

Alexander Hamilton

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Richard Brookhiser, the celebrated author of *Rediscovering George Washington* (1996), intrudes again upon the specious present to hold up for the praise of men the character and achievements of Alexander Hamilton, (1999). "He is a great man" we are told. Indeed, "...a great American". This is so, according to Brookhiser, because "most men, who make it, provide for their families, thank fortune, and maybe give to charity." But Hamilton was different, Brookhiser insists, not because Hamilton (a prodigy like the younger Pitt) became America's first Secretary of the Treasury at 32; neither because he towered over all the other cabinet officers as the de facto first minister of the founding administration. But because, from his front position at the post, he designed, into his comprehensive program of economic growth and national institution building, "ways to bring light to the talents of other men as well as himself." In a word, magnanimity marked his essential character. His pathbreaking policies, though not populist, "would enable his countrymen to become conscious of their resources."

Unlike so many fictitious claimants to a premier American title deed, this immigrant from the Caribbean at 15 years of age was an authentic self-made man. Into the slave and sugar culture of Nevis, he was born illegitimate of an errant mother, whose death left him on his own at 11, having been abandoned by his feckless father at nine — apprenticed at that moment to an export-import merchant at Christiansted. Within two decades young Hamilton rose from the obscurity of a West Indies immigrant to become, according to Brookhiser's compelling narrative, a celebrated American statesman. Having learned early on to love Plutarch, as we know from his writings, Hamilton, it seems, was ever guided by Demosthenes: — "Wise politicians march at the head of affairs", rarely awaiting "the event, to know what measures to take; but the measures which they have taken, ought to produce the event".

As the first minister of Washington, we know that Hamilton's nationalist measures of economic and foreign policy, implemented over opposition by the states' right party of Jefferson, were inextricably linked to the economic boom of the administrations of Presidents Washington and Adams. This outcome was no accident, for the Secretary of the Treasury had carefully designed his legislative program to give energy and credibility to the new constitution and its economic institutions. He, more than anyone, had breathed life into American fundamental law with his sublime inspiration of *The Federalist Papers*. Even Thomas Jefferson, himself, ever the jealous author, called *The Federalist Papers*, "the best commentary on the principles of government which was ever written." But unlike Jefferson's publicized claim to preeminent authorship of the Declaration of Independence, Hamilton contributed two-thirds of *The Federalist* — anonymously. No one who has read carefully into the history of state and congressional legislative irresponsibility, and studied the catastrophic inflation of the era of the Articles of Confederation, can fail to be astonished by the economic prosperity set off by the Hamiltonian economic plan of the new republic.

But this was only the middle chapter of Hamilton's life. At death in his 47th year at the hand of Aaron Burr, he was acknowledged by the judiciary and the Bar of New York as its first lawyer and the most effective advocate of a free press in New York. To him and his colleagues, at the Bar and the bench, had also fallen the task of developing the new commercial law absolutely indispensable to the effective functioning of free markets, grounded in consent and contract on the principle of free labor. His commercial vision of diversified American economic power was of a piece with his first principles of political economy; for, as Brookhiser reminds us, he was not only a "political economist" in the tradition of David Hume and Adam Smith, he was also a commercial entrepreneur, helping to found the Bank of New York (a success), and an immense manufacturing enterprise on the banks of the Passaic River (a failure); and, of course, the *New York Post* (a success) of which he was, as Brookhiser emphasized, the premier journalist.

Even in the austere testimony of the great judges of that era, Hamilton was regarded as an inspired lawgiver, the supreme advocate of the new Constitution. Chancellor Kent, the American Blackstone, thought him without peer: — "He rose at once to the loftiest heights of professional eminence, by his profound penetration...the firmness, frankness, and integrity of his character." Judge Ambrose Spencer, a distinguished judge of New York, often in conflict with Hamilton, held him to be "the greatest man this country has produced... I saw him at the bar and at home... He argued cases before me...In creative power Hamilton was infinitely [Senator Daniel] Webster's superior...It was he, more than any other man who thought out the Constitution of the United States and the details of the government of the Union..."

These are but a tiny fraction of the opinions of his peers, by a few who knew him at home in New York; and here again, Brookhiser reminds us what we have almost forgotten — that Hamilton, an immigrant to Manhattan, was quintessentially a New Yorker — bright, inquisitive, enterprising. He alone is the New Yorker whose contribution to the founding of the new republic puts New York at parity with "the glory that was Boston and the grandeur that was Virginia."

Having grown up in the Caribbean slave culture where black slaves outnumbered white masters, ten to one, he must have developed an early intuition of the advanced views he exhibited as a young man. A colonel in the revolutionary army at 20 — in 1777 on the staff of General Washington — he sponsored, with his friend Henry Laurens, a plan to raise black battalions in South Carolina and "to give them their freedom with their muskets", arguing that the then prevailing prejudice against blacks "makes us fancy many things that are founded neither in reason nor experience." Instead Colonel Hamilton based his argument about blacks upon the equality principle: — that "their natural faculties are probably as good as ours", merely suppressed from "want of cultivation". This view he set out unselfconsciously and forthrightly in a letter to John Jay, the President of the Continental Congress. He was but 22, into his third year at the right hand of General Washington, the central figure of the Commander-in-Chief's general staff. From his anti-slavery position, he could not be moved, as he went on to advocate it in New York anti-slavery circles after the revolution.

There is so much more to this precocious immigrant — the luminous intellect he developed in but four years of formal education, the brave heart he exhibited in the battle of Monmouth, the battlefield leadership he wrought with his brigade. Sword drawn, he was the first over the parapet and into the redoubt at the ultimate victory of Yorkton.

Now, if Brookhiser's thesis, that Hamilton was a great man, is born out in the fascinating 200 pages of his analytical narrative, whereto, we must ask, has the great man disappeared. Into whose vortex has history swallowed him up; and by what mechanism? It is too plain to point to the Adams family and the venerable tradition of their gifted historians and friends, wherein we find variations on a theme played out by the dyspeptic and volatile President John Adams, whose jealousy of Hamilton allowed his Christian conscience to let loose with the immortal epithet by which he characterized the West Indian immigrant as the "bastard brat of a Scotch pedlar"... It would also be too straightforward to point to the astonishing intellectual power of the Jeffersonian hagiographers whose inspiration has been drawn from the prodigious scholarly work of C.M. Wiltse, Merrill Jensen, Dumas Malone, among others. These were indefatigable scholars who took their cue from their idol himself, Mr. Jefferson, who declared Hamilton a "true colossus", but whose career Jefferson said, "from the moment history stooped to notice him," issued in "a tissue of machinations against the liberty of his country."

Hamilton most assuredly had his flaws, and like his talents, they were outsized. But still, if Brookhiser is right — that he is a great man — why have the historians come not to praise his supervening deeds but too often to denigrate his errors? In fact, Brookhiser's penetrating narrative of Hamilton's legacy is nothing less than the authentication of a great deed of statecraft — of nation-building. Moreover, no reasonable scholar can dispute the fact that most of Hamilton's plan as Secretary of the Treasury had been well-executed. Paradoxically, while the man rebuilt the wellsprings of the wealth of his adopted nation, he manifestly cared nothing for riches himself. Born poor, he died poor. His were ambitions for fame, sought in the leadership of his country, designed in policies aimed at creating a unified nation — rich, powerful, well-respected.

Even his antagonists conceded, and Jefferson lamented, that he had founded the lasting financial institutions of his country, thereby giving life to the fragile fabric of the Constitution and the Federal Union, mobilizing the requisite energy in the Executive to raise the Federal government from the lethargy of the Articles of Confederation. He originated the tax system, the banking system, even the detailed procedures of the tariff and customs measures which financed the new federal government. Over Jefferson's and Madison's resistance he oversaw the consolidation and refinancing of the enormous and debilitating public debt, all of which led, at the creation of the republic, to a vibrant organism of government — all but nullifying for a time, under the aegis of President Washington, the centrifugal forces of state autonomy. His were also the brilliant arguments for liberal construction of the implied powers of the constitution, relied upon by our greatest Chief Justice, John Marshall, who held out Alexander Hamilton to be, after Washington, the first man of his age. Next to Hamilton, Chief Justice Marshall felt himself but a candle "beside the sun at noonday". It was no accident that President Washington asked Hamilton to be the Chief Justice — which he declined.

In the words of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, the leading scholar-politician of a later era, Hamilton "was the embodiment of nationality". This was a decisive idea at the crucial moment when "the principle of nationality meant nothing..." And "there is no single man to whom" the idea and the building of American nationality "owes more than to Hamilton". It is hard to grasp the revolutionary importance — at that moment — of the idea of American nationality. It is a notion so commonplace today. But one cannot emphasize enough that, until the arrival of

President Washington, Secretary Hamilton and their Federalist protagonists, almost all power was concentrated in the individual states. Most loyalties of the ruling squirearchies of the former colonies were pledged to their state-based privileges, power, and slaves — all safely protected by the state legislatures they tended to dominate. There is insufficient space to spell out the scholarship on this point except to notice Hamilton's chief adversary, Thomas Jefferson in Congress at Philadelphia, writing wistfully of his longing to return to his "country" — namely, Virginia.

To a certain extent then, we may truly wonder that there exists no memorial to Hamilton built upon the tidal plain of the Potomac — next to the neo-classical memorial dedicated by FDR to Jefferson in 1943 — this event itself an exquisite irony. During this very period Franklin Roosevelt had, for a decade, by Hamiltonian means carried out a new economic policy (which Hamilton might not have approved), sustained by constitutional arguments which Hamilton and Marshall had advanced. Even more interesting, we can observe FDR, at the same time, forging the vital Anglo-American alliance to win World War II, manifestly a manqué "Hamiltonian Alliance" — by the concrete test of Hamilton's own farseeing foreign policy. The first Secretary of the Treasury thought Anglo-American entente indispensable to protect our vital commercial interests, not to mention his respect for the centrality of the hegemonic British navy, which, after 1815, insulated the young nation from the threat of entanglements and dismemberment by the competing great powers of Europe.

Let us then try to deal more thoroughly with the curious question of Hamilton's disappearance from the American pantheon, which Richard Brookhiser's biography travels part of the way to answer. First, one harkens to Professor Joseph Ellis, the distinguished Adams and Jefferson scholar, and his *American Sphinx*, the national book award winner of 1997. Ellis got it about right, I think, when he wrote: "Hamilton was the kind of man who might have been put on earth by God to refute all the Jeffersonian values. Dashing and direct in his demeanor, Hamilton possessed all the confidence of a military leader accustomed to command... While perhaps rooted in Hamilton's military exploits...during the Revolutionary War (another heroic experience Jefferson could not claim) this palpable projection of authority called attention to its own brilliance... To make matters worse, Hamilton as an opponent was equally formidable on his feet and in print. [Jefferson was feeble upon his feet.] Jefferson recalled his clashes with Hamilton in cabinet meetings as a form of martyrdom and warned Madison to draft all attacks against Hamilton personally, claiming that Hamilton was a host within himself."

But the historic victory in the first half of the 20th century of Jeffersonian historiography pushed Hamilton to the edge of the abyss and the enmity of the Adams clan and their advocates eased Hamilton into the vortex. Yet, the historical debate goes on. In the most profound and penetrating masterpiece of scholarship on *The Age of Federalism*, encompassing the entire period of the founding administrations of Washington and Adams, Professors Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick have much to say about Adams' hatred and jealousy of Hamilton, about the animus each held for the other, "most of it less than attractive." It is clear, of course, that the Adams family tradition of inextinguishable hatred for Hamilton stemmed in part from Hamilton's trenchant criticism of President Adams at a crucial moment before the election of 1800. Hamilton had argued in a private letter (later disclosed by Aaron Burr) that Adams "'does not possess the talents adapted to the administration of government..., that there are great and

intrinsic defects in his character which unfit him for the office of Chief Magistrate", that in the early stages of the Revolution...Hamilton had begun with "a high veneration for Mr. Adams", but with time he had come to "an opinion...that he is a man of an imagination...eccentric; propitious neither to the regular display of sound judgment...; that to this defect are added the...foibles of a vanity without bounds, and a jealousy capable of discoloring every object." In this minor excerpt from Hamilton's extensive commentary upon the insufficiencies of Adams' character, we can grasp the gravamen which engendered the understandable hostility of the Adams family and its tutored camp of historians over two centuries. But Professors Elkins and McKittrick, after exhaustively surveying the original sources and the entire historiography of the founding period, are, on this issue, not without judgement themselves. "Hamilton's case", they opine "had it stopped there, might well have represented the judgement which history itself ought to have settled upon with regard to John Adams."

But Hamilton did not let his critique end there.

And so we arrive at the end of the beginning of this review of Brookhiser on Hamilton. With Brookhiser, we must embrace not only the genius and the virtues of the first Secretary of the Treasury, but also an explication of the character flaws of the "little lion" himself, or as the brilliant but self-important Fisher Ames was wont to call his esteemed friend, "the great little man." Hamilton was 5'7", handsome, and winning. Hamilton was not only self-confident; he was proud to a fault. He had not only a sense of honor; but he carried his dignity to a vanity. He had not only the gift of tongues joined to an equal gift of the pen; but he deployed them with the art of an artillery captain and the intrepidity of a regimental colonel — in places where prudence would have wisely constrained his fire.

In a word, in the absence of the disciplined regulating mechanism of General Washington's force of personality, Hamilton's passions — carnal and careerist — often overcame his powerful intellect. In Brookhiser's apt comment: "For the first time in his life — also for the last — Alexander Hamilton met a man who was greater than himself... Hamilton's understanding was quicker than Washington's, and his analytical powers were greater. But in every other mental or moral quality [especially judgement and prudence], Washington was his equal or superior". It is true; the force of Washington's example was all pervasive. "I give in to no kind of amusement myself", General Washington wrote of headquarters, "and consequently those about me can have none". To a certain extent, as Brookhiser makes clear, Washington was the gyroscope which, in war and in government, kept Hamilton's genius rotating evenly in orbit.

During his short lifetime of extraordinary accomplishment, Hamilton's intense passions, it may be said, were generally well-controlled. But there were several crucial occasions when they burst through the dam, leading to decisive indiscretions; for example, the affair with Maria Reynolds and the letter against Adams. These imprudent cataclysms often ignited the contempt, envy and hatred of the Jeffersonian and Adams phalanxes. These were historic explosions which conspired to diminish, even to minimize Hamilton's popular reputation and to suppress, for long periods, the esteem for his achievements. But this is still insufficient explanation for the near disappearance of Hamilton during the 20th Century, two hundred years after the death of a chief architect of the new republic. There is, I think, something more to this story.

It has never been emphasized that, in Abraham Lincoln and in the nationalism of the Union party, Alexander Hamilton found, as it were by an invisible hand, his supreme nationalist successor who, by force of will and circumstance, was enabled to overthrow the slavepower of the South, led by the Virginia dynasty. The Jeffersonian settlement of 1800, which led to the dominance within the national government of the states' rights party of the slaveholding south, had finally been undone by free elections and by trial of arms. But in a paradox of American history, the victory of the party of union and emancipation was in fact overturned in the early twentieth century by the academic schools of anti-Reconstruction revisionism and slavery apology, led by Professor Ulrich B. Phillips. This school of historians dominated American historiography until the 1950s. In parallel, and not by accident, the slaveholding fantasies of "Gone With the Wind" and "The Lost Cause" prevailed in the popular mind. Both the academic and popularized tradition, which demonized Reconstruction and Emancipation and questioned the purpose of the Civil War and the justice of the Union victory, was joined to the post-World War I school of liberal historians, exemplified by the work of Vernon Parrington, among many other able scholars. The rising liberal historians combined with the distinguished Jeffersonian school of C.M. Wiltse, Merrill Jensen and Dumas Malone and retook for the Jeffersonian tradition, the high ground of American politics — recapturing it directly from the bloody field of Union victory and Emancipation.

Not until the 1950s were the apologies of Ulrich Phillips and "Gone With the Wind" brought before the bar of reason, equity, and evidence in the scholarship of Professor Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* — among other pioneering works. And even more decisively, it was the civil rights struggle itself which finally gave lasting force to the Union victory and permanent meaning to the equal laws of its legacy, the XIIIth, XIVth, and XVth amendments. It is no exaggeration to see in the triumph of desegregation in the second half of the 20th Century the ghost of Hamilton's anti-slavery impulse prevailing over Jefferson's attachment to the service of his slaves, the spirit of Hamilton's nationalist program prevailing over the states' rights oligarchies of the South. Even Hamilton's drive for national economic growth, to open up wide opportunities for men and women of diverse talents, prevailed over Jefferson's abstract idealization of the tough and grinding agrarian way of life which, while honorable and primordial, was an insufficient prospect for a great and diverse free nation competing in world markets.

This triumph of the Hamiltonian vision, it must be said, was foreshadowed during the nineteenth century in the opinions of Chief Justice Marshall and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, both of whom held up Hamilton next to Washington as the organizing genius of the new constitutional republic. Even for a time after World War II, in the work of Jacob Cooke, Harold Syrett, Clinton Rossiter, and Forrest McDonald, Hamiltonian ideas waxed momentarily into the firmament, even above the long shadow cast by the Monticello and the Quincy schools of American history.

In the end, these waxings and wanings of the life and work of Alexander Hamilton may be seen as the nocturnal linkages to the outgoing and incoming tides of ideological passion in American politics. But, in studying such a world-decisive epoch as the American founding, the historian must exert not only every judicious discipline to avoid "presentism"; he must also peer into the past with the eye of eternity to discern in that era the permanent — and also to de-emphasize the ephemeral. In order to judge the American founding and "its feverish mentality," the

contemporary eye of eternity was given but to a single man, even if one may doubt that any person could ever see his colleagues clearly. In Professor Joseph Ellis' distinctive phrase, "Only Washington seems to have remained immune [to the feverish mentality of the founding], but then he was immune to everything." For it is true that Washington's perennial effort at objectivity was as unimpeachable as the balance of his taciturn judgement.

And so, for the definitive ruling in the case of Alexander Hamilton, even Mr. Brookhiser, a master of the period, will yield gladly to the judgement of President Washington. "By some", the founding father declared, Mr. Hamilton "is considered as an ambitious man, and therefore a dangerous one... That he is ambitious I shall readily grant, but it is of the laudable kind, which prompts a man to excel in whatever he takes in hand."

For the millenium, one can almost hear an inspired Richard Brookhiser rephrase the unforgettable epigram drawn from Jefferson's first Inaugural: — We were all democrats. Now we shall all become Federalists....