal role. Almost immediately, Hamilton “began to woo Washington for the presidency as determinedly as (he) would a lover” (270).

On the other side of this, Washington made a stellar choice in picking Hamilton for the Treasury post. This is where Hamilton makes his greatest historical contribution. Our modern economic system, in many ways, can be traced back to Hamilton’s tenure as treasury secretary. These include “a central bank, a funded debt, a mint, a customs service, manufacturing subsidies ...” (287).

In addition to economic responsibilities, Hamilton had powers “akin to a prime minister” (289), where he often went outside the bounds of his office. Chernow makes the argument this was easy to do, as cabinet powers were still undefined, the government was so small and if cabinet secretaries were away, decisions still had to be made.

Within his proper sphere of affairs, Hamilton made a pivotal decision, debt assumption of states debts from Revolution and Confederation periods. By doing this, Hamilton “laid the foundations for America’s future financial preeminence” (298), including establishing US creditworthiness and making the bondholders feel they had a stake in the success of the government that held the bonds. While many saw debt and rewarding speculators as horrifying, Hamilton ‘s financial acumen placed the new government on a sound economic footing. Hamilton also set the culture that has allowed the American market economy to flourish for over 200 years. This includes rule of law when it comes to enforceable contracts, respect of private property, establishing a trustworthy bureaucracy to arbitrate disputes and patent protection of new inventions (344-345).

In addition, he was the original loose constructionist, willing to use the intentional vagueness of the Constitution to further governmental role in the economy. Hamilton would use the necessary clause of the Constitution to handle “unforeseen emergencies” (355), again setting the stage for future government involvement with the economy.

Finally, Hamilton’s Report on Manufactures warrants mention. Chernow articulates how significant this speech was, as it helped develop the vision for industrial planning of the United States. Among them would be tariffs on imports, development of

a national infrastructure “ to meld America’s scattered regional economies into a single unified market” (378) and subsidies to industry (374-379).

Chernow chronicles the further events of Hamilton’s too brief life after leaving government service. From a growing family, his legal work, the death of a son and its impact, his waning governmental influence and less than honorable behavior (including challenging three people to duels in one day). Of course, Hamilton’s increasingly rough relationship with Aaron Burr is covered and his duel and death is well detailed. However, it seems the most pivotal parts of Hamilton’s life were his role in the Revolution, his role in framing and establishing the Constitution and his tenure as Secretary of the Treasury.

While Chernow seemingly tends to glorify Hamilton, as an author he provides a broad, interesting and powerful chronicle of the life of a pivotal founder, Alexander Hamilton.

How this book could be used in the classroom:

I feel this book could be used in a few ways. First, there are a number of rich quotes in the book, from Hamilton, about Hamilton and about other significant players of the early Federal period. A teacher could use these quotes and ask students for their analysis or to decipher their meaning.

The main way this book could be used in the classroom is the reason I chose to read it-to make me a better teacher. That is, one with a greater understanding of the workings of early US history. Through this highly readable book (and the TAH class), I have a much better understanding of the Constitution, early US economics, problems

faced after the Revolution and the impact of Alexander Hamilton. When teaching, I am now much more effective and knowledgeable with the content.

Three questions to be posed to Alexander Hamilton:

Recently I listened to a podcast from the National Constitution Center with Richard Brookhiser, discussing his book on Washington. In it, he basically argues the Founders cannot be relied on to interpret events of today's world. A large part of this is the wide gap in technology and events. With these questions, and my answers, I try to keep that in mind.

Question One: Having served with George Washington, what are the most important traits a president should possess?

What is there not to admire about the man who is "first in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen"? I think Hamilton would mention Washington's ability to take counsel from different sources (including Hamilton), to do unpopular things that are in the nation's interest (see neutrality with France), to promote economic development and stability (national bank established), and a president with strong nationalistic view and an optimistic vision for the future.

Question Two: (Assuming he had knowledge of the modern US economy and its workings): What advice would you give to the current administration on economic policy? This question could also ask him about globalization.

Given Hamilton's support of American industrialization, I assume he would support globalization. A Hamiltonian view of globalization would include not outsourcing all industrial jobs, but finding a way to keep those jobs in the United States. I would also

assume Hamilton would find government support (tariffs, tax breaks, building infrastructure) pivotal in keeping industrial jobs here in the continental US. I can also envision Hamilton participating in organizations that promote globalization, maybe an economic think tank or sitting on an advisory board to promote US interests in globalization. This would be mildly similar to the Society for Establishing Useful Manufacturing that Hamilton belonged to in the 1790's. An interesting footnote: Chernow believes it is Hamilton's economic vision of prosperity we are living today.

Question Three: What is your opinion on successor generations using/interpreting law using your work with the Federalist Papers?

In a way, the egotistical Hamilton would be flattered that his works were in use for over 200 years, but not much further. Given that Hamilton has such a huge body of written work, and that some of the Federalist Papers were written on short notice, one might question trying to interpret modern legal decisions using the Federalist Papers. Hamilton himself supported a loose constructionist view of the Constitution, as shown in how he created and ran the Treasury Department.