

The Greatest American

Brian Pinnegar

*For all his obduracy in business, war, and politics, verbal fluidity gave [him] startling charm, almost a kind of femininity. He was small and stylish [and] had violet eyes and striking physical grace. He went to Congress a self-taught student of finance who knew more about the subject than almost anyone else in government. He brought from the military a love of hierarchy and combat.*¹

Is George Washington the “Father of our Nation?” He led the Americans to victory over the British Empire in the Revolutionary War, and was subsequently elected the first President of the United States. However there are two assumptions that make this designation troublesome. Washington would not have wished to be called the Father of the nation, and he really was not the Father of the nation. This honor should be bestowed upon another: Alexander Hamilton. An exploration of various sources will reveal Alexander Hamilton, the self-taught student of finance, is the actual Father of the American Republic. During the critical formative years of the Early Republic, it was his strong personality combined with keen intellect that allowed him to have great influence on his peers and to see Congress implement a number of policies that he proposed. Washington and Hamilton had a close relationship which enabled him to advise Washington on important issues and policies that would help the country to survive. He wrote the majority of the *Federalist Papers* which played a significant role in the process of adopting the Constitution. He died as a martyr for the Republic in his duel with Aaron Burr. These factors all come together to prove that although Washington

¹ William Hogeland, *The Whiskey Rebellion* (New York: A Lisa Drew Book/Scribner, 2006), 29.

was a great leader and the first President of the United States, the real Father of the American Republic is Alexander Hamilton.

During and in the years immediately following the American Revolution, the nascent nation was loosely organized under the Articles of Confederation. The government proved ineffective, but it was neither Thomas Jefferson nor George Washington who formulated our current government, it was Alexander Hamilton. He proposed “[a detailed] prescription for healing the ailing nation: discard the Articles of Confederation...and start anew, creating a governmental structure with centralized authority [and] give Congress the power of the purse.”² Alexander Hamilton, the staunch Federalist, became the driving force behind the adoption of our current Constitution. Hamilton and the Federalists were not opposed to state governments, but insisted that a strong central government could “interdict state actions.”³ The Federalists believed that the Constitution allowed for a national government with the powers to unify the diverse states by establishing national laws, national treaties, or the issuing of currency.⁴ The new government needed to be strong enough to prevent the failures of the government that was prominent under the Articles.

Hamilton’s influence persuaded others of the need for adopting a Constitution and he accomplished this by being the primary writer of what is now known as *The Federalist Papers*. In “Federalist No. 85,” Hamilton was extremely confident in his ideas: “I am persuaded that it [his rationale for a Constitution] is the best which our political situation, habits, and opinions will admit, and *superior* (emphasis mine) to any the revolution has produced.”⁵ Hamilton’s supreme confidence became the main catalyst in the United States adopting the Constitution and makes

2 Ray Raphael, *Founders: The People who Brought you a Nation* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 361.

3 Morgan, 143-44.

4 Ibid.

5 Hamilton in Goldman, Ed. *The Federalist Papers*, “Federalist No. 85,” 429.

HISTORY

him a solid candidate for being considered as the Father of the nation. That the majority of people at the Constitutional Convention agreed with him despite opposition from the Anti-Federalists, strongly suggests that Alexander Hamilton is *the* father of the nation.

Alexander Hamilton was very close friends with George Washington and he used his relationship to sway the President to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion. Hamilton felt that the rebels in Pennsylvania were unlikely to respond peacefully; and that they would be likely to respond with “violence that would justify a federal military suppression” and require President Washington to invoke the “new militia law to call out the largest possible force on his own discretion.”⁶ John Ferling writes that Alexander Hamilton “had long been anxious to demonstrate the power of the new national government [and] wrote privately to Washington urging action.”⁷ He “asserted that demagogues in western Pennsylvania were in fact the head of an anti-tax serpent [that had] managed to ‘confirm, inflame, and systematize the spirit’ of rebellion [and their goal] was to ‘embarrass the Government.’”⁸ In a letter to George Washington, Hamilton said “It appears to me that the very existence of Government demands this course [military action] and that a duty of the highest nature urges the Chief Magistrate to pursue it. The Constitution and laws of the United States, contemplate and provide for it.”⁹ Hamilton wanted Washington to understand that the rebellion would spread if not stopped immediately. Hamilton, along with Washington and 13,000 militiamen, quickly suppressed the Whiskey Rebellion.¹⁰

The best and most famous leaders always have a vision for the future. Alexander Hamilton, as a great leader, “had a vision of an

6 Hogeland, 142.

7 John Ferling, *A Leap in the Dark: The Struggle to Create the American Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2003), 372-73.

8 Ibid, 373.

9 Joanne B. Freeman, *Hamilton Writings* (New York: Library Classics of the United States, Inc., 2001), 825.

10 Hogeland, 373.

American manufacturing and commercial empire.”¹¹ Hamilton wanted to give credibility to the independence that the United States achieved through their victory in the Revolutionary War, and in order to do that the United States had to repay its war debts. Hamilton crafted a plan and sent several proposals to Congress including “funding, assumption, excise, and the central bank.”¹² Hamilton’s new excise law, a tax on production or sales of a commercial good, was passed by Congress on May 8, 1792. The law faced opposition, and Hamilton proposed enforcement of the law through an executive-led military expedition.¹³ He argued that the issue must be dealt with swiftly, and along with Henry Knox, urged an “overwhelming force of at least twelve thousand men, bigger than any American army to date.”¹⁴ Hamilton took control of building up the military in order to enforce the will of the federal government, to ensure that the nation would not fall victim to secession. As a young man, Hamilton so speedily “distinguished himself as an artillery captain... that he was invited to join General Washington’s staff, of which he quickly became de facto chief.”¹⁵ This is another example of Hamilton’s intelligence and skill that lead him to taking on an important role in the growth and development of this nation. Not just anyone could impress a President so much that they could be invited to take on the President’s role as Commander in Chief, but Hamilton succeeded. His superior intellect and economic ideas helped propagate the American economy that would enable the nation to survive through the critical years of the Early Republic to the present day.

Hamilton then proposed a Public Credit plan to Congress in order to pay the national debt and help the nation to survive and grow in economic power. In 1790, Hamilton gave his Report on Public Credit. He argued for the necessity to adopt his policy because it depended on certain

11 Hogeland, 71.

12 Ibid, 111-12.

13 Ibid, 115.

14 Ibid, 189.

15 Ibid, 29.

HISTORY

“immutable principles of moral obligation [and that the nature of the debt of the United States] was the price of liberty.”¹⁶ His arguments for the United States to pay its war debts ranged from justifying and preserving their confidence to strengthening the union of the states. Hamilton stated that “These are the great and invaluable ends to be secured, by a proper and adequate provision, at the present period, for the support of public credit...”¹⁷ Hamilton convinced Congress to adopt his Public Credit plan and the nation paid its debts and grew economically. Through Hamilton’s proposed plan of Public Credit, the United States was able to pay its debt and establish credibility as a genuine and independent republic. This is just another example of Alexander Hamilton and his ideas being the foundation of this great nation and proves that he is the Father of the nation.

Along with convincing Congress of the need for the Public Credit plan, Alexander Hamilton argued for the need for, and the Constitutionality of a National Bank. In the debate over whether the Federal Government can do something that the Constitution does not explicitly state they can do, Hamilton countered that if the Federal government was not sovereign, then the people would simply be a “*political society without sovereignty, or of a people governed without government...*”¹⁸ Essentially, he was saying that without a sovereign Federal government, there is no United States and that without a National Bank it would be impossible to implement the Public Credit policy and ensure a stable economy. Because of the need for the Federal government to institute a National Bank, Hamilton argued that it was Constitutional. He said that “the only question must be...whether the mean to be employed, or in this instance the corporation to be erected, has a natural relation to any of the acknowledged objects or lawful ends of the

16 Alexander Hamilton, “Reports on the Public Credit, 1790” in *Major Problems in the Early Republic, 1787-1848, 2nd Ed.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 60.

17 Ibid.

18 Hamilton, “Debate of the Constitutionality of the National Bank, 1791” in *Major Problems*, 63.

government...¹⁹ In the case of the National Bank, the government had the right to erect a corporation and Congress later agreed despite initial objection. Rakove writes that “Most scholars agree that Hamilton got the better of his antagonists on the dual issues of policy and constitutionality that the bank bill raised.”²⁰ Given Hamilton’s brilliance and the fact that the bill was passed despite initial objection, it stands to reason that these scholars are correct.

Hamilton’s plan for the bank was to make it a “central bank, owned half by the government and half by private individuals that could issue money and make public and private loans.”²¹ Allowing private individuals to own half of the bank would prevent the United States from becoming more socialist. It would also motivate wealthier people to invest in the growth of the nation because they would have a stake in its success and to potentially make more money as well. Hamilton noted that the French and the British derived much of their political power from raising foreign loans in times of war, “and this inextricable linkage between military and financial strength informed all of his subsequent thinking.”²² His ability to create policies that merged military and financial strength ensured the growth of the republic during the critical years and its ability to survive to the present day. It should also be mentioned that although the National Bank was eventually eliminated, Hamilton’s conceptual ideas about economics have lasted to this day

According to John Ferling, “There can be no question of the impact of Hamilton on the new national government. Not only had he played a Herculean role in its creation, but during its first half dozen years he had done more than anyone to shape substantive measures of the Washington administration.”²³ When it came to economics, other people like Jefferson

19 Ibid.

20 Jack N. Rakove, *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 354.

21 Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 138.

22 Ibid.

23 Ferling, 375.

HISTORY

had different ideas than Hamilton but they were not attempted. Hamilton's ideas were favored because of his support from Washington, and they favored "utilizing the principles of British public finance to jump-start the transformation of the United States into a powerful modern state."²⁴ Though John Ferling has a somewhat negative attitude about Hamilton, he does concede that "better than most—better than almost anyone, in fact—Hamilton understood how to stabilize the fragile Union through bold economic measures."²⁵ The fact that Hamilton was better than almost anyone at keeping the nation stable through economic measures confirms that he is the true Father of the American Republic.

Hamilton's hand was in almost every matter that ever arose in the Early Republic. After the signing of the unpopular Jay Treaty, which allowed closer economic ties with Great Britain, he wrote long articles defending it with Rufus King under the pseudonym "Camillus." In these articles, Hamilton and King "dissected and defended virtually every aspect of every article of the treaty, producing in the process what [was later] described as a 'Federalist manifesto on foreign policy.'²⁶ Not only was Hamilton skilled in financial matters and domestic policy, but he was influential in foreign policy as well. Hamilton believed that the United States needed to "avoid a war that might sap its ever-increasing vitality and prosperity and stifle its accelerating economic growth. Peace, not war, should be the desideratum of American foreign policy."²⁷ Had the United States heeded Hamilton's position on this matter they may have later avoided the War of 1812 which despite popular opinion, was not an American victory.²⁸

Hamilton also played a significant role in American relations with Spain over navigation rights on the Mississippi River. Resolutions

24 Ibid, 375.

25 Ibid, 377.

26 Cooke, 162.

27 Cooke, 163.

28 Donald E. Graves in *Canada's History*. Dec2012/Jan2013, Vol. 92 Issue 6, p20-26.

in Congress dated September 16, 1788 from a Committee that included Alexander Hamilton states that “Congress are disposed to treat with Spain for the surrender of their claim to the navigation of the river Mississippi.”²⁹ The committee also “Resolved, [t]hat the free navigation of the river Mississippi, is a clear and essential right of the United States, and that the same ought to be considered and supported as such.”³⁰ The committee was successful and the United States did gain the right to free navigation of the Mississippi River. This is still another example of Alexander Hamilton achieving a goal for the benefit of the United States.

Though Hamilton did tend to be arrogant in some manner, he also understood that he was human and sought advice from others. On October 26, 1789, J. Witherspoon wrote a letter to Hamilton in which he said “It is very flattering to me that you suppose I can render any assistance by advice in the important duties of your present station.”³¹ Hamilton was seeking advice on the management of Treasury affairs from someone he trusted. The fact that he was confident enough to show humility and seek advice reveals that though he did think highly of himself at times, he was not as arrogant as others thought. Hamilton’s fascination with Plutarch also illustrates his desire to better himself and thus shows his humility. During the war, Hamilton often “copied passages from the *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* into the pay book of his artillery company... for the same reason Plutarch wrote them: to be improved by moral biography, by lives examined in moral terms.”³² Richard Brookhiser feels that Hamilton was drawn to Plutarch because “Plutarch also wrote of his subjects’ vices, which he [Hamilton] sought to learn from. Both virtues

29 Church, John, Ed. *The works of Alexander Hamilton: comprising his correspondence and his political and official writings, exclusive of the Federalist, civil and ...* Volume 2. New-York, 1851, p473.

30 Ibid.

31 Church, John, Ed. *The works of Alexander Hamilton: comprising his correspondence and his political and official writings, exclusive of the Federalist, civil and ...* Volume 5. New-York, 1851, p442.

32 Brookhiser, 10.

HISTORY

and vices...appear in Hamilton's character."³³ It is clear that Plutarch and his writings were highly influential for Hamilton, and were a sign of his character. In this manner, Hamilton is a fantastic example of what a fatherly sage should resemble. Of course, other Founding Fathers had similar qualities, but the Early Republic was built on the foundation of certain ideas and principles, and Hamilton espoused and possessed these characteristics.

Although Hamilton was skilled in getting many people to see things his way, he also had the ability to make enemies. Hamilton had the kind of personality that made his presence known to everyone in a room, and he often found people to be a nuisance. He once wrote to a friend that "our countrymen have all the folly of the ass and all the passiveness of the sheep in their compositions."³⁴ Although these statements were laden with arrogance, he tried to be a virtuous man. Unfortunately, some people angered him, such as Aaron Burr who constantly provoked him. Rather than ignore Burr and his constant attacks over the span of more than a decade, Hamilton erred and kept firing back. The two exchanged despicable words with each other for years. Finally, Burr wrote to Hamilton in June of 1804 that "you have invited the course I am about to pursue."³⁵ Burr was referring to a duel, which Hamilton reluctantly accepted. However, Hamilton stated that his religious and moral principles would not allow him to shed the blood of any fellow creature in any act of violence that was against the law.³⁶ He stated that "I am conscious of no *ill-will* to Col. Burr, distinct from political opposition, which, as I trust, has proceeded from pure and upright motives [and that] I wished, as far as might be practicable, to leave a door open to accommodation."³⁷ It is possible that Hamilton truly only opposed Burr politically, but the fact that the exchanges went on for so long shows that it seemed to be personal.

33 Ibid.

34 Hamilton, letter to John Laurens, May 12, 1780 in Chernow, 139.

35 Ibid, 1015.

36 Ibid, 1019.

37 Ibid, 1020.

This was a fault in Hamilton's personality but true to being a gentleman, Hamilton abided by the gentlemanly code (and the officer's code), and he could not back down when challenged to a duel by Burr.

Hamilton agreed to the duel but he resolved to waste his first shot and even his second if possible, to give Burr a chance to change his mind.³⁸ However, Burr shot Hamilton; and he died the following day, July 12, 1804 at two o'clock in the afternoon.³⁹ Indictments arose against Burr for dueling and murder, and he "fled the city in disgrace, not stopping until he reached Georgia."⁴⁰ The result of the duel had "Hamilton safely buried and assuming legendary proportions as a martyr; [and] Burr slipping out of town...already consigned to political oblivion."⁴¹ This act, even if he did not die, ruined all political influence that Burr exerted on the nation. Hamilton's new status as a martyr was the final brick in the foundation of his position as the Father of the American Republic.

There are at least two other related reasons that Hamilton is the Father of the Nation. Several of Hamilton's beliefs do not fit any current political ideology. "Modern conservatives would distrust his trust in government; modern liberals would find him lacking in compassion."⁴² However, his positions are as relevant today as they were in his time and this further cements his place as the Father of the American republic. On a similar note, Hamilton is the Father of the American republic because it is plausible to believe that George Washington himself would not accept the label of the "Father of the Nation." While John Adams longed to name the office with such "extravagant phrases enjoyed by royalty, such as 'your highness' or 'your benign highness,' or 'your majesty,' Washington made it plain that he would have none of this: dignity, yes, fulsomeness, no."⁴³

38 Joseph J. Ellis *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 23.

39 Ibid, 26.

40 Ibid, 27.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid, 10-11.

43 Ibid, 207.

HISTORY

He believed that he was simply the President of the United States with an “aversion to ostentation and officiousness,” and all other titles should be dismissed.⁴⁴ Given this fact, it is plausible to conclude that Washington in his humility would rather be remembered as the first President and not as the Father of the Nation.

Throughout his career, Hamilton showed that he was a brilliant statesman. He was a gifted leader, a financial wizard, a solid artillery officer, and a loyal friend and competent advisor to President Washington. He wrote the majority of the *Federalist Papers*, making the case for a strong central government under a Constitution, and then he helped write the Constitution. He helped suppress the Whiskey Rebellion, which kept the country from secession or from slipping into chaos and anarchy. He devised a plan for the nation to pay its debts and to build a National Bank. He kept to the gentleman’s code and accepted Burr’s challenge to a duel, and he kept his vow to not fire the first shot which resulted in him dying as a martyr for the nation he loved and helped build. For all of these reasons and several more, Alexander Hamilton deserves to be recognized as the Father of the nation because he was the greatest American.

Bibliography

Brookhiser, Richard. *Alexander Hamilton, American*. New York: The Free Press, 1999.

Chernow, Ron. *Alexander Hamilton*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2004.

Church, John, Ed. *The works of Alexander Hamilton: comprising his correspondence and his political and official writings, exclusive of the Federalist, civil and ...* Volumes 2 and 5. New-York, 1851.

⁴⁴ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Heroes: Profiles of Men and Women who Shaped Early America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2009), 202.

- Cooke, Jacob Ernest. *Alexander Hamilton*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982.
- Ellis, Joseph J. *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.
- Ferling, John. *A Leap in the Dark: The Struggle to Create the American Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Fleming, Thomas. *The Perils of Peace: America's Struggle for Survival after Yorktown*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2007.
- Freeman, Joanne B., Ed. *Hamilton, Writings*. New York: Library Classics of the United States, Inc., 2001.
- Goldman, Lawrence, Ed. *Hamilton, Madison, and Jay: The Federalist Papers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Graves, Donald E. in *Canada's History*. Vol. 92 Issue 6 Dec2012/Jan2013.
- Hogeland, William. *The Whiskey Rebellion*. New York: A Lisa Drew Book/Scribner, 2006.
- Morgan, Edmund S. *American Heroes: Profiles of Men and Women who shaped Early America*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2009.
- Rakove, Jack N. *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.
- Raphael, Ray. *Founders: The People who brought you a Nation*. New York: The New Press, 2009.
- Wilentz, Sean, Jonathan Earle and Thomas Paterson ed. *Major Problems in the Early Republic, 1787-1848 2nd Ed.*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

Brian Pinnegar is a senior and will be graduating with a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in History. This paper was written for Dr. Timothy Willig's J495, Proseminar for History Majors course.