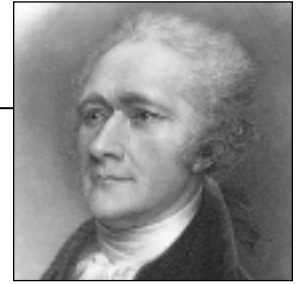


Alexander Hamilton

Founder of Federalism



Alexander Hamilton (c. 1755–1804) played a leading role in the adoption of the U.S. Constitution. During the formative years of the United States, his dedication to the public good helped to create a strong and stable central government.

Alexander Hamilton was born on the island of Nevis, in the Danish West Indies. Hamilton had a difficult childhood. When he was around eight years old, his father abandoned his family. By the time Hamilton was eleven, his mother had died.

To support himself, Hamilton stocked shelves for a merchant named Nicholas Cruger. His mathematical abilities quickly earned him a position as the business's bookkeeper. When Hamilton was fourteen, Cruger took a trip to New York. To everyone's surprise, he left the boy in charge of the business while he was gone.

In 1772, Cruger sent Hamilton to a nearby island on business. While he was traveling, a terrible hurricane hit the West Indies. Hamilton wrote a moving account of the event, which was published by a local newspaper. People were so impressed with the boy's writing that they collected money to send him to the American colonies for a formal education.

High Achiever In America, Hamilton attended a grammar school in New Jersey while working at an accounting firm in New York. After completing his basic studies, he traveled to Princeton University (then known as the College of New Jersey) and informed the president of the college that he was too smart to take the normal courses. He wanted to take only advanced courses and complete them at his own pace. Unimpressed with the pushy young man, the school flatly rejected him.

He tried the same thing at Columbia University, then known as King's College. Surprisingly, he was admitted on his own terms. Backing up his big talk, Hamilton completed five years of study in only twenty-four months, making good grades all the way through.

Meeting George Washington While Hamilton was in college, relations between England and the American colonies grew strained. Hamilton used his talent for writing to author numerous newspaper articles calling for American independence.

When war broke out in 1775, Hamilton was put in charge of a student militia. After the Second Continental Congress named George Washington commander in chief, Hamilton's men were assigned to him. Hamilton immediately impressed General Washington.

When Washington crossed the Delaware River on Christmas Eve in 1776 to attack the British, Hamilton was with him. He helped Washington's army retreat before the main British force could arrive and surround the Americans. Washington made Hamilton—then only nineteen—his special assistant.

Political Interests Before the war ended, Hamilton had already begun to turn his attention to the economic and political problems that would face the new nation. He was particularly concerned with the nation's finances. At that time, each state printed its own money. Hamilton argued for a central bank that would take charge of the finances of the entire nation. This idea scared many Americans. They had grown tired of being pushed around by England. The last thing they wanted was a central government with the power to push them around again.

Hamilton also participated in politics. He was selected as a delegate to help draft the Articles of Confederation, the nation's first constitution. But Hamilton soon came to believe that the Articles were too weak to last. He began to write articles calling for a stronger constitution.

Other leaders agreed. In 1787, delegates

gathered at a Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia to write a new Constitution. At the convention, Hamilton advocated a strong central government. Some delegates believed that he went too far. Hamilton wanted a president who would serve for life. He also suggested that America should make its government as much like that of England as possible. Although few of Hamilton's ideas were accepted by the Convention, the new Constitution did create a much stronger central government.

After the Convention, Hamilton joined with James Madison and John Jay to write a series of newspaper articles in support of the new Constitution. These articles eventually came to be known as the "Federalist Papers." Without a strong national government, the letters insisted, America would quickly dissolve into thirteen feuding nations that would soon destroy one another.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

There is scarcely any thing that can wound the pride, or degrade the character of an independent nation, which we do not [currently] experience . . .

Here, my countrymen, impelled by every motive that ought to influence an enlightened people, let us make a firm stand for our safety, our tranquillity, our dignity, our reputation.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON, *The Federalist*,
"Number 15"

In 1789, the Constitution was adopted as the law of the land.

Father of Federalism Not everyone was as enthusiastic about a strong central government as Hamilton. He soon made enemies of those, like Thomas Jefferson, who believed that "the government that governs least governs best."

President Washington selected both Hamilton and Jefferson to serve in the new government. Hamilton became secretary of the treasury, and Jefferson became secretary of state. By the end of Washington's second term, the two men could barely stand to be in the same room. The different ideas the two men had about how the nation should be governed would eventually lead to the formation of America's first political parties—the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans.

In 1796, Hamilton resigned from government to go back into private law practice. He continued to write political columns for newspapers. In 1804, Hamilton wrote an article critical of Aaron Burr, a candidate for governor of New York. Hamilton's criticism was so harsh that Burr challenged him to a duel. On July 11, Hamilton and Burr met near the Hudson River to settle their differences. When the signal was given, Burr fired a shot that went through Hamilton's liver. Hamilton soon died from the wound.

A six-week grieving period was called across the nation. Flags were lowered to half-mast and pastors dedicated their sermons to the slain founding father. Hamilton is remembered for his leading role in the ratification of the U.S. Constitution and the creation of a strong central government. As the first secretary of the treasury, he created a stable economic framework and established the credit of the United States at home and abroad. His hard work during the early years of the nation contributed to the lasting strength of the U.S. government.

Review Questions

1. What events led Hamilton to move to America?
2. How did Hamilton support himself while he was completing his basic studies in America?
3. What was Hamilton's main focus at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia?

Critical Thinking

4. **Making Inferences** Nicholas Cruger left the fourteen-year-old Hamilton in charge of his business when he traveled. What does this say about Hamilton's character?
5. **Drawing Conclusions** Why were Americans reluctant to create a central bank, as Hamilton proposed, after the American Revolution?
6. **Making Generalizations** What are Hamilton's most important contributions to the United States?