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A More Perfect Union: The Origins and Developments of the U.S. Constitution

Paper # 3

Ron Chernow's masterful biography, *Alexander Hamilton*, was an illuminating look in to the life of one of the most influential and controversial of our Founding Fathers. In his work, Chernow presents a man who, in one sense, was the most unlikely heroic figure of the late 18th century and, in another sense, was the epitome of what America came to stand for. Chernow is able to take the reader through the life and times of Alexander Hamilton at a torrid pace, while also including details and anecdotes rarely seen in other biographical works about our nation's founders.

Chernow begins his book by recounting the humble beginnings of Hamilton's family. Chernow spends a considerable amount of time describing Hamilton's lineage, both on his father's side and on his mother's side. Because Hamilton's early years in the West Indies would play such a large role in his later life, Chernow argues, it is crucial to understand and appreciate his roots.

According to Chernow, Hamilton was born in 1755, though he admits that, "few questions bedevil Hamilton biographers more than the baffling matter of his year of birth" (Chernow 16). Chernow cites several pieces of compelling evidence to suggest that he is correct, however. In any event, Hamilton was born to unwed parents, James and Rachel, on the island of Nevis in the West Indies. At the time, Hamilton's mother, Rachel, was estranged from her husband Peter Lavien, whose entire family Hamilton regarded as "the certified ogres" of his family saga (10). It was at this time that Hamilton's father, James, met Rachel. Due to her marriage to Lavien, Rachel was unable to marry James, but they did cohabit and produce two children: James, Jr. and Alexander. Throughout his work, Chernow makes constant references to Hamilton's childhood on the island of St.Croix and the effect of his parent's dubious relationship on his later life in the United States.

In his early years in the West Indies, Hamilton was exposed to varying means of existence. Chernow paints a picture of a young Hamilton, the burgeoning intellect, surrounded by “abundant savagery and depravity” due to the copious slave trade on the island of St. Croix. Chernow surmises throughout his work that these early images of slavery helped create the abolitionist views in Hamilton later in life. Hamilton was also, however, exposed to “glimpses of an elegant way of life that might have fostered a desire to be allied with the rich,” which Chernow also suggests played a role in Hamilton’s never-ending quest for fame and power, if not wealth (Chernow 23). What was unmistakable, however, was Hamilton’s supreme intellect and talent. Chernow describes Hamilton’s “phenomenal stamina for sustained work because ambitious, orphaned boys do not enjoy the option of idleness” (Chernow 30).

Upon entering his first clerkship for the merchant firm of Beekman and Krueger on St. Croix, Hamilton showed early flashes of greatness. Chernow notes that, “While his peers squandered their time on frivolities, Hamilton led a much more strenuous, urgent life that was to liberate him from St. Croix” (Chernow 30). Ironically, and somewhat fittingly, Hamilton’s liberation came in the form of a hurricane that devastated the tiny island in August of 1772. Chernow chronicles the series of events after the hurricane that lead to Hamilton’s eventual arrival in the American colonies. Hamilton, it seems, was so taken with the “wide swath of destruction” and devastation that hit the island that it prompted him to write a letter to his now estranged father, James, describing the event. A copy of that letter eventually found its way in to the hands of the publishers of the *Royal Danish American Gazette*, and readers were astounded at the “verve and gusto” that Hamilton was able to contain in his brief synopsis (Chernow 37).

Soon after, a collection was taken up among friends and family to send the young Hamilton off to America to receive a formal education. As luck would have it, Hamilton was about to enter a political hotbed that was ready to explode in to full bore revolution.

When Hamilton set off to America, Chernow notes that he did so not with a heavy heart, but with exceedingly high expectations for himself. He “took his unhappy boyhood, tucked it away in a mental closet, and never opened the door again” (Chernow 39). Throughout his work, Chernow seems to intimate that Hamilton’s refusal to accept and face his tumultuous upbringing caused him a great deal of distress later in life and may have, ultimately, helped lead to his untimely death.

Upon Hamilton’s arrival in America, he entered King’s College in New York. He dedicated himself to his studies, his writing, and his religious duties. Hamilton was never like most young men. Chernow describes Hamilton as fanatically driven and wise beyond his years, and his time at King’s College proved to be a suitable launching ground for his later adventures. It was during Hamilton’s time at King’s that the American Revolution began to shift in to focus. The Boston Tea Party took place in December 1773, just as Hamilton was settling in to his new surroundings. The event, almost overnight, transformed Hamilton from neophyte collegian to fiery revolutionary. As news of the Tea Party spread through the colonies, Hamilton took it upon himself to rush to Boston for a firsthand account of the happenings. Never one to sit on the sidelines and wait for events to unfurl around him, Chernow shows Hamilton’s unwavering desire to be *part* of the event. Furthermore, Hamilton was unusually qualified to report on the Tea Party and its aftermath due to his past experiences. Chernow writes, “As a former clerk acquainted with import duties, contraband goods, and European trade policies, Hamilton was handed a tailor-made issue that wasn’t entirely new to him; the West Indian islands had felt the distant repercussions of the Stamp Act protests and other thwarted attempts by Britain to tax the colonists” (Chernow 56).

Hamilton was soon engaged in revolutionary dialogue with friends and classmates and he began an aggressive letter writing campaign against the British government. Many of his letters wound up being published in area newspapers and pamphlets. His writings were so intuitive and well articulated that many observers doubted whether a man of Hamilton’s age could have possibly written them

(Chernow 61). It was not the first, or last, time that people would underestimate Alexander Hamilton.

Hamilton soon became a star of sorts in the early stages of the rebellion. His letters and speeches were so profound and convincing that audiences were drawn to the cause. When armed battles began in Massachusetts during April 1775, Hamilton immediately enlisted in the Continental Army and, in typical Hamilton fashion, “engulfed himself in a comprehensive military education” (Chernow 63).

It was at the devastating Battle of New York during the summer of 1776 that Alexander Hamilton first met George Washington. Chernow notes that, “It was at Harlem Heights that Washington first recognized Hamilton’s unique organizational gifts” (Chernow 81). It was here, then, that the two men began to form a bond that would literally shape the nation. Hamilton fought valiantly with Washington at the decisive Battle of Trenton and earned Washington’s respect through his preparation and his valor. It was during this time, as well, that Hamilton formed two of the most meaningful and lasting friendships of his life with both John Laurens and The Marquis de Lafayette. The three men had formed an inseparable bond. Chernow described them as a “gallant trio” who wrote to each other often in loving tones (Chernow 121, insert) when they were separated by war or other business.

Hamilton rose quickly through Washington’s ranks, becoming an aide de camp to the general during the latter stages of the war. In time, Hamilton became one of Washington’s top advisors and he reaped the benefits of his new found position. Hamilton became socially active and made the company of many admiring females of the time. Among them was his future wife, Elizabeth Schuyler, known affectionately as Eliza. Chernow describes Eliza as “a woman of sterling character, ...loyal, generous, strong willed, funny, and courageous. Short and pretty, she was utterly devoid of conceit, and was to prove an ideal companion for Hamilton” (Chernow 131). Chernow does not spend an inordinate amount of time describing their relationship throughout the biography, but he does paint a picture of genuine

love between the two, even through Hamilton's scandalous affair with Maria Reynolds.

As the Revolutionary War draws to a close, Chernow descends upon the more well documented aspects of Hamilton's remarkable life. Hamilton becomes a "Forrest Gump"-like character of early American history. He is present at, and plays a vital role in, so many critical moments during those early days of the new nation. It was Hamilton who was meeting with General Benedict Arnold when his plot to surrender West Point was discovered (Chernow 142), and it was Hamilton who played a vital role in the decisive Battle of Yorktown (Chernow 160-165). Indeed, as Chernow states, "Throughout his career, Hamilton had a knack for being present at historic moments" (Chernow 140). When the war ended, Hamilton continued to surround himself in living history.

Hamilton believed that the first ruling document in the United States, The Articles of Confederation, did not promote the national unity that was needed to prevent future revolutions. When Hamilton ascended to his first political position in New York and was then asked to participate in the Confederation Congress in Philadelphia, he began his crusade to change the way that the government of the United States would function. Chernow does a terrific job in letting his readers in to the small details of Hamilton's life during this pivotal time by recounting many interesting anecdotes and tales of Hamilton's spirit and adventures in both New York and Philadelphia. Throughout, Chernow keeps pace with Hamilton's eventual killer, Aaron Burr, as well, and examines how Burr and Hamilton ran in many of the same circles throughout their time as attorneys and politicians in New York (Chernow 193).

Of course, Hamilton was a major figure at the Constitutional Convention during the summer of 1787. His ideas on a strong centralized national government were controversial, especially in his home state of New York. In fact, the long time governor of the state and noted Hamilton adversary, George Clinton, had made every effort to mute Hamilton's effectiveness at the Convention by sending him with

two other delegates that did not support Hamilton's ideas (Chernow 236). As was usually the case, however, Hamilton's overwhelming power to persuade and reason eventually won out. Chernow celebrates Hamilton for his ability to break old political factions and to create new ideas among people. Hamilton put this power to good use in writing the Federalist Papers, in collaboration with James Madison and John Jay. Chernow describes the tension and unease throughout the states during this emotionally charged time. He praises Hamilton as the backbone of the effort, and makes note of the fact that, of the eighty-five essays, Hamilton was responsible for fifty-one of them. In great detail, Chernow takes his readers through the most significant of these essays and describes their effect on the general public. For example, Chernow says that Hamilton laid out his plans clearly, and in an order that people could easily understand, such as in Federalist number 60 where Hamilton "offered a vision of a House of Representatives dominated by landholders but also marked by diversity" (Chernow 257). Hamilton's vision for the future of the nation was so clear and precise, that Chernow's readers cannot help but come away with a sense of wonder and awe at Hamilton's accomplishments.

Chernow, of course, spends a great deal of time discussing Hamilton's time as Treasury Secretary, his relationships (both positive and negative) with other Founders such as Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and Madison, his leadership in establishing the First National Bank, the controversies surrounding his plan for assumption of national debt, and his role in forming the country's first political parties. As much as most of this information is well known to even novice historians, Chernow still was able to offer some fresh insight and new perspective by providing more in-depth coverage than a typical biographer might offer. For example, Chernow covered the emotional and political aspects of the war of words between the Federalists and Republicans that dominated the newspapers in the early 1790's particularly well. Chernow provides great insight with such passages as, "Amid this imbroglio, Hamilton wrote to Washington on June 21 (1793) that he wished to resign when the next congressional session ended in June 1794. He wanted enough time to enact the programs he had initiated and to clear his name in

the on-going inquiry led by William Branch Gates, but he was chafing under the restraints to office. He kept scribbling tirades against the French Revolution and then stashing them in the drawer” (Chernow 440). Hamilton’s frustration palpably leaps off the page.

In the latter stages of the book, though he does not clearly state this point, Chernow dedicates himself to explaining the downfall of Alexander Hamilton. As noted, his sometimes hostile relationships with men such as Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and James Monroe eventually took their toll on Hamilton’s public image and private power. Perhaps most interestingly, however, was the particular devotion Chernow spent on detailing Hamilton’s affair with Maria Reynolds. That Hamilton could be so brilliant, cunning, and sophisticated in his work and so deliberately careless in his private life seemed to truly confound the author. Chernow states, “The man accused by his enemies of bottomless craft could be a most credulous dupe” (Chernow 365), and he goes on to wonder how a man of Hamilton’s stature could be so easily fooled and manipulated by seemingly simplistic rubes such as Maria and James Reynolds (Chernow 370). Hamilton’s later admissions of the affair and ensuing blackmail were made to clear his name of charges by James Reynolds and others of unscrupulous activity in his official role as Treasury Secretary and lead to Hamilton famously espousing that, “My real crime is an amorous connection with his wife” (Chernow 533).

In the closing chapters of his book, Chernow relives the last days of Alexander Hamilton. Throughout his work, Chernow details Hamilton’s connection and attraction to the practice of dueling. Chernow traces Hamilton’s “unhealthy” attachment to dueling back to his days on Nevis, where he undoubtedly witnessed many “cutthroats and pirates” coming ashore on the island to take part in duels. Chernow suggests that Hamilton became entranced by the romanticism involved in the event (Chernow 19). Upon his arrival in America, Hamilton continued to be fascinated by the practice and, on several occasions, came close to engaging in duels with several of his adversaries, including Aedanus Burke, James Reynolds, and even future president James Monroe. Chernow says that Hamilton “still inhabited two

worlds: the modern world of Constitutional law and the old feudal order based on honor and dignity” (Chernow 308).

Unfortunately, Hamilton’s appetite for dueling was not even placated when his eldest son, Phillip, was shot and killed in a duel by a political rival, George Eacker, who had, ironically, insulted Alexander in a speech during an Independence Day celebration in 1801, resulting in the match between the two. Chernow does a wonderful job portraying Hamilton’s despair upon his son’s death. “After Phillip’s death, Hamilton tumbled into a bottomless despair. Though no stranger to depression, he had never lapsed into the lethargy that usually accompanies it....Now, the well oiled machinery of his life ran down” (Chernow 655). Still, Hamilton continued to ingratiate himself in to public life. Through everything, he believed in his cause and his party, and he used his political clout in an attempt to redeem his good name. Such was the case when Hamilton and Burr became engaged in such heated debate that it eventually led to their own “interview” (duel) in the spring of 1804.

Chernow traces the relationship between Hamilton and Burr back to their days at Elizabethtown Academy in New York during the summer of 1773 (Chernow 43). Over the course of the next three decades, their paths would continue to cross in various social, legal, and political circles. At times, the two men had at least some deal of respect for each other, highlighted by the fact, as Chernow points out, that Burr actually played the role of mediator during Hamilton’s feud with James Monroe (Chernow 541). Their relationship would change forever, though, after Hamilton attended a dinner party at his friend Judge John Tayler’s house. Chernow recounts in extraordinary detail the events that lead from a simple comment at this dinner party to a dispute that would lead to the death of one of the most prominent men in American history.

Chernow tells the story of how, at this party, Hamilton, Tayler, and others were discussing Burr’s merits as a political candidate. Hamilton expressed his unfavorable opinions to the assembled group, among them who was Dr. Charles

Cooper, who had never liked Burr. Cooper, it seems, was so delighted to hear someone of Hamilton's stature express the same opinions of Burr that he held that he sent a letter explaining his evening and Hamilton's opinion to a friend. The letter, like many others of the day, was "intercepted" by an unknown antagonist, and turned up in print several days later in the *New York Evening Post* (Chernow 680). In the letter, Cooper mentioned to his friend that Hamilton had a "despicable opinion" of Burr. The two men's relationship had already become strained after Hamilton had helped steer a pair of elections (one for the presidency and one for the governorship of New York) away from Burr. It was this last transgression, though, that Chernow contends put Burr over the proverbial ledge.

Both men were headstrong and lived under a "code of honor." The use of the word "despicable," as Chernow describes it, was such a serious point of contention with Burr that from that point forward, the duel was virtually inevitable. In retrospect, it is difficult for both Chernow and the reader to understand how two such prominent men could lay their lives on the line because of an adjective, but the drama is so unique and entertaining that Chernow is able to tell the tale in such a way that it reads like a well versed novel. The outcome of the duel was almost anticlimactic in Chernow's biography. More enlightening was his description of Hamilton's mental state at the time of the duel and charges that Hamilton was perhaps suicidal to begin with. Chernow reveals that Hamilton was so depressed by "personal and political setbacks" that he had potentially resolved to kill himself by the time Burr challenged him to a duel. The event offered him a convenient, and (in his mind) noble exit from the world stage. Chernow offers evidence of this by stating, "In 1978, four psychobiographers studied the duel and also concluded that it was a disguised suicide" (Chernow 690). He also offers evidence to the contrary, however, by stating that Hamilton simply followed the time honored rules of dueling and that rushing to judgment by "later generations" who had not been privy to this script "might seem lunatic rather than merely rash and wrongheaded" (Chernow 690).

This superb biography truly captured the essence of a man who led such a remarkable and influential life. Hamilton's rise to power from obscure and controversial roots provided Chernow with plenty material to work with and he clearly took great advantage. The book was refreshingly well crafted and filled with information on Hamilton that has been lacking in other biographies. Chernow's ability to intertwine anecdotes and witty stories of Hamilton's adventures along with the factual information that every biography must possess made this effort one worth undertaking both for the author and the reader.