



HAMILTON: THE MAN WHO INVENTED AMERICA

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It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that Alexander Hamilton invented the United States of America.

George Washington was the guiding star; Thomas Jefferson, the visionary; and Benjamin Franklin, the sage. But Hamilton was the pragmatist, the man who got it done.

This most self-made of self-made men took a country with no past and planned its future.

He was born on January 11, 1755 on the island of Nevis. This was not the Caribbean of your cruise fantasy—quite the contrary. As Ron Chernow writes in his biography of Hamilton, “While other founding fathers were reared in tidy New England villages or cosseted on baronial Virginia estates, [Hamilton] grew up in a tropical hellhole...”

Sugar plantation slave auctions were a regular feature of island life. The spectacle—buyers swinging branding irons as they surveyed the human “merchandise”—made a permanent impression on Hamilton: He was a fierce abolitionist his entire life.

Abandoned by his father at an early age, his mother died of yellow fever when he was 14, leaving the teenage boy destitute. A local judge had to buy him shoes so that he could attend her funeral.

He soon took a job as clerk for a local merchant. Before long, he was running the business—coordinating shipments of mules and codfish, calculating currency exchanges, and advising sea captains on how to deal with pirates. It was an unmatched apprenticeship in trade, credit, and commerce.

In 1773, he arrived in New York to attend King’s College, the forerunner of today’s Columbia University. Swept up in the revolutionary fervor of his adopted country, he dropped out to join the Continental Army.

He quickly came to the attention of George Washington, who made him a staff officer. The sonless Washington called the fatherless Hamilton “my boy.” Fellow officers later remembered “Call Colonel Hamilton” as Washington’s instinctive utterance when important news arrived.

As Washington’s trusted aide, he was involved in every aspect of running the war, including actual fighting, where he distinguished himself on multiple occasions. But more than anything, it was his dealings with the weak and indecisive Continental Congress that shaped his political views.

The problem with the Congress, in Hamilton's view, was that too few members took the idea of nationhood seriously. They quarreled over their narrow interests rather than uniting over the national interest.

As the war was winding down, Hamilton laid out the choice before the country in a widely read six-part essay. We could become a "noble and magnificent" federal republic, he wrote, "closely linked in the pursuit of a common interest..." or we could stumble ahead as a "number of petty states, with the appearance only of union..."

It was clear where Hamilton stood.

The speed by which the United States became a unified nation with a cohesive federal government is largely a result of his tireless efforts before, during, and after the Constitutional Convention.

Washington named Hamilton, still only 34, to be the first Secretary of the Treasury. He served in the post for almost six years. His task was nothing short of Herculean: put the country, drowning in war debt and teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, on a sound financial footing.

He succeeded, and in doing so set the course for America to become the world's most prosperous nation.

Historian Leonard White writes that Hamilton was not only the "greatest administrative genius of his generation..." but "one of the great administrators of all time."

There's no telling what Hamilton might have achieved had he lived a longer life. Instead, he died one of the most pointless deaths in American history. As hard as it is to fathom today, he was killed in a duel with the Vice President of the United States, Aaron Burr, a man with whom he had a long and bitter political feud.

Hamilton fired his pistol harmlessly into the air. He never intended to kill Burr. To Hamilton, it was an affair of honor. But to Burr, it was something else. The Vice President took careful aim, shot and mortally wounded his rival, who spent some 30 hours in agony before succumbing. Hamilton was 49.

Hamilton lived in a time when the great danger to the national project was a government that was too weak. We live in a time when many believe that the great danger to the nation is from a national government grown too strong.

The ideal, Hamilton would have told us, is somewhere in between. But perhaps America will have to wait for another Hamilton to achieve that happy medium.

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