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A More Perfect Union Seminar
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Chernow, Ron. *Alexander Hamilton*. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.

In modern parlance, Alexander Hamilton starred in his own movie, playing the role of a classic hero based on the myths and legends he had voraciously consumed as a boy. As did the heroes of legend, the brash and brazen Hamilton possessed a tragic flaw, an enormous ego that at crucial times overwhelmed his better judgment. Through a combination of calculated plotting, “vaulting ambition,” (554) fortunate coincidences, and daunting intelligence Hamilton attained the peak of power in the nascent nation, which he molded to his vision and purpose. Why did a man who had achieved the pinnacle of success repeatedly risk losing it? Hamilton was one of those extraordinary men who actually turned thought into action, one of the superhuman founders who have made succeeding generations wonder why we lack what they seem to have had in abundance. Yet Alexander Hamilton was also a grasping, obnoxious, strutting egoist who maneuvered himself to the crux of power; a scheming genius reluctant to loosen his grip on that power; and an insecure egoist with the sexual appetite of an alley cat who consistently placed himself before wife, children, and friends. The boy who believed in heroes and grand gestures grew into a man who lived a life which a novelist would be hard pressed to conceive, but he was too good to be true. And as with all tragic heroes, Hamilton caused his own downfall.

Ron Chernow is a master story teller. His narrative seamlessly weaves Hamilton’s personal and professional lives together in a page turner filled with lively personages and a compelling plot. It is an exhaustive and, for the reader, exhausting biography, yet early on the reader feels deprived of a deeper treatment of this extraordinary man; something always feels missing. Chernow is not a trained historian. “I managed to sneak through Yale without taking a history course,” Ron Chernow stated in a 2004 interview. “Maybe if my first exposure to the material had been in a class, doing tests and term papers, while aware of all the academic in-fighting, I wouldn’t have had the kind of naïve glee I had and still have” for history. Even if a teacher of history is willing to overlook this insult, Chernow is hard to categorize. Popular historian? Independent historian? He graduated from Yale and Cambridge with a degree in English, worked as a journalist, and edited financial policy research at Twentieth Century Fund, where he acquired his impressive knowledge of finance. His books have focused on the financial world, beginning with a study of the Morgan dynasty, followed by *The Warburgs*, a history of the German banking family, and *Titan, the Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* Chernow has collected an impressive array of awards, including the National Book Award, the George S. Eccles Prize, and, for *Alexander Hamilton*, the first George Washington Book Prize. His latest, published this month, is *Washington A Life*. He is past President of the PEN American Center, a literary rights activist group, and currently serves on its board. But is he a historian?

Historian Alan Brinkley provided a clue. In a recent interview at the Kennedy Library he said that when writing *The Publisher: Henry Luce and the American Century* he wore two hats, one as historian

and the other as biographer. (<http://www.wbur.org/programs/jfk-library-forums>) Ron Chernow is a master biographer who can grasp a life but often misses the historical nuances of the underlying social, political, and cultural contexts. He frequently explains rather than analyzes, and consistently engages in speculation, assumptions, and suppositions. By doing so Chernow preempts his readers, assuming they are not capable of drawing their own conclusions.

The answer to whether the American revolution would “herald a new social order” or “perpetuate something closer to the status quo ante” (243-244) revolved around Alexander Hamilton, and Chernow aptly conveys the segue from the unity of the revolution to the divisiveness and polarization within the new republic. Readers familiar only with the author of *The Federalist* will discover an Alexander Hamilton of immense and multifaceted talent. Chernow also provides enough minutia of what the first generation of Americans did behind the scenes to satisfy those familiar with the period, teasing with insinuations and building suspense for the intrigues, such as the Reynolds affair and Hamilton’s relationship with John Laurens, which historians often brush aside to deal with more esoteric matters.

Throughout his life Alexander Hamilton was accused of having “a faint tincture of something foreign...[a] West Indian transplant” (3) who was an incurable Anglophile. It was true. Hamilton was born to parents of primarily British ancestry in a multicultural society at the crossroads of the Atlantic world. Hamilton was an Anglophile in his appreciation of the British military, system of government, and legal framework. He favored a monarchy, distrusting the fragility of democracy and fearing chaos. His close friend and eulogizer, the brilliant Gouverneur Morris, confided to his diary that Hamilton “was on principle opposed to republican and attached to monarchical government.” (712) The irony is that Alexander Hamilton was instrumental in establishing an American political structure which eradicated the worst of the British system.

Chernow visited the West Indies and Scotland to study archival records, consult with local historians, and make personal observations. He provides new revelations about Hamilton’s boyhood, including, in a complete antithesis to his son’s meteoric rise, his father’s descent to poverty in Bequia. Not even Charles Dickens could have invented Hamilton’s childhood. Born on Nevis and raised in St. Croix, Hamilton was the product of a common law marriage, as was his mother; such arrangements were recognized as legal in England and in her American colonies for most of the eighteenth century. Hamilton had a lineage superior to that of most Americans; his father James was the fourth son of a Scottish laird and his mother Rachel the daughter of a French Huguenot doctor and British mother. Chernow investigates the claim by Timothy Pickering that Hamilton was the natural son of merchant Thomas Stevens rather than of James Hamilton, which, in a curious twist, would make Hamilton a bastard of a different sort. At the time of publication Chernow had offered to pay for DNA testing to solve lingering doubts about Hamilton’s paternity, but the Hamilton Surname DNA Project has since concluded that “at this time we cannot come to any definite conclusions whether Alexander Hamilton's father was, or was not, a Hamilton.” (<http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/g/a/gah4/HamDNA/Results.html>)

Chernow initially praises Rachel Hamilton for her “proud defiance” and “mental toughness” in leaving her abusive husband, but sees her “willingness to court controversy” as the “preview of her son’s later passionately willful behavior” (12) In comparison, James Hamilton, the black sheep of his noble family, is charming: “easygoing and lackadaisical” albeit “devoid of...ambition”. Chernow facetiously interprets Rachel Hamilton’s actions as the model for her son’s negative behaviors, while James Hamilton’s slide down a slippery financial slope would “propel his spirited son” into being the financial

wizard of the new republic. (13) Rather than using the standby of it's-always-the-mother's-fault, perhaps Chernow should have considered that few eighteenth century women would have done what Rachel did; given the options available to them, even women of superior intellect and courage resorted to the use of feminine wiles and subterfuge rather than flat out defiance. Hamilton's drive and ambition was more likely derived from witnessing his mother overcome the incredible adversities of her life rather than from his father, who simply walked out. It was Rachel Hamilton's connections to the trading firm Beekman & Cruger that led to Hamilton's position with the firm, a crucial turning point in his life. Yet while speculating about the titles of the thirty-four books listed in Rachel Hamilton's probate inventory, Chernow assumes they belonged to Hamilton; he does not even consider that they were part of a family library.

At the impressionable age of thirteen Hamilton was left in charge of the St. Croix branch of the New York trading firm Beekman and Cruger for five months. The level of responsibility invested in Hamilton by his employers would have required him to have the knowledge of a supercargo combined with that of a merchant trader, and many of the abilities and traits that defined Hamilton's life formed during this period: his "phenomenal stamina," "air of crisp efficiency and cool self-command," and "take-charge mode;" his incredible grasp of practical economics, financial systems, and world markets; and the first recorded incident of Hamilton's dressing down a superior. (30-31) Chernow stresses that Hamilton "found a home" (49) in New York, but Hamilton's world vision was formed by his birthplace and first job. A string of mentors supported and promoted the young prodigy in his ascent from impecunious island clerk to pivotal American revolutionist, especially Presbyterians, whose connections in education, politics, business, and the law would smooth Hamilton's way. When Hamilton's description of the hurricane of August 1772 was published the local St. Croix establishment was so impressed that they sent Hamilton to college in New York. Chernow stresses Hamilton's loyalty to his friends, yet as Hamilton becomes more self serving he cuts ties with many old friends and mentors.

Success happens when preparation meets opportunity, and Hamilton prepared himself by following a "tight daily regimen" and developing the life long habit of a "profitable use of time." (52) He was a voracious reader of both fiction and nonfiction, especially history, economics, and political theory, and had "a beautifully organized mind." (224) Chernow persists in labeling Hamilton an autodidact, when a better term is life long learner. Hamilton *was* educated, and, as did most of the men who founded the nation, "he aspired to the eighteenth-century aristocratic ideal of the versatile man conversant in every area of knowledge." (110) Hamilton's reading of the classics informed his opinion of battle as dashing and romantic, and "like the other founding fathers, Hamilton rummaged through the wisdom of antiquity for political precedents." (111) Hamilton's views on government and finance were shaped early in his life and never changed.

Hamilton's revolutionary career began during his college days in New York City, where traits seen throughout Hamilton's life became apparent. His first political speech was a true Desmoulins moment when he leaped onto a platform during a Sons of Liberty rally and "transfixed" the crowd (55-56) This impetuosity, his ability to use fleeting moments to his greater glory, sometimes resulted in his leaping into an abyss. Hamilton feared extremes because he recognized the extremist tendencies within himself: "while the passions of men are worked up to an uncommon pitch, there is a great danger of fatal extremes." (69)

Hamilton wrote his first political piece following the Boston Tea Party, and remained primarily a journalist - a prolific essayist - long before and after *The Federalist*. Hamilton was a wordsmith who “could transpose complex thoughts onto paper with few revisions.” (250) His first series of political essays appeared in 1774, and stopped only with his death. His writing was always thoroughly researched. Even the treatise he produced to study the law became a classic, “copied by hand and circulated among New York law students for years.” (168) In partnership with James Madison and John Jay, Hamilton, as “Publius,” wrote sixty percent of the essays in *The Federalist*, the classic defense of the Constitution. The debates of the revolutionary era were played out in “vitriolic essays.” *Alexander Hamilton* proves that attack ads and mudslinging are inherent in the American political tradition. The first vicious attacks on Hamilton’s illegitimacy, racial identity, and aristocratic and monarchist inclinations occurred during the ratification debate and the continued throughout his life. For his part, Hamilton never seemed to grasp the fact that if you attack you must be prepared to be attacked. “Words were his chief weapon...His eloquence...seemed to require opposition to give it its full force.” (250) Chernow claims to have discovered unattributed essays Hamilton wrote in college as “Monitor” and the “Phocion” essays of 1796, although since both were in the collection of the New York Historical Society, it is difficult to accept that they were unknown to Hamiltonian scholars. Chernow also claims that letters written from New York to the *Royal Danish American Gazette* in St. Croix during the revolution were from Hamilton, but provides no proof that Hamilton wrote them.

Hamilton’s public orations were no less impressive; he “spontaneously spouted perfect speeches in every forum.” He was a theatrical courtroom attorney, and “could speak extemporaneously in perfectly formed paragraphs for hours.” After being uncharacteristically quiet for his first three weeks as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention he gave a first speech which lasted no less than six hours. Hamilton was completely straightforward and unrestrained in his rhetoric, but lacked the tact of Jefferson and the humor of Franklin, and his “fluency shaded into excess.” (190) During one cabinet meetings on the Citizen Genet affair Jefferson noted with annoyance that Hamilton spoke for forty-five minutes, “as inflammatory and declamatory as if he had been speaking to a jury.” (444)

Do men make the times or do the times make the men? Hamilton reflected that revolutions “serve to bring to light talents and virtues which might otherwise have languished in obscurity or only shot forth a few scattered and wandering rays.” (166) Chernow is amazed by Hamilton’s “unique flair for materializing at every major turning point in the early history of the republic,” failing despite, or perhaps because of, his immersion in Hamilton’s life to grasp that he was turning up because he was one of the men creating every major event of the early republic.

Hamilton’s brilliant mind, thorough research, extensive reading, and powers of persuasion in fused his vision and conviction with self assurance. He had an unsettling and heightened intuition which made him seem prescient. *Alexander Hamilton* is replete with examples of this ability: in February 1775 Hamilton predicted “that France and Spain would aid the colonies” and that the Americans should “harass and exhaust the [British] soldiery by frequent skirmishes and incursions” (61); that “if we do not make use” of slaves as soldiers, “the enemy probably will.” (122); arguing *Rutgers v. Waddington* (1784) he “expounded the all-important doctrine of judicial review” (198) before a federal judiciary had been established; and, in 1781 wrote financier Robert Morris that “by... restoring public credit-not by gaining battles that we are finally to gain our object.” (156) He suggested the Constitutional Convention seven years before it met. Hamilton had a “sense of the fine interconnectedness of things.” He did not

create political theory or monetary policy as much as absorb it, “see what foundation it rests on,” (229) organize it, rearrange it, and, with his “penchant for systemic solutions,” offer it back in a new form. (224) A French naval officer observed that “some things were so blindingly self-evident to Hamilton that he was baffled when others didn’t grasp them quickly.” (120)

Another reason Hamilton seemed prescient was because he turned his ideas into reality through hard-nosed promotion. “I am an unlucky honest man that speaks my sentiments to all and with emphasis.” (140) It was this “preternatural confidence,” (288) a sense of infallibility, which inspired the confidence of others and enabled him to put his programs in place, whether as Treasury Secretary, Federalist leader, or Inspector General of the Army. “Hamilton engineered the transition to a postwar political culture that valued sound and efficient government as the...custodian of liberty.” (266) His conviction in his programs caused him to overstep the bounds of checks and balances, lobbying for his financial plan within the House and meeting with British diplomats behind Jefferson’s back. Hamilton would not keep his nose out of every other department in Washington’s and Adams’s cabinets, and skewed the balance between the executive and legislative when he “both submitted reports and drafted bills based on them.” (351) Hamilton was “a system builder who could devise interrelated policies,” but “virtually every program that Hamilton put together raised fundamental constitutional issues.” (289) Hamilton’s support of the Alien & Sedition Acts, however, exhibited a mistrust of the very institutions he helped create. As Treasury Secretary he had once written to Washington that “it is perhaps always better that partial evils should be submitted to than that principles should be violated,” (304), but his refusal to let go and allow the system he helped create to work led to the Hamilton-Adams split within the Federalist party and its eventual downfall. Hamilton’s “intellectual agility” makes some of his major blunders hard to understand, such as trusting William Duer to be his second at Treasury, dealing with petty crooks such as Clingman and the Reynolds, or becoming involved in the plots of Francisco de Miranda. “I am aware that a man of real merit is never seen in so favourable a light as seen through the medium of adversity” he wrote, but despite his astonishing success Hamilton often exhibited a lack of common sense.

Hamilton continually strove to embody exalted ideals and Republican virtue included military as well as political service. During the revolution Captain Hamilton dressed and drilled his artillery company until it was deemed “the most beautiful model of discipline in the whole army,” (73) reflecting Hamilton’s own fastidiousness and adherence to routine. Decades later he would exhibit the same fascination for uniforms and drill books when he served as Inspector General. “Hamilton always displayed an unusual capacity for impressing older, influential men,” (43) and during the war no less than three generals asked him to join their staffs before Hamilton accepted the invitation of the Commander-in-Chief. Just as his boyhood heroes, “the only distinction that Hamilton devoutly craved was not money or power but military fame” (555) According to Brigadier General Charles Coatesworth Pinckney, Hamilton had “a genius capable of forming an extensive military plan.” (560)

Washington treated several of his aides, Hamilton included, as surrogate sons, and Hamilton formed significant relationships with other members of Washington’s “family” of aides: Lafayette, Von Steuben, Henry Knox, and John Laurens, his “spiritual twin.” (94) Hamilton became Washington’s “principal and most confidential aide,” (91) beginning the symbiotic relationship that would define their careers and the new nation. Washington found Hamilton indispensable, and Chernow makes a convincing case that without Hamilton Washington’s leadership would have suffered. Hamilton “didn’t

wallow in hero worship” (89) but never wavered in his belief that Washington was crucial as the figurehead, the metaphor of American national unity. Hamilton’s war escapades are as dramatic as the rest of his life, filled with swashbuckling escapes, spy missions, and heroic action. In battle Hamilton was described as having “an indifference toward danger” and a “heat and effervescence” (115) that bordered on recklessness. At Yorktown he “wantonly exposed the lives of his men” (162) in a ridiculous display of arrogance, drilling his men in front, but just out of range, of the British lines. He then led his men on a nighttime attack that took a crucial redoubt, and “because of his valiant performance...became a certified hero.” (165)

Chernow does not shrink from examining the possible homoerotic relationships among several members of Washington’s “family” during the conduct of the war, especially the trio of Lafayette, Laurens, and Hamilton. Hamilton’s relationship with Laurens was described by his grandson as “a deep fondness of friendship which approached the tenderness of feminine attachment” (95) During the war Hamilton enjoyed reading about the “amorous stories and strange sexual customs” (112) in Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Greeks*, which included sadomasochism, public nudity, wife swapping, and homosexuality, and he would have read of Achilles and Patroclus in *The Iliad*. Hamilton’s friendship with Lafayette, his grandson wrote, contained “a note of romance...quite unusual even in those days...Lafayette was on the closest terms with Hamilton.” Although the literary style of the time was based on hyperbole, Lafayette’s letters gushed about Hamilton, and “the breathless tone of the letters that Hamilton exchanged with Laurens and Lafayette is unlike anything in [Hamilton’s] later letters.” (97) Laurens, a member of the southern aristocracy, shared Hamilton’s romantic ideal of dying young for a cause; Hamilton’s first dueling experience was as Laurens’s second. In 1779 Hamilton wrote to Laurens, then serving in South Carolina, “I wish...it m[ight] be in my power by action rather than words [to] convince you that I love you...till you bade us adieu, I hardly knew the value you had taught my heart to set upon you...You s[hould] not have taken advantage of my sensibility to ste[al] into my affections without my consent.”(123) The letters between Laurens and Hamilton may have simply been platonic, as the tone of correspondence at that time was flowery even among men, but Hamilton complained that Laurens did not write him frequently enough: “like a jealous lover, when I thought you slighted my caresses, my affection was alarmed and my vanity piqued.” (124) It is to Laurens that Hamilton outlined the qualities he sought in a wife; was he seeking Laurens’s assistance or his approval? When Hamilton tried to join Laurens in South Carolina, Washington would not let Hamilton leave his staff.

There are many references throughout the book to Hamilton’s “brimming with libido,” but being “fickle.” (128) Martha Washington even named her tom cat “Hamilton.” Hamilton “tended to grow flirtatious, almost giddy, with women.” (93) During the Continental Army’s winter hiatus at Morristown Hamilton met and was “instantly smitten” (129) with Elizabeth Schuyler, daughter of General Philip Schuyler, scion of an old Dutch family and owner of large estates in upstate New York. Elizabeth Schuyler’s qualities matched Hamilton’s list, and within a month they were engaged. Elizabeth Schuyler was “well-bred,” (127) had a large family of seven siblings, and a large fortune, yet Hamilton does not tell Laurens of his engagement for four months, and is less than effusive when describing his fiancé. Hamilton writes Laurens several months later, “I have still a part for the public and another for you,” (132) perhaps the most telling line in their correspondence. Hamilton tried twice to obtain diplomatic appointments to France in the year before his marriage; in the first he was assisted by Laurens, in the

second Laurens was chosen over Hamilton. “Hamilton was a mass of insecurities that he usually kept well hidden,” according to Chernow, “only to John Laurens and Eliza Schuyler did he confide his fears.” (144) After Yorktown Hamilton urges Laurens to “put on the *toga*, come to Congress... We have fought side by side to make America free. Let us hand in hand struggle to make her happy.” (172) Hamilton sounds as if he is playing a role, acting out the stories of Greek and Roman heroes in his own personal drama, the American Revolution. When Laurens, “an imprudent officer...too rash and impetuous” in battle, was killed in a British ambush near Charleston in 1782 “Hamilton shut off some compartment of his emotions and never reopened it.” (173)

The lusty Hamilton fathered eight children, and seems to have had a strong sexual proclivity, which would help to explain his relationship with Laurens, his self-documented affair with Maria Reynolds, and his likely affair with sister-in-law Angelica Church. Several descriptions portray Hamilton as having androgynous qualities: “feminine rosiness to his cheeks,” (333); “feminine traits.” (335) One observer even called him a “skite,” a Scotch-Irish term for “a vain, frivolous, or wanton girl.” (329) While Hamilton and Eliza complemented one another, Angelica Church was his female counterpart: well-read, musical, steeped in politics, seductive, and an incurable flirt. She was a renowned hostess on both sides of the Atlantic, and Thomas Jefferson was just one of a string of men who adored her. Hamilton and Church never hid their mutual admiration, which was “so potent and obvious that many people assumed they were lovers.” (133) Although their letters to Eliza never hide their affection for one another, their letters to each other are more intense. “I seldom write to a lady without fancying the relation of lover and mistress,” (281) Hamilton wrote. When the Churches permanently move to Europe Hamilton writes of “the bitterness it gives to those who love you with the *love of nature* and to me who feel an attachment for you not less lively...” (205) The first public accusation of Hamilton being an adulterer coincided with a visit home by Angelica Church in 1789, when the speculation about the true relationship between Hamilton and Church was renewed by their open “mutual admiration.” (283)

Chernow does not connect the dots between Hamilton and two of his great friends, Gouverneur Morris and Charles Talleyrand, both notorious womanizers. “Mr. Hamilton saw much of him,” Eliza said of Talleyrand, who in return thought that Hamilton “took too little notice of Eliza’s beauty.” Chernow notes that “Hamilton savored the roguish diplomat’s company,” and describes their relationship as a “mutual fascination.” (466) Usually, where there’s smoke there’s fire, and a reason why Hamilton was so willing to pay his blackmailers, the Reynolds. The perceptive Abigail Adams got it right: “Oh, I have read his heart in his wicked eyes. The very devil is in them. They are lasciviousness itself.” (535)

Chernow believes Hamilton feared “despotism and anarchy” (33) in equal measure, a fear derived from growing up amidst a plantation system wherein despotic planters lived in constant fear of slave revolts. Chernow’s tendency to judge the past from the convenience of the present is most evident when he discusses slavery. He forsakes the realities of the eighteenth century for melodramatic interpretations, using a curious blend of daintiness and hyperbole when writing about slavery that masks rather than exposes the institution. That white masters routinely fathered children by their slaves becomes “inequitable carnal relations” that were a “dreadful commonplace.” In the islands, slavery lent a “pervasive taint” rather than being by its very nature an inequitable basis for an economic system. Describing slavery with vocabulary such as “heinous” and “grisly,” may be politically correct, but avoids the historical complexity of that era.

Chernow assumes that Hamilton's abhorrence of slavery was a result of his growing up as a witness to "bloodcurdling scenes" of "inimitable savagery" on Nevis, but offers no proof that Hamilton directly observed any of them. (19) He speculates that having house slaves in St. Croix "*may* [italics added] have made a lasting impression" (211) that led to Hamilton's abolitionist stance, yet offers not one piece of evidence. Eliza Hamilton's growing up in a household that had slaves is termed "terribly jarring" (211) when, given her family's status, it would have been commonplace. Chernow qualifies the Hamiltons owning two house slaves with terminology such as "*may*," "apparently," and "reluctantly."

Chernow gets really worked up when discussing institutionalized southern slavery, accusing its practitioners, many of whom were Hamilton's political opponents, of "nefarious deeds" (211) Hamilton's efforts on behalf of abolition are employed by Chernow to prove that the stereotype of Hamilton caring only for the merchant elite is false, and that Hamilton was more sincere in his position on abolition than Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, Washington, and Madison. Hamilton believed slaves were genetically equal, whereas Jefferson believed they were inherently unequal; Jefferson is "craven" in doing nothing about slavery, whereas Hamilton "toiled" to end it. (212) Hamilton was, however, a member of the New York Manumission Society, over half of whose members were slave owners, and which favored gradual abolition, a position taken in various degrees by all the above named founders. Chernow's discussion of the founders and slavery skims the surface, avoiding the deeper analysis that is necessary, especially for the underlying political implications. By doing so he distances the reader from the historical reality, and thereby from Hamilton's world.

Chernow sets up a dynamic in *Alexander Hamilton* whereby Hamilton, the hero, exhibits the qualities most admired by Americans while Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and Burr do not. The melodrama is palpable when Chernow compares Hamilton with his nemeses, especially Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson was "a crafty man" whose "tightly sealed lips convey something enigmatic," he found "strength in silence," and "seldom made eye contact." Jefferson was "laconic," had "slack-jointed movements" and a "folksy air" which "charmed people and allowed Jefferson to root out their secrets." (311) It occurs to the discerning reader that the author may be indulging in dramatic effect, scene-setting rather than interpreting. On one page alone Jefferson "dithered," "vacillated," "evaded," and "equivocated." (310) Jefferson was skilled at "hoarding statements" while Hamilton was a "swashbuckler who reveled in debate...opinionated, almost recklessly candid." Jefferson was "seduced by [his] quest for self-perfection," (312) while Hamilton's pursuit of the same is portrayed as astounding and admirable. Jefferson is faulted for the "exquisite contradictions" (314) between his lifestyle and his belief in republican ideals, while Hamilton is presented as living modestly. Hence Hamilton, the Federalist, was misunderstood as favoring aristocracy while Jefferson, the Republican, was the true aristocrat. The fact that Hamilton married into one of the wealthiest and most politically powerful families in New York is omitted from this discussion. Chernow goes so far as to state "if we are to credit Jefferson's story" (328) when he quotes all other historical personages without aspersions.

"Both Hamilton and Jefferson came to see each other as hypocritical libertines, and this fed a mutual cynicism." (316) The connections between Jefferson and Angelica Church must have ruffled Hamilton, which Chernow, curiously, does not discuss. Church was go-between for Jefferson and Maria Cosway during their dalliance in Paris, and Jefferson also had a flirtation with Church. Chernow paints Jefferson as a libertine who pursued Church despite her being a wife and mother, while letting Hamilton off the hook for his morally questionable relationship with his sister-in-law. Despite his animosity for

Hamilton, Jefferson remained Angelica Church's life-long correspondent. New Yorker Chernow has little understanding of southern gentility and of the eighteenth century southern aristocracy - their avoidance of unpleasantness, acerbic debate, and emphasis on manners. Where Hamilton reveled in direct confrontation, Jefferson was an experienced diplomat, a skill attributed by Chernow to corrupt European influences. Chernow dwells on Hamilton's childhood, but omits the fact that Jefferson's father died when he was fourteen. He quotes Jefferson's famous comment on protecting oneself from pain, but fails to connect it with the deaths of his wife, infant son, and two daughters.

Chernow excuses every indiscretion committed by Hamilton for the first two-thirds of the book, including his mania for control that nearly created the chaos he feared. Despite his consistent manipulations, Chernow does not describe Hamilton as "calculating" until page 530. As Hamilton's denouement begins Chernow shifts to a more even handed approach towards Jefferson and Burr, as if the author has just discovered Hamilton's less admirable qualities.

Washington said of Hamilton that he was "an ambitious man and therefore a dangerous one. That he is ambitious I readily grant, but...of that laudable kind which prompts a man to excel in whatever he takes in hand." (560) However, men as brilliant, dedicated, and with personalities as diverse as John Adams, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Aaron Burr loathed and distrusted him. John Adams was correct when he "saw himself as a decent, helpless man tangled in byzantine plots dreamed up by the devious mind of Alexander Hamilton." (558) Chernow takes pains to present Hamilton as a planner rather than a plotter, a man who "could not muzzle his opinions," (176) but a French emigré said Hamilton had "something a little furtive in his glance." (464) Hamilton always had to have it *his* way: "Hamilton lived in a world of moral absolutes and was not especially prone to compromise or consensus building." (509) Hamilton "was seen as cocky, conceited, and swaggering by his enemies." (509) He believed that sovereignty provides the right to use means to ends to preserve the power granted, a very Machiavellian concept.

Chernow explains that Hamilton would never have quit Washington's staff and risked alienating him for "one last chance for battlefield honor" had he been a "brazen opportunist," but more likely is that Hamilton calculated that being a hero "would be a [more] useful credential in the postwar political world" (150) "Hamilton at his most devious" (177) urged Washington to "dabble in a dangerous game of pretending to be a lofty statesman while covertly orchestrating pressure on Congress" during the Newburgh Conspiracy. Hamilton addressed Washington with all the impertinence and entitlement of a favored son, assuring that Washington, as president, would remain the public face for Hamilton's agenda: "It is to little purpose to have *introduced* a system," he wrote to Washington, "if the weightiest influence is not given to its firm *establishment* in the outset." (270) Just as he had hammered away at Washington to promote him to a field command over other officers, Treasury Secretary Hamilton consistently badgered Washington to further his personal agendas in every other cabinet department, especially State, and Washington "willingly served as... [Hamilton's] political shield." (290) Even under Adams, he was "cunning, quick-footed, and manipulative" (560) in his pursuit of the Inspector Generalship, which made him second in command to Washington during the Quasi War.

Hamilton consistently violated the separation of powers, hammering at Congress to pass his financial plan and encouraging others to do the same. He lobbied strenuously for passage of his plan to assume states' debts, causing Benjamin Rush to doubt "whether a more dishonorable influence has ever been used by a British Minister (bribery excepted)." (324) He ultimately sold out his father-in-law Philip

Schuyler in the “backdoor deal” to place the capitol on the Potomac in return for passage of the assumption bill, a deal in which Jefferson claimed he was “duped.” (330) “Most historians regard him as having been something akin to a prime minister”(289): “Your Excellency has, in my opinion,” he wrote to Washington after his historic speech to the Newburgh officers, “acted wisely... You coincide in opinion with me on the conduct proper to be observed by yourself.” (179) His machinations weakened his own political support, but “he wanted to be a statesman...not a politician.” (324) Hamilton repeatedly meddled in elections, attempting to manipulate votes and outcomes to assure that *his* candidates were elected. His plans backfired every time: in the New York Senatorial election of 1789 he ruined a chance to injure the Clinton machine; the Presidential Election of 1796, “a dark and dirty intrigue,” (274) earned him Adams’s undying enmity; and the New York Governor’s race of 1804 led to his death.

Spectres of doubt about his participation in speculation in government securities clouded his tenure as Treasury Secretary. “There *were* hidden agendas buried inside Hamilton’s economic program” (342) that he did not share with the public. He “wielded huge patronage powers” in awarding contracts for construction of the infrastructure for the Coast Guard and Customs Service. Once Customs and the Coast Guard were up and running, Hamilton had a built in spy network which he knew how to utilize, having gained espionage experience during the war. “He had a canny ability to clothe political objectives in technical garb.” (342) A revolution had been fought to prevent one man from holding too much power, which was exactly what Hamilton attempted to do.

It is also difficult to accept that Hamilton was totally innocent of financial manipulation, speculation, or personal financial benefit. He may not have embezzled any of the “tremendous sums” (341) he was in charge of as Treasury Secretary, and was cleared by Congressional inquiry but his political positions led to lucrative legal work. He was adored by New York’s merchant elite, and acted as business agent for brother-in-law John Church, which provided him not only with opportunity but shared accounts. He may have held “only a single share” (200) of the Bank of New York, but he sat as Church’s representative on the board, and received a handsome income as the bank’s attorney. His altruism on behalf of the New York Manumission Society came with an appointment as one of its counselors. Chernow offers that Hamilton, “a man of irreproachable integrity...severed all outside sources of income while in office,” (287) but so did Dick Cheney. Hamilton knew William Duer to be a speculator when he chose him as Assistant Treasury Secretary, and although warned of the possibility he created the circumstances and climate for the rampant speculation that ensued after the establishment of the Bank of the United States. In these difficult economic times it is hard to be appreciative of the structure Hamilton created in support of our avaricious market economy, especially when the same weaknesses and evils that nearly brought down Hamilton’s new structure are so readily apparent today.

Hamilton continually left his wife and children at crucial periods in their lives. Immediately before his wedding he competed for a diplomatic position abroad, then agitated for a field command; shortly after he left to take his command at Yorktown. He left for the Annapolis Convention immediately after the birth of their third child. Chernow presents Hamilton as “suffused with melancholy” over these separations, and continually loving in his correspondence. In one of the most blatant example of Chernow’s excusing Hamilton’s behavior, he even blames the pregnant Eliza for the inception of the Maria Reynolds affair. “It was a dangerous moment for Eliza to abandon Hamilton...many people noted his enchantment with women.” Poor Hamilton, who “did not allow himself sufficient time for escape and relaxation...a volatile personality encased inside a regimented existence,” (363) would then use the

excuse of not wanting to upset his wife and family as the reason that he paid his blackmailers. “One can only imagine Hamilton’s cold sweats and unremitting horror at the thought of discovery by Eliza,” (410) Chernow speculates. Hamilton “was prepared to sacrifice his private reputation to preserve his public honor” by publishing “the Reynolds pamphlet”. The “righteous” Hamilton, the supreme egoist, chose to sacrifice not only his own privacy but that of his family when Eliza was pregnant yet again.

Alexander Hamilton proves that the American politics of our time have not entered a new phase of partisan bitterness and rivalry, but have always been that way. The “gutter world of personal sniping, furtive machinations, and tabloid-style press attacks” was as much a part of the early republic as the “Olympian sphere of constitutional debate and dignified discourse.” (275) Hamilton set the pattern for all future American political sexcapades in his public confession of sexual indiscretion in “the Reynolds pamphlet.” Americans love a confessed sinner: “if [Hamilton] fornicates with every female in the cities of New York and Philadelphia he will rise again, for purity of character after a period of political existence is not necessary for public patronage.” (537)

Even Hamilton’s incredible ego, however, can not explain his fatalism and his conviction that the future of the nation would be determined by his participation in the duel with Burr. Hamilton saw the duel as an unavoidable responsibility, but was fully prepared to sacrifice his responsibility to his wife and seven children, willing to be the cause of their suffering even after the death of his son in a duel a few years before. Hamilton the mythic hero appreciated the “romantic sense of honor” and “ritualized violence” (683) of a duel. He had been involved in six challenges, but they had all been negotiated to a nonviolent conclusion. Until the confrontation with Burr, Hamilton had always taken the offensive, demanding and receiving apologies from those whom he believed had impugned his honor. He *had* insulted Burr and harmed his political future by calling him “a dangerous man...who ought not to be trusted.” (681) Hamilton could have diffused the situation, and had several opportunities to back off, but he rarely admitted he was wrong. Instead, when questioned by Burr he became defensive, he equivocated, he could not recall. As the negotiations and preparations for the duel played out over a span of three weeks he seemed to become delusional, at once throwing parties and writing wills. So mystifying is his bizarre behavior that one wonders if he suffered from syphilis or an opium habit, was a manic depressive, or wished he had died with John Laurens. The messianic complex he exhibited seems inexplicable unless the reader accepts it as the epitome of Hamilton’s outsized ego. Hamilton rarely lost, and this duel would be “another gallant gamble of the sort he was accustomed to winning.” (690) Either he never believed Burr would shoot him, or he did want to die, not necessarily as a suicide, but as a savior, the savior of the United States. “Perhaps my sensibility is the effect of an exaggerated estimate of my service to the U[nited] States,” he wrote, “...every man will judge for himself.” (691)

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