

“...*Things as they are, not as they ought to be.*”
A Review of Ron Chernow’s *Alexander Hamilton*¹

Alexander Hamilton: to his contemporaries he was either a hero or scoundrel; a visionary bar none, he was to nearly all a force with which to reckon. Astounding at times to his allies and enemies alike, Hamilton was -and continues to be- a truly remarkable figure. From the beginning, “drama shadowed his footsteps.”² Many aspects of Hamilton’s complex story have been obscured by not only time, but also from years of an inimical press guided by powerful detractors and foes, including Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, and John Adams. This exceptional founder’s story is a truly protean one: starting with an unstable and unpredictable childhood and ending with a tragic death in what may have been an avoidable duel; Hamilton’s personal and political lives reach perhaps the zenith and then nadir of the human experience.

Rising to the very pinnacle of political success in the first administration of the new government that he fought so hard to create, Hamilton and his legacy are still with us today. In his eponymous biography of this father of the American government, Ron Chernow guides us through the tumultuous adventure of Hamilton’s life and political career: starting with this “castaway’s” escape from Nevis and then St. Croix, tracing his meteoric rise through war-time service and later politics, to the immediate course of events that lead to his tragic death at the hands of his erstwhile colleague and then murderer, Aaron Burr.

Hamilton the Castaway Boy

For his entire life, Alexander Hamilton was haunted by his humble origins and early years on Nevis and St. Croix. As Chernow reminds us, his past is shrouded “in more mystery” than any other major founder as he was “famously reticent” about “his squalid Caribbean boyhood.”³ The truth surrounding Hamilton’s parentage is murky; Chernow revisits the possibility that this son of Rachel Faucette may have been fathered by Thomas Stevens, not James Hamilton. Regardless of whom his biological father may have been, Hamilton suffered numerous setbacks along with his brother, both were ‘castaways,’ bouncing from one relation to the next, only to be in the end left truly alone. He never revisited the islands, nor seemed to have any desire to do so; his “upbringing remained a taboo topic.”⁴ Jealously guarded of his personal honor to a fault, the West Indian turned New Yorker did not seem to

¹ All quotes taken from Chernow, Ron. *Alexander Hamilton*. New York: Penguin, 2004.

² pg5

³ pg.6.

⁴ pg. 581.

truly escape the islands from which he fled, nor did he outgrow the “stigma of his illegitimacy.”⁵ With the Revolution, Hamilton gained that opportunity he desperately wished for: to rise above his given station of the rigid caste-based British Empire and to invent himself anew. In spite of Hamilton’s new active role in his adopted country, Hamilton’s past gave fodder to his enemies, especially John Adams who ruthlessly jabbed at his illegitimacy at every opportunity, calling him “a bastard” and “as much of a foreigner as Gallatin.”⁶ Though Hamilton became the government’s most successful administrator, these ad homonym attacks deeply wounded him; whereas with other attacks he seemed to be impervious.

Hamilton the Collegian

After Hamilton arrived at Boston in 1773, the young clerk proceeded straight to New York, “fortified” by introductory letters from Hugh Knox. Using his various connections to find a suitable education beyond that which he received in his insular childhood, Hamilton is given entrance to Elizabethtown, where he makes numerous valuable friendships and connections, many that will last throughout his life. After trying unsuccessfully to enter Princeton College, Hamilton enters Kings College in New York. Chernow makes a solid case that this environment attuned Hamilton to the clashing of Tory and Whig ideology so prominent in New York City on the eve of the revolution: by rejecting Hamilton, Witherspoon and the trustees of Princeton “unintentionally thrust the young West Indian straight into the thick of the combustible patriotic drama in a way that would have proved impossible in a sleepy New Jersey town.”⁷

Academically, Hamilton read voraciously and “ransacked the library” reading everything from Locke, Montesquieu, Hobbes, Hume, Blackstone -to name a few- to Greek and Roman tales from antiquity that would later serve him well “for the unending debates about the fate of republican government in America.”⁸ Initially somewhat objective in his views of the approaching imperial crisis, Hamilton would eventually publish the “outspoken anti-British pieces that made his reputation.”⁹

The young collegian gained the notice of New York’s Sons of Liberty and other patriots on July 6, 1774 when he rose to speak, perhaps extemporaneously, at the mass meeting held at “The Fields” in the “shadow of the towering liberty pole.”¹⁰ After his spellbinding speech he “was treated as a youthful hero of the cause and recognized as such by the Sons’ leadership; Alexander Hamilton had joined the radical

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ President John Adams to Secretary of War McHenry, pg.613.

⁷ pg.49.

⁸ pg. 52.

⁹ pg.54.

¹⁰ pg 55.

camp and was initiated into the cause of American liberty.¹¹ Without these crucial, politically formative years at King's Hamilton may never have entered the fray to which he tied his destiny.

“I wish there was a war.”¹² –Hamilton the Soldier.

From the time of his arrival in New York, Hamilton “marched with an erect military carriage, thrusting out his chest in an assertive manner.”¹³ He seemed born to be a soldier –At King's he demonstrated to his peers that he was mentally disciplined, physically active, and bounding with a seemingly endless reservoir of energy so commonly associated with youth. At the Revolution's outbreak, young Alexander, already known to Col. McDougall, secured his commission as a Light Artillery Captain. Hamilton knew he could not merely write and speak of revolution, but must also be a man of action. From his days as an eager recruit drilling on the grounds of King's College to the time of his commission, Hamilton demonstrated both his latent knowledge and inherent talent for military affairs that soon caught the eyes of Lord Stirling, then General Nathaniel Greene, and later of Henry Knox.¹⁴ George Washington himself first spoke with Hamilton at Harlem Heights, assessing the young captain's skills. Hamilton performed with distinction at places like White Plains, Trenton, and Princeton. After his time in the field as a junior officer, Hamilton joined Washington's staff with the rank of lieutenant colonel, though to his dismay. Hungry for a field command, he was frustrated, though Chernow is quick to point out that this position “won him the patronage of America's leading figure.”¹⁵

Chernow delves into Hamilton's truly amazing (and woefully overlooked) career as an officer in the American cause. From his years as part of Washington's “military family” Hamilton proves indispensable as “Washington's voice,” writing and issuing dispatches and general orders to Washington's subordinates, as well as pleas to the Continental Congress. He was as Chernow puts it “akin to chief of staff.”¹⁶ Washington's patronage of Hamilton enabled him to spend the rest of his life in the “upper stratum of American society,” allowing Hamilton upward mobility in what was a rigid social order.¹⁷ Much as Hamilton lamented over what appeared to be a static assignment -an unattainable combat commission always just beyond his grasp- Hamilton saw more of the Revolution's inner workings and battles than most usually credit. When finally he received command over a New York light-infantry battalion, he was already in possession of the valuable military skills set he would someday use in

¹¹ pp55-6.

¹² Hamilton to Edward Stevens, pg 31.

¹³ pg.41.

¹⁴ pp.72-73.

¹⁵ pp.85-86.

¹⁶ pg.90.

¹⁷ pg.92.

organizing resistance to the Whiskey Rebellion and in serving as an Inspector-General of the newly created army during the Quasi-War.

It is truly a wonder that a participant in so many critical battles and hardships faced by the army is usually not remembered for his military career, when it was truly amazing. Hamilton, like many other notable military figures of the war was at White Plains, Long Island, Trenton, Princeton, wintered at Valley Forge, and Morristown, and assisted in stemming a would be route by Charles Lee at Camden. He was sent diplomatic missions to the likes of the prickly Horatio Gates and was trusted as the arranger of prisoner exchanges. He witnessed first-hand Arnold's treachery and subsequent escape; he defied the British guns at the Siege of Yorktown by drilling his men in a memorable act of bravado, and of course won his long-sought glory there with his famous charge on Redoubt #10.

From Chernow's account one can surmise that perhaps the most notable impact made on the Hamilton during his military career was his role in what was a national institution: the Continental Army. Hamilton's role as a delegate to the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 was of course far off in the future, but nobody was perhaps more continental-minded at the convention than Hamilton. Clearly his vision of American nationalism began here in what was a truly *continental army* not just a consortium of state militias. Hamilton believed a strong central army was key to the revolution's success, more so than the militias, the "partiality for state militias...threatened to undermine the entire revolution."¹⁸ Washington and Hamilton were to draw similar conclusions about the need for a national army, centralized power over the states, and a strong executive, and perhaps above all national unity.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, Hamilton was a keen supporter of a standing army after the war with Britain was concluded, and even more so when the threat of war with France loomed overhead. It is no surprise that when Congress called for the raising of a national army to defend the US from France, that Alexander Hamilton secured an appointment as a major-general. General Hamilton, second-in-command in the new "phantom army," distinguished himself as a great military organizer. He might very well have been an able field commander, had the need arisen. His strength was in taking an almost single-handed effort in organizing everything from drill manuals to uniform descriptions, to procuring the necessary arms and equipment. Even after the disbanding of what was virtually *his* army, he would be listed in the New York City directory under the honorific "General Hamilton."

Hamilton the Abolitionist

Chernow reminds his readers time and again that Nevis, as in nearly every Caribbean isle, the brutality of slavery was perhaps more prevalent than in the American South. Nor does he forget to

¹⁸ pg.108.

¹⁹ pg.153.

observe that every white inhabitant of those islands relied upon slave labor for their food, their resources, their way of life, and their very survival. Obviously, these conditions made an early impression on the young Alexander, especially the “tyranny” exercised by the planters of his boyhood and “their authoritarian rule” over their slaves.²⁰ Furthermore, Hamilton’s mother’s slaves -most notably a little boy named Ajax whom attended to Alexander -exposed early on to Hamilton the humanity of slaves.²¹ Hamilton applauded the measures, thought failed, taken by Laurens and others to secure the military employment and manumission of slaves during the war.

Hamilton was instrumental in the creation of the New York Manumission Society; his association with which lasted until his death, saw him serve as one of four legal advisers. Hamilton successfully litigated on behalf of free African New Yorkers from “out of state” slave masters bearing fraudulent bills of sale.²² If Hamilton wished to banish all memory of the islands, he retained a strong residual sense of injustice concerning the institution of slavery.

Hamilton the Statesman

While serving out is tenure as Treasury Secretary, Hamilton achieved a great deal more than any other cabinet member in history. Both of his monstrous works -the forty-thousand-word treatise *Report on Public Credit* and his *Report on Manufacturers* -are perhaps his best known state papers. The former, while encountering stiff resistance from Jefferson, Madison and their followers still enjoyed great success; conclusively acting as a blueprint of the government’s fiscal machinery, “wrapped in broad political and economic vision.”²³ The later, no less enthralling, was a “prescient statement of American nationalism,” but unfortunately was destined to become an object of “legislative oblivion.”²⁴ His assumption plan, perhaps the most radical of his early contributions met vehement resistance from those that would someday call themselves the Republicans. The Bank especially was an object of their hatred; Jefferson and his followers severely castigated Hamilton for the creation of what they believed to be a threat to the ideals of the Revolution.²⁵ Ironically, when asked of what he thought of Hamilton’s system, the Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin confessed to President Jefferson that Hamilton’s system was “the most perfect system ever formed.”²⁶

Hamilton had to create the machinations that would allow him to serve the new government. He had to create a customs service “on the spot” and planned to create a Coast Guard to help collect

²⁰ pg.33.

²¹ pg.23.

²² pg. 581.

²³ pg. 297.

²⁴ pg. 375, pg. 378.

²⁵ See especially Chapter 18, pp.345-353.

²⁶ pg. 647.

revenue.²⁷ He had created a “prodigious bureaucracy” ballooning to more than five hundred employees.²⁸ Hamilton had no ‘user’s manual’ to consult when he took on this daunting task. Import duties generated about 90 percent of the government’s revenues. He created a lasting system that has enjoyed great staying power, having undergone little alteration the system that took Hamilton one year to create is in many ways still in operation!²⁹

His legacy as a statesman far outlived him. Chernow calls Hamilton “the foremost political figure in American history who never attained the presidency, yet he probably had a much deeper and lasting impact than many who did.”³⁰ He is the “principal architect” of the new US government, arguably even more than fellow *Federalist* co-author James Madison.³¹ In essence Hamilton’s numerous amazing feats - creating the Treasury department, drafting policy statements, either as piece-mail entities or gargantuan reports to the first Congress, to name a few –defined American politics, his contemporaries “defined by how they reacted to the political gauntlets” thrown down by him.³² Hamilton defined much of our nation’s early economic and foreign policies, he more than anyone -save the President perhaps- set the political agenda in both the Washington and Adams administrations, either personally or through surrogates.³³

Hamilton the Polemicist

Hamilton, “the human word machine,” wrote “perhaps the maximum number of words that a human being can scratch out in forty-nine years.”³⁴ Beginning in the West Indies, and fine-tuning his style first in college, Hamilton had written several pieces of poetry and then moved onto political editorials. His anonymous dispatches to the *Royal Danish American Gazette* show a penchant for journalism, but his real talents lay in the art of polemics.

His earliest published tract, “A Full Vindication of the Measures of the Congress,” published in pamphlet form, gave the young radical a chance to combat the unflattering Tory essays then prominent in New York. In thirty-five pages, Hamilton showed traits that would be hallmarks of his style: elegant insults, allusions to history, philosophy, politics, economics, and law.³⁵ Hamilton was to be as effective with the pen as he was with the sword in years to come.

²⁷ pg. 292.

²⁸ pg. 339.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ pg.5.

³¹ pg.333.

³² *Ibid*, pp. 5-6., 306.

³³ *Ibid*, pg.6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ pg. 59.

Throughout his long career, his many pseudonyms had appeared in papers or pamphlets defending or defaming the given subject. A.B., Pacificus, Phocion, and of course Publius are among the best known aliases of Alexander Hamilton the polemicist.

“The Farmer Refuted” (*New York Gazetteer*, February 23, 1775) was an astounding 60, 000 words; the piece not only allowed Hamilton to prophesize the outcome of the Revolution, but the nature of an independent America. He also once and for all cemented his political stance on the revolution and its goals. Hamilton enjoyed further success with fourteen installments of “The Monitor” (the *New York Journal*, November 9, 1775 to February 8, 1776).³⁶ Hamilton’s war-time service did not interfere with his ability to publish his thoughts; between October and November of 1778, Hamilton published three diatribes against Samuel Chase (under the pseudonym Publius) in the *New York Journal*, in which he indicting Chase as a profiteer.³⁷ Perhaps anticipating *The Federalist*, his “The Continentalist” appeared as four essays in the *New York Packet* (July and August of 1781) expressing his concerns over the transition from revolutionary government to peace-time government; without strong centralized government, anarchy, secession movements, smaller confederacies, or even civil war might erupt...“to a peculiar extent, his mind was already focused on the problems that were to dominate the postwar period.”³⁸ *The Federalist*, of which he wrote more parts than any of his co-authors, remains his greatest achievement.

In spite of his well-received polemics, his sponsorship of the *New York Evening Post* and frequent backing of other Federalist papers, the press could serve as a double edged-sword for Hamilton. Republican papers like the *Aurora*, *the Argus* and other Jefferson-backed publications repeatedly stabbed at Hamilton. With few exceptions, political slander the likes that were never before seen, nor have been seen again were leveled at Hamilton.³⁹ These flagrant defamations generated by Benjamin Franklin Bache, James Thomas Callender and others included accusations of corruption, illegal securities speculation and stock-jobbing, British conspiracies headed by Hamilton, and of course ridiculous accounts of Hamilton’s *continued* adulterous affair with Maria Reynolds. For the Republicans this particular attack was the gift that kept on giving; when newspapermen failed to attack Hamilton on other fronts they could always rely on dredging the Reynolds affair up again and again. Likewise, charges laid by Jefferson claiming that Hamilton manipulated George Washington continued to reappear, even after both Washington and Hamilton were long dead, (Jefferson, having outlived them both by a fairly long margin, continued to take advantage of reiterating this accusation). Newspapers weren’t the only outlets for Hamilton’s detractors. Republicans had their pamphleteers as well. Though the effects were somewhat

³⁶ pp.68-72.

³⁷ pg. 118.

³⁸ pg. 158.

³⁹ Perhaps only Andrew Jackson received nastier press in 1828.

short-term, Callender's attacks did considerable damage to Hamilton's reputation in publishing such *The Prospect Before Us* and *The History of the United States for 1796*.

Consistent with his character, Hamilton felt the need to defend his reputation, to a fault. His defense of his conduct in the Mariah Reynolds affair damaged his reputation far more than it ever upheld it, "exposing his own folly."⁴⁰ His polemic "The Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, esquire" (New York, 1800), -"an extended tantrum in print" -was not just written "to catalog wrongs done" by Adams to those in his cabinet, but to air his own "personal grievances."⁴¹ His "intemperate indictment" of John Adams led to Hamilton committing "a form of political suicide that blighted the rest of his career."⁴² Here he "displayed both his own errant judgment" as well as "Adams's instability."⁴³ Chernow identifies Hamilton's polemics against John Adams as not only the catalyst that would lead to his political career's end, but also fatal wound inflicted upon his own Federalist party. As Adams put it, Hamilton and his band had "killed themselves."⁴⁴

The anti-Hamilton, Aaron Burr

Like a tragic hero in a play from antiquity, Hamilton's undoing and ultimate end results in part from his own flaws, though the primary agent of his demise is none other than his erstwhile colleague and now nemesis, Aaron Burr. Chernow is keen to point out that Burr and Hamilton were in close proximity to one another from the very beginning of Hamilton's arrival in America. From the school at Elizabethtown to service in the Continental Army to burgeoning law careers in the New York bar, Burr is there continually, and if not in the forefront of the action as a lingering presence. Despite their differing political allegiances, he is recurrent figure in Hamilton's later legal and political career. We find Burr attending levees and soirees, having common friends and acquaintances, serving on boards of corporate institutions with Hamilton, as a fellow member in the Order of the Cincinnati and surprisingly even as a cohort in the court-room. Chernow's storytelling places the two men's lives in an inextricably woven fashion over the course of nearly thirty years all culminating to the 'fatal errand' that abruptly ends both men's political careers. Chernow portrays Burr in many ways as an antithesis to Hamilton, a man without honor, without morals, or scruples.

While some scholars still argue over the specific meaning attached to the phrase that immediately set the duel in motion, Chernow focuses less on this aspect and identifies several events, some

⁴⁰ pg. 622.

⁴¹ pg. 623.

⁴² pg. 619.

⁴³ pg. 622.

⁴⁴ John Adams (as quoted in Ferling) as found in Chernow, pg 625.

consequential, others not, that led to Burr's bitterness.⁴⁵ Personal defamation in the form of broadsides and editorials, a failed election as Governor, and gossip transmitted though hearsay are a few things that led Burr's admirers to believe "that Alexander Hamilton had destroyed his career."⁴⁶ Thus the usually urbane Burr harbored a "murderous rage against Hamilton."⁴⁷ Chernow also identifies Burr's paramount object in challenging Hamilton to an affair of honor: A duel with Hamilton might have some restorative power to Burr's honor and reputation.⁴⁸

While the details of the duel are well-established, Chernow's retelling captivates the reader, creating a suspense that makes us forget the outcome of the 'fatal interview.' Chernow not only details a play by play retelling of the last hours of Hamilton's life, but gives the reader certain pathos for Hamilton, who after 708 pages has been an object of our intimate study. More so, we are forced to relive Eliza's anguish of losing her Hamilton as she lost her son Philip –with a tragic, senseless death.

The Whole Hamilton: An Endorsement

To the professional historian and lay reader alike, I implore you: read this book. Ron Chernow's account is fair, balanced, and at times even critical of Hamilton. Though intended to raise *Hamilton's* entire story out of undeserved obscurity, the author pulls no punches in giving us the entire man, complete with his flaws.

He not only divulges to the reader a complete and great life-story in this triumphant monograph, but retells the vast story of our nation's birth; tracing the larger story of the Revolution, our struggle for the Constitution, and three presidential administrations, with Hamilton usually in the midst of it all.

This masterful biographical feat is perhaps the greatest paper monument erected to the man. Chernow's introduction concludes with what could perhaps serve as the most fitting epitaph, one at which Hamilton would have undoubtedly smiled wryly and nodded:

"He was the messenger from a future that we now inhabit...today we are the indisputably the heirs to Hamilton's America, and to repudiate his legacy is, in many ways, to repudiate the modern world."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ For Charles Cooper's quote see pg. 682.

⁴⁶ pg. 677.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ pg. 682.

⁴⁹ pg.6