

Maryland Society, Sons of the American Revolution

First Place 2007-2008 Winning Essay

Alexander Hamilton's Impact on the Constitutional Era

Alex Knobel
Columbia, MD, 21044
Atholton High School

Their status as Presidents immortalizes founding fathers George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. Ben Franklin's charisma and affability grants him similar historical longevity. However, other men played crucial roles in the formation of the United States during the revolutionary period. Alexander Hamilton qualifies as such a leader; although he never attained a position higher than Secretary of the Treasury, he sharply influenced the events of the late 18th century. Despite constant obscurity, courtesy of the aforementioned political figures, few matched Hamilton's contributions to the development of the Constitution and subsequent growth of the new nation.

Most historians believe Hamilton was born in 1755, in the West Indies. An illegitimate child, he survived on the islands until 1772, when he traveled to New York City to further his education. He remained in the thirteen colonies and attended King's College (now Columbia University) where his interest in politics took shape. Inspired by activist ideals acquired through his learning, Hamilton joined the Continental Army following the outbreak of war. While in the army, Hamilton gained crucial connections and his talents allowed him a speedy rise in rank. Within two years, Hamilton had earned himself a place in the inner circle of George Washington, Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. In addition to serving loyally as Lieutenant Colonel, Hamilton forged an important bond with the general, one that furthered his political influence in the new nation formed following the successful rebellion.

The United States faced many challenges after winning its independence from Great Britain. First among these was the lack of an effective federal government. Without a strong, central controlling institution, little could prevent states from acting in any manner they pleased and no existing organization possessed the capability to intervene in matters too large for individual states to handle. A small number of delegates, including Hamilton, attended a conference in September 1786 that confined its deliberations to matters of trade. Hamilton called for a larger convention to address the weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation. The purpose of such a gathering, in Hamilton's words, was "to render the constitution of the federal government adequate to the exigencies of the Union."¹

Shortly after the Constitutional Convention convened in May 1787, Hamilton gave a crucial five-hour speech outlining his vision of a strong national government. The plan represented a dramatic leap from the delegates' previous discussions, which had all centered on

plans keeping much more power in the hands of the states. Hamilton viewed the British government as the perfect model to emulate, and as a result, his plan called for electors to choose a “governor” (of the federal government), who would serve for life. His bicameral legislature would have the power to appoint state governors and override state laws.²

Ultimately, the delegates did not seriously consider Hamilton’s plan as a whole; many found it alarmingly similar to the government from which the states had recently won their independence. Nonetheless, Hamilton’s push for a very strong federal government fundamentally changed the tone of the debate. With Hamilton’s plan, as well as the less radical Virginia Plan, proposing strong federal governments, discussions shifted to how much power that federal government should have. These plans helped make inevitable the creation of a significant federal government, as opposed to the ineffective sham the Articles of Confederation established. Hamilton’s drive for electors, instead of the popular vote, to determine the chief executive of the federal government proved successful. The convention did not enact his exact plan (in which congress would choose the electors), but the Electoral College, which has fundamentally shaped the way American presidential campaigns are run, received much support from Hamilton.

However, Hamilton’s greatest contribution came in the period following the convention. Nine of the thirteen states needed to ratify the constitution in order for the document to go into effect; however, at the local level strong opposition existed, as the new plan granted the federal government powers previously held by the states. With the summer’s deliberations hanging in the balance, Hamilton wrote 51 of the 85 Federalist papers, essays penned by Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay defending and explaining the Constitution. Hamilton, who “was resourceful in seeking collaborators close at hand,” made the collection possible.³

Although several of Madison’s essays, such as Federalist #10 on factions in democracy, earned historical acclaim, Hamilton made the most valuable contributions. Hamilton’s disputes with political enemy George Clinton spawned the newspaper letters, and it was advice Hamilton received from Washington that resulted in the three men publishing the papers under the pseudonym of “Publius,” which Hamilton selected. Attaching names to the essays would have lessened their effects, as political enemies could have attacked the people writing them, particularly the controversial Hamilton, and ignored the ideas they espoused.

Hamilton wrote all of the letters concerning the judiciary, a hotly disputed subject. Assuaging critics who charged that the Constitution granted too much power to an unelected body, Hamilton explained the purpose of the federal courts as protector of the people against abuses from either the legislature or executive. Of all the branches, it represented the minimal threat, as it had no control over the “sword” (executive branch) or the “purse” (legislative branch).⁴ Furthermore, Hamilton explained why the delegates had not included a Bill of Rights in the Constitution, effectively arguing that by enumerating specific rights, an implication existed that all rights not explicitly stated were not granted to the people.⁵ Although the Bill of Rights was later added to the Constitution as the first ten amendments, this defense of the delegates’ decision assuaged concerns at many state conventions.

At the New York ratifying convention, Hamilton led the Federalist forces. As one of the largest states, New York’s ratification was immensely important; even if nine states ratified, the

new union would be hard-pressed to succeed without a state as vital as New York. Hamilton countered the points of those opposed to ratification and “the cause of the Constitution owed most to the brilliant oratorical efforts of Hamilton.”⁶

Had the states not ratified the Constitution, the battlefield heroics of Washington, the brilliant penmanship of Jefferson, and the unending wit of Franklin would not be legendary today. The efforts of the Revolutionary War were at risk of being for naught prior to the Constitution’s ratification. Washington said before the Philadelphia Convention, “Without some alteration in our political creed, the superstructure we have been seven years raising at the expense of much blood and treasure must fall. We are fast verging to anarchy and confusion.”⁷ In many ways, the efforts of those pushing the Constitution, among whom Hamilton was foremost, enabled the United States to begin down the path leading to eventual stability and prosperity.

Hamilton, an illegitimate child who immigrated to the United States as a teen, embodied the American dream before anyone popularized the expression. His contributions were solely the result of his passion and intellect. Those contributions ensured the historical remembrance of more celebrated founding figures.

Footnotes

¹O’Brien, Steven. *Alexander Hamilton*. New York: Chelsea House, 1989.

²Mount, Steve. “Constitutional Topic: the Constitutional Convention. “The U.S. Constitution Online, 2007. 22 Dec., 2007 http://www.usconstitution.net/consttop_ccon.html

³Morris, Richard B. *Witness at the Creation*. New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1985.

⁴Alexander Hamilton, *The Federalist*, No. 78

⁵Alexander Hamilton, *The Federalist*, No 84.

⁶Morris, Richard B. *Witness at the Creation*. New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1985.

⁷Ellis, Joseph J. *American Creation*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2007.

Works Cited

Alexander Hamilton. *The Federalist*, No. 78

Alexander Hamilton, *The Federalist*, No. 84

Ellis, Joseph J. *American Creation*. New York: Alfred a. Knopf, 2007.

Morris, Richard B. *Witness at the Creation*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1985.

Mount, Steve. "Constitutional Topic: the Constitutional Convention." The U.S. Constitution Online. 2007. 22 Dec. 2007 <http://www.usconstitution.net/consttop_ccon.html>.

O'Brien, Steven. *Alexander Hamilton*. New York: Chelsea House, 1989.

Biography

Alex Knobel is a junior at Atholton High School in Columbia, Maryland. Along with his other academic honors he is a scholar athlete. His sports include soccer and tennis. Other extracurricular activities include *It's Academic* and Future Business Leaders of America, Student Government Association and Atholton's Jewish Student Union. He has volunteered at the Howard County Parks and Recreation camps. Alex plans to attend college and is considering studying government, history, journalism and psychology.