

# Alexander Hamilton: The Inaugural American Dream

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One's psychological state is often compounded in the breeding ground of one's childhood, and Alexander Hamilton's inveterate habits were no different. His birthplace in the West Indies "vastly outweigh[ed] the northern colonies," economically, but Hamilton experienced little of this wealth.<sup>1</sup> Both of his parents were struck with downward social and economic mobility, depriving him of a first-class life, and instilling in him the necessity of personal achievement. The departure of his father and death of his mother in his pre-pubescent years only served to further his self-reliance. This modest upbringing led Hamilton to dream of little but lasting glory, writing his friend about his utmost desire for war.<sup>2</sup> At the age of 17, he wrote a newspaper article describing the devastation of a recent hurricane that was avidly received by his neighbors, who collected funds to send him to college on the mainland hoping he would return as a doctor. This kindness not only provided for his future, but furthered his understanding of the importance of money. This grasp of economics can be seen later in his life as the basis for many of his proposals, from his founding of the Bank of New York and the Bank of the United States to his financial plan as Secretary of the Treasury.

Hamilton believed that Great Britain had the best government possible, but the temporary failures of Parliament prompted him to believe that, "to usurp dominion over a people can . . . confer no obligation to obedience."<sup>3</sup> The beginnings of the Revolutionary War gave him his first opportunity to achieve the glory he sought.

Hamilton held several positions during the war, including aide-de-camp to George Washington, where they began a close friendship. Washington recognized Hamilton's genius and

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1. Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Viking Press, 1938) quoted in Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 7.

2. Alexander Hamilton to Edward Stevens, November 11, 1769, in *Founders Online*, National Archives. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0002>.

3. Alexander Hamilton, *The Farmer Refuted* (New York: James Rivington, 1775) in *Founders Online*, National Archives. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0057>.

dedication, writing, “there are few men to be found who has more general knowledge, and none whose Soul is more firmly engaged in the cause.”<sup>4</sup> Even after retiring from the army, however, Hamilton couldn’t stop pursuing greatness. After studying law for only a few months, he opened his law office in New York City. He was appointed a delegate to a number of conventions and he held various government offices. Eventually he accepted a challenge to a duel against one of his bitter rivals that cost him his life. All of these activities contributed to his effort to establish his honor. He often talked of retirement, saying, “I am sick of this career and dare to leave it,” but he never allowed himself the satisfaction required for such a change, and was therefore stuck always pursuing something more.<sup>5</sup> Everlasting ambition was a principal aspect of Hamilton’s character that prompted his relentless pursuit of recognition.

When Hamilton returned to New York to start a law practice, he hoped to benefit from the massive amount of legal work anticipated with the newfound peace.<sup>6</sup> He tried to establish himself as quickly as possible in order to gain a proper foothold, passing the bar within six months. His practice quickly achieved success through his arguing of cases such as *Rutgers v. Waddington* in support of loyalists. He challenged new state legislation that punished Tories for their place in the war and stripped them of their rights and property. Haunted by his own past, Hamilton advocated for acceptance and national unity, believing that collective work would further the nation as a whole.

New York was by and large very successful during the Confederation, and Hamilton took advantage of that success to participate in many government functions and promote his fundamental ideals. He saw weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation’s lack of a central authority and the vast freedoms and powers that it gave to the states, saying, “the United States afford the extraordinary spectacle of a government destitute even of the shadow of constitutional power to enforce . . . its own laws.”<sup>7</sup> He believed the system needed further examination and reflection in order to sufficiently attain its ends, arguing for a convention with full authority to alter the Articles in order to fix the broken system. He was ignored for a number of years, but at

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4. George Washington to John Sullivan, February 4, 1781, in John P. Kaminski, ed. *Alexander Hamilton: From Obscurity to Greatness* (Madison, Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2016), 6.

5. Alexander Hamilton to Marquis de Lafayette, November 3, 1782, *ibid.*, 10.

6. Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, 7.

7. Alexander Hamilton, *The Federalist 21. Other Defects of the Present Confederation*, in *The Federalist Papers—A Complete Collection of Essays Written in Favour of the New Constitution* (independently published, 2019), 40.

the Annapolis Convention he was able to put his plan into action, requesting that delegates from the states meet in Philadelphia. The new convention proposed a plan that would require the state governments to give up some of their power to a central authority. Hamilton was sent to the Philadelphia Convention as a delegate for New York, and he continued to use his influence over many of the prominent figures to his advantage, even signing the final document as New York's sole delegate. At the Poughkeepsie Convention, during the ratification debates, Hamilton worked with John Jay to overcome a dominant Anti-Federalist majority.

Hamilton strongly advocated for, “the conformity of the . . . constitution to the true principles of republican government,” as he believed it would work to elevate the sense of a national identity and a unified citizenry.<sup>8</sup> His advocacy of a vast expansion of national power and economic policy as Secretary of the Treasury provided the basis for our modern democracy, promoting strong financial institutions and big business in order to expedite growth and push America to become a global powerhouse. He also created the coastguard both to enforce tariffs and to expand U.S. naval capabilities. His brash steps of national power were wildly successful in cultivating the patriotism and nationalism that define much of our country today.

Hamilton's lifetime contained turbulence unparalleled by his peers, and best exemplified through his oscillation between the mind of a political tycoon and that of a frustrated commoner, between dynamic dictation and trivial quarrels. He survived his childhood as a foreign-born orphan to be a driving force in creating a nation that is undoubtedly in his image. At first glance, this nuanced complexity can be deceptive, but further study reveals the inner-workings and humanity of a great man.

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8. Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist 1. Other Defects of the Present Confederation*, in *The Federalist Papers—A Complete Collection of Essays Written in Favour of the New Constitution* (independently published, 2019), 6.

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