

Alexander Hamilton
by Ron Chernow

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Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* is a wonderfully written detailed account of one of America's most important founding fathers. Whether listening to the 10-compact-discs, abridged audio version as narrated by Grover Gardner (which is done so beautifully that I am at a loss to site exactly what is left out), or reading the lengthy 832 pages of the book, Chernow takes us from Hamilton's sad and shameful upbringing on Nevis and St. Croix through his death from the mortal shot fired by our nation's Vice President, Aaron Burr.

The period from 1755 to 1804 – Chernow's option for the questionable birth year of our subject and his death, respectively – is unarguably the most important period in American history, and Alexander Hamilton was present, active and a formidable participant. For his role as General Washington's aide-de-camp, his bravery shown at the final battles of Yorktown, his membership in the Constitutional Congress, his leadership and cunning usage of the pen in *The Federalist Papers*, his role as the first Secretary of the Treasury, Hamilton was so vital to the making of America that he is the second most important American founding father, to be followed only by the honorable, venerable and one of his very few steady friends, George Washington.

For teachers of early American history, Chernow's book is rich with details enabling educators to thoroughly translate not only the life of Alexander Hamilton, but also important facts of all the founding fathers: George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Ben Franklin, and Aaron Burr. (Burr's status as a founding father is rightly questioned by Chernow. The author tells us that Burr "produced no major papers on policy matters, constitutional issues, or government institutions (page 192)." In contrast, author Joseph Ellis gives Burr founding father status,

but is his fame, or infamy, a direct correlation to his duel, and the subsequent death of the both loved and hated Alexander Hamilton?

Despite Hamilton's enemies, time has told that he was presciently aware of America's needs. For his dedication to his many services -- particularly for the ultimate sacrifice to his country, his death -- brought on by the unrelenting and unjust harassment of his opponents, Hamilton deserves to be posthumously awarded the Profiles in Courage Award (as originally defined by Senator John F. Kennedy for senators in memoriam and now carried out by his daughter, Caroline, through the JFK Museum, for honorary recipients from all walks of life). While some saw Hamilton as a selfish, aristocratic Anglophile, his direction for the nascent world power has been immeasurable. His conviction to stay the course amidst professional and personal attacks was cited often by Chernow. The most glaring example of Hamilton's courage was his defense of Loyalist rights and properties immediately following the American Revolution.

Hamilton bravely defended and championed the causes of many Loyalists in law suits in his adopted home state of New York. New Yorkers, having seen their land and property taken over and often gutted by the British for practically the duration of the War, had nothing but outrage for the Tories. Hamilton pleaded for mercy as he "remind[ed] his fellow citizens that actions taken now would reverberate into the future (page 197)." He questioned why New York should lose the economic vitality of these Tories as they left for British Canada or returned to Great Britain itself. More importantly, Hamilton could see that the world was watching this new "republican experiment."

Experimentation with the Articles of Confederation failed as they were too weak in raising the necessary funds and too weak in enforcing the laws of the new republic.

With Hamilton's strong support at the Constitutional Convention (the other two New York members were radically opposed to a new government) the delegates, under secrecy, miraculously composed the United States Constitution – today's oldest written constitution of any country. This new vision for government, admittedly not perfect by Hamilton as noted when he "cited Hume that only time and experience could guide political enterprises to completion (page 260)" now needed ratification of nine of the thirteen states to become effective.

For Hamilton's New York, a large, prosperous and geographically important state to the hopeful new Union, relinquishing power, any power, to a national government which in any way resembled the British government, was going to be difficult for New Yorkers to accept. Like all other states' citizens, New Yorkers considered their state as their country, particularly as "most outside the military had never traveled more than a day's journey from their homes (page 157)." But even more than state loyalty, according to Alexander Hamilton, the "major threat [to New York joining the new United States] could now be summed up in three words: Governor George Clinton (page 219).

Clinton had "emerged from the Revolution with unmatched popularity and had been reelected three times (page 219). He had the power of the masses behind him – where Clinton went, so went the populace. Clinton would "serve seven terms as governor and two as vice-president . . . [and] represented what would become a staple of American political folklore: the local populist boss (page 220)." Hamilton had to take the fight for the Constitution to the people, and this he did, in his most important service to the United States – his leadership and contribution to *The Federalist Papers*.

“Federalists” surprisingly “a name ordinarily applied to supporters of a loose confederation (page 243)” was the identification for those in favor of a strong and central government. “Anti-Federalists” would be their opponents and this is where most New Yorkers, led by Governor Clinton, stood. To win support for the Constitution, Hamilton, in October of 1787 “conceived an ambitious writing project to help elect federalist delegates to the New York Ratifying Convention (page 246).”

A total of eighty-five essays, *The Federalist* would be written originally for the New York press with the immediate purpose of persuading the state’s delegates to ratify the Constitution. However, these important papers would take on not only national fame, but world fame as well. Hamilton’s precise and thorough defense of the Constitution through his efforts in *The Federalist* is his longest-lasting contribution to the United States. “By the year 2000, [*The Federalist Papers*] had been quoted no fewer than 291 times in Supreme Court opinions, with the frequency of citations rising with the years (page 260).” Chernow tells us that “Theodore Roosevelt commented ‘that it is on the whole the greatest book’ dealing with practical politics (page 249).”

Hamilton did not act alone here. He and fellow New Yorker, John Jay, invited James Madison from Virginia – another state struggling to ratify the Constitution – along with Gouverneur Morris and William Duer. Ultimately, Morris was too busy to accept the offer and Duer’s “two or more papers . . . were not continued, nor did they make a part of the printed collection (page 247).” As the three authors were writing secretly, the pen name of Publius was chosen by Hamilton. “Publius Valerius had toppled the last Roman king and set up the republican foundations of government (page 248).” Of the eighty-five essays, “fifty-one [were] attributed to Hamilton, twenty-nine to Madison, and

only five to Jay (page 248).” Each author would write within their area of expertise: Jay was assigned to foreign relations, Madison the history of republics and confederacies and Hamilton “those branches of government most congenial to him: the executive, the judiciary, and some sections of the Senate. Previewing things to come, he also covered military matters and taxation (page 248).”

Understanding *The Federalist Papers* can be challenging. Chernow offers on pages 252-260 a simplified overview of all eighty-five essays including their authors. The following list charts Chernow’s details (with the exception of *The Federalist No. 14* which he omitted):

<u>Essay</u>	<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>General Topic(s)</u>
1	Hamilton	Opening essay addressed to the people of New York. Hamilton declares that the fate of the new empire rests with New Yorkers.
2-5	Jay	Addresses how weak the Confederacy had been in foreign affairs.
6-9	Hamilton	Details the pernicious domestic consequences if the Articles of Confederation endured.
10	Madison	Noted as the most influential of all: takes issue against Montesquieu’s theory that republics work only in small states.
11-13	Hamilton	States the advantages for the new union for commerce as well as government revenue and expenses.
14	Madison	In his recount, Chernow left out <i>The Federalist No. 14</i> which website www.constitution.org tells us pertains to “Objections to the Proposed Constitution from Extent of Territory Answered.”
15-22	Hamilton/ Madison	Skewed the anarchic state of the Confederation.
23-36	Hamilton	Outlines point-by-point defense of the Constitution.
37-56	Madison	Covers the general structure of the new Union.

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| 59-61 | Hamilton | Details Congressional elections and regulations. |
| 62-64 | Madison/
Jay | Addresses the Senate embody. |
| 65-85 | Hamilton | Further address of the Senate and the entire commentary on the executive and judicial branches. |

Hamilton clearly was the leader of these masterful documents which ultimately met their goal of bringing New York into the new Union. While this vast project was neither his first nor last service to his country, it is *The Federalist Papers* which represents his greatest contribution to America.

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