

Alexander Hamilton AND THE GROWTH OF THE NEW NATION

JOHN C. MILLER

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ALEXANDER HAMILTON AND THE GROWTH OF THE NEW NATION

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Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton (Culver Service)

Alexander Hamilton (Culver Service)

To the Memory of My Brother Raymond

No man can by care-taking (as the Scripture saith) "add a cubit to his stature," in this little model of a man's body; but in the great frame of kingdoms and commonwealths, it is in the power of princes, or estates, to add amplitude and greatness to their kingdom: for, by introducing such ordinances, constitutions, and customs, as we have now touched, they may sow greatness to their posterity and succession; but these things are commonly not observed, but left to take their chance.

FRANCIS BACON

Introduction

The period in which Alexander Hamilton lived was an age of great men and great events. In the United States, besides Hamilton himself, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and John Marshall held the center of the stage; while the European scene was dominated by William Pitt, Charles James Fox and Napoleon Bonaparte. And yet, Talleyrand, whose career is a convincing testimonial of his astuteness in judging men and measures and who was intimately acquainted with the leaders on both sides of the Atlantic, pronounced Alexander Hamilton to be the greatest of these "choice and master spirits of the age."

Probably no American statesman has displayed more constructive imagination than did Hamilton. Prodigal of ideas, bursting with plans for diversifying the American economy and obsessed by a determination to make the United States a powerful nation under a centralized government, he left an imprint upon this country that time has not yet effaced. Of some of our institutions it may be justly said that they are the lengthened shadow of one man—Alexander Hamilton.

In Hamilton's comparatively brief span, he lived through three great wars, in two of which he was an active participant. Whenever he looked abroad he found wars or rumors of wars. As a result, the conviction was implanted in him that the survival of the United States depended to a great degree upon its warmaking potential. If this was a harsh and unattractive philosophy, at least it could be said to have been based upon the facts of international life as Hamilton knew them.

Everything depended, he believed, upon strengthening the union: if it perished, Americans would never attain the liberty, material well-being and happiness to which they aspired. Even his financial and economic plans were but means to the great end of solidifying the union; in his hands, capitalism became a barrier against the strong centrifugal forces that threatened to reduce the central government to impotence.

Paradoxically enough, the abounding love of the American union that actuated Hamilton was partly owing to the fact that he was born outside

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the continental boundaries of what later became the United States. He was thereby preserved against the corroding effects of state loyalty which in most of his contemporaries seriously weakened the springs of nationalism. Even more important, Hamilton's service in the Revolutionary Army impressed upon him the necessity of strong central government capable of acting upon Americans directly rather than through the states. Above all, he realized to a greater degree than any American of his generation that the republic must draw its strength from union. The source of American greatness, he perceived, was continental, not provincial. From first to last, he "thought continentally."

Hamilton's was a strange career—and no one was more conscious of its strangeness than was Hamilton himself. A West Indian by birth and of antecedents that provided his enemies with a never-failing source of scurrility—John Adams called him "the bastard brat of a Scotch pedlar"—he rose to high social, political and military position in the United States. To the cause of American union he gave unstintingly of his energy and devotion, and yet he had little love for the people whose power and material well-being he sought to advance. Never, he said, had he expected to find a people born to greatness who more stubbornly resisted their destiny than did Americans. He confessed that he did not understand them and on one occasion he cried out in anguish of spirit that "this American world" was not made for him. Frequently he asked himself to what end he was laboring; but he never ceased to strive to mold the United States in accord with the vision that had been granted him.

The supreme irony of Hamilton's achievement is that the methods by which he sought to lay the economic foundations of the American union actually aggravated political sectionalism in the United States-the very eventuality he most dreaded. There are few instances in history that demonstrate more strikingly how the best-laid plans of statesmen can go awry. Hamilton dedicated himself to the cause of union; yet when he retired from the office of Secretary of the Treasury, the fissures between North and South had begun to assume menacing proportions. True, Hamilton did not bear the sole responsibility for this untoward and, for him, wholly unexpected development; and yet he, more than any other individual, was responsible for the policies which divided the American people and which led to the creation of political parties. It was his archrival, Thomas Jefferson, who united Americans and, until the imposition of the embargo of 1808, seemed on the point of making the United States a one-party state. If the American world were made for Thomas Jefferson, then Alexander Hamilton felt that he stood on foreign ground indeed.

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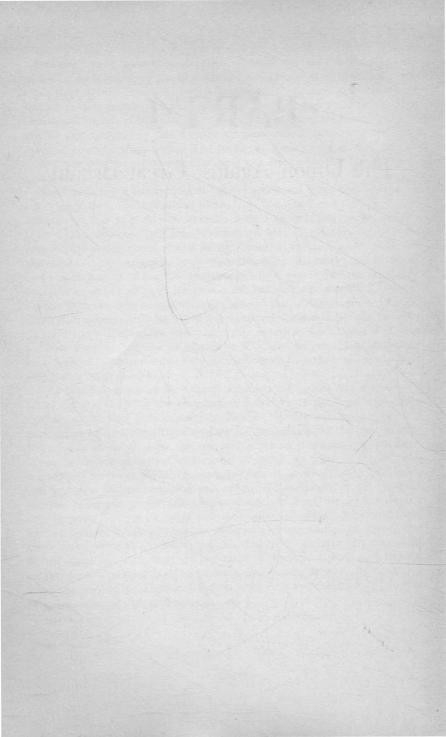
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PART I

The Union Against Great Britain



1.

The Making of a Revolutionary

Alexander Hamilton bore neither loyalty nor affection for Nevis, the British island on which he was born, or for St. Croix, the Danish island on which he passed his early youth. An American who spent a few years on St. Croix during the eighteenth century remarked that he felt "much the same anxiety at a distance from it as Adam did after he was banished from the bowers of Eden." For Hamilton, however, the island was a prison from which he could not wait to escape: probably the happiest moment he knew in the West Indies was when, from the deck of a ship, he watched St. Croix drop below the horizon. 1*

No doubt, much of the aversion Hamilton felt for St. Croix was owing to the unhappiness he experienced there. His father, James Hamilton, the fourth son of the Laird of Cambuskeith, "The Grange," Ayrshire, Scotland, lived in open adultery with Alexander's mother, Rachel Fawcett Lavien, the daughter of a French Huguenot physician and wife of John Lavien, a German businessman who had settled at St. Croix. Although Alexander was born in 1755 (his brother James had preceded him by two years), John Lavien did not get round to divorcing Rachel until 1758. In his bill of divorce, he declared her to be no better than a prostitute. In actuality, she seems to have been an impetuous, ardent and high-spirited young woman, too strong-willed to endure a loveless marriage. But since Rachel was forbidden by Danish law to remarry (she being the offending party), the bar sinister was indelibly fixed upon her two sons.²

To make matters worse, James Hamilton was a ne'er-do-well. His business ventures almost invariably turned out badly; the year Alexander was born, his father went bankrupt. Moreover, most of Alexander's relatives on his mother's side, the most important of whom were the Lyttons, were in financial difficulties. Thus, from his earliest years, it was impressed upon Alexander that while he came of good family—"My blood," he once said, "is as good as that of those who plume themselves upon their ancestry"—and many of his near relatives had been wealthy and respected, times had

^{*} Numbered notes will be found in a group beginning on page 577.

changed for the worse, the money was gone and they were all on the downgrade. As for the family name, it was becoming increasingly apparent that James Hamilton would add no embellishment to it, not even to the extent of handing it down legally to his descendants.

In 1765, shortly after James Hamilton had brought his family to St. Croix, he abandoned Rachel and his sons. He left them almost wholly destitute. Since none of Rachel's relatives were able to help out financially, she was obliged to open a small store while her son James was apprenticed to a carpenter, and Alexander, at the age of eleven, became a clerk in the counting house of Cruger and Beekman. In 1769, Rachel died; she had ceased to call herself "Madame Hamilton" and she was buried as Rachel Lavien. As for James Hamilton, he was last heard of on the island of St. Vincent, where he lived to a ripe and impenitent old age. While thus cutting himself off from his family, he did not make the breach so complete as to exclude charity. Over the course of years he received a considerable sum of money from Alexander, but James Hamilton never indicated any strong desire to see the son whose generosity he had done so little to merit.³

Singularly enough, Alexander never blamed his troubles upon his father. He always addressed James Hamilton with filial respect and affection; at no time did he reproach him for his conduct toward his wife and children. Indeed, had James Hamilton been a model of conjugal and parental behavior, he could hardly have evoked a greater semblance of regard from his youngest son. In later life, when Alexander referred to his family—which, understandably, was not often—it was of his father rather than of his mother that he usually spoke.

Hamilton forgave his father this unpaternal neglect because James Hamilton, with all his faults, represented a link with the aristocratic world. Much could be forgiven a lord, or the younger son of a lord; to have broken with his father, to have loaded him with the censures he no doubt deserved, would have invalidated what Alexander came to regard as his passport to good society.

The harrowing experiences of his youth did not embitter Hamilton against the world so much as they instilled in him an inflexible resolution to conquer it. Pride and a fierce determination to succeed—these were the qualities which he derived from his early environment and which he never relinquished. His ambition was whetted by the obstacles it encountered. Many years later he wrote in *The Federalist:* "There are strong minds in every walk of life that will rise superior to the disadvantages of situation, and will command the tribute due to their merit, not only from the classes to which they particularly belong, but from the society in general." Keenly aware of the superiority of his talents as well as of the disadvantages of his situation, Hamilton from an early age put himself in the company of those who by intelligence and industry rise superior to their station in life.

In Hamilton's case, it was an uphill road strewn with obstructions. Nevertheless, his ability, industry and engaging manners soon began to tell: in 1771, owing to Nicholas Cruger's temporary absence from the island, Alexander was elevated from bookkeeper to manager. Here he displayed the acumen, self-confidence and willingness to take risks that later became his distinguishing characteristics in the United States Treasury. But his tenure of authority was short-lived: Nicholas Cruger returned to St. Croix and Hamilton was demoted to bookkeeper, thereby reversing the traditional American success story. Nevertheless, at Cruger and Beckman's, Hamilton gained valuable experience for his later career in business and finance. He learned the importance of method, the ways of the business world and—from the ship captains and supercargoes with whom he was obliged to deal—the seamier side of human nature.4

Even though his connection with Cruger and Beckman might have blossomed into a junior partnership, Hamilton chafed at the dull round in which his duties confined him: with the world waiting to be conquered, what was he doing pushing a pen in a stuffy office? Conscious as he was of his ability and ambition, he was no less aware that St. Croix afforded scope for neither. The life of a merchant or planter, however prosperous, did not capture his imagination. His daydreams transported him to a very different world from that which he knew at St. Croix. Almost shamefacedly, he confessed that he built castles in the air; but, although he apologized for wasting his time conjuring up visions of future greatness, he always clung to the hope that such dreams came true "when the projector is consistent."

His friend Edward Stevens did not need to rely upon daydreams to escape from St. Croix: in 1769 he was sent by his father to New York to study at King's College. Being possessed of a "fine Address, & great Merit & Cleverness," Stevens proposed to convert these assets into a bedside manner: after graduating from King's College, he intended to study medicine. With his best friend gone, Hamilton found the island even more deadly than before. In November, 1769, he wrote Stevens that he would willingly risk his life, though not his character, to raise himself out of the rut into which he felt himself slipping. "I wish," he exclaimed, "there was a war."

It was not a war but a hurricane that gave Hamilton his opportunity of severing connections with St. Croix. Fittingly enough, he rode into the North American continent upon a whirlwind. In August, 1772, one of the most devastating hurricanes in the history of the West Indies struck St. Croix. So deeply impressed was Alexander by the force of the winds and the devastation they wrought that he wrote a description of the storm for the benefit of his father. Before sending the letter, however, Alexander showed it to the Reverend Hugh Knox, a Presbyterian clergyman, schoolteacher, apothecary and physician who resided on the island. Knox had already seen in Alexander evidences of a genius that could be brought to fruition only

by a college education. Alexander's description of the hurricane so completely vindicated Knox's high opinion of his young parishioner's talents that he published it in the Royal Danish American Gazette.

Although Hamilton set down in his "Hurricane Letter" such effective bits of observation as that the rain tasted of salt and that at the height of the storm there was a strong odor of gunpowder in the air, when he warmed to his work he portrayed the horrors of the night with all the flamboyance of a Gothic novelist, "Good God!" he exclaimed, "what horror and destructionit's impossible for me to describe-or you to form any idea of it. It seemed as if a total dissolution of nature was taking place. The roaring of the sea and wind—fiery meteors flying about in the air—the prodigious glare of almost perpetual lightning-the crash of the falling houses-and the earpiercing shrieks of the distressed, were sufficient to strike astonishment into Angels." But it was the "reflections and feelings on this frightful and melancholy occasion" to which Hamilton gave expression that caught the attention of the Reverend Dr. Knox and his friends. Hamilton's letter left no doubt that he had faithfully absorbed the religious instruction of his Presbyterian spiritual guide. Contemplating God's power and wrath as manifested in the hurricane, Hamilton was moved to meditate upon the wretchedness and degradation of man: "Where now, oh! vile worm," he exclaimed, "is all thy boasted fortitude and resolution? What is become of thy arrogance and self-sufficiency?" He saw mankind as wholly deprayed and damned and God as "an incensed master, executing vengeance on the crimes of his servants."

Upon rereading his letter, Hamilton was troubled lest these thoughts strike his readers as morbid; after all, not every seventeen-year-old boy saw a sermon in a hurricane. The religious bent of his contemplations, he hastened to point out, did not proceed from excessive fear of God's wrath or from "a conscience overburdened with crimes of an uncommon cast"—the possession of which at his age would have been truly extraordinary. These ideas, he explained, were such as would be naturally awakened in "every thinking breast. . . . It were a lamentable insensibility not to have such feelings—and," he added, "I think inconsistent with human nature." It was inconceivable to him that after witnessing the majesty of God, as manifested in a hurricane, thoughts of man's helplessness, baseness and sin should not follow as a matter of course.

This letter likewise revealed Hamilton to be a youth of high emotional intensity, strongly affected by the plight of the poor and downtrodden, particularly women and little children. During the hurricane, he recounted his horror at seeing "whole families running about the streets unknowing where to find a place of shelter—the sick exposed to the keenness of water and air—without a bed to lie upon—or a dry covering to their Bodies." Extracting, as always, a moral from these events, he urged all who "revel in affluence, [to] see the afflictions of humanity, and bestow your superfluity to