

# Hamilton and Washington: The Architects of America<sup>1</sup>

By Clifford J. Hendel

## Introduction

Any 21st-century discussion of the relationship between Alexander Hamilton (born Nevis, British Leeward Islands, 1755—died, New York, 1804) and George Washington (born Popes Creek, Virginia, 1732—died Mt. Vernon, Virginia, 1799) and of the extent to which the success and notoriety of the latter depended on the contributions of the former, must start with the bestselling biography of Hamilton written by Ron Chernow in 2004.<sup>2</sup>

And this, not only for its own merits as the most comprehensive and masterful biography of Hamilton, but because Chernow's text served as the inspiration for the record-breaking Broadway musical "Hamilton," composed and written by (and initially starring in the title role) Lin-Manuel Miranda.<sup>3</sup>

Hamilton differed in many important ways from his fellow "founding fathers." He was, first and foremost, a self-made man and an immigrant, born to a poor and broken family on a Caribbean island. He never became president, his elective political career having been tarnished by a scandalous relation with a woman not his wife, and his life having been cut short at the age of 49 in a duel with the vice president of the United States, no less.

Indeed, if the typical American schoolchild (before the tandem of Chernow and Miranda, that is) knows anything about Hamilton, it is precisely the nature of his death, and perhaps the fact that his image appears on the American \$10 bill due to his service as the first U.S. Treasury secretary. His truly extraordinary contributions in the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), in the process of elaborating and approval of the American Constitution (1789) and in Washington's eight years as President (1789-1797) have not received the recognition they deserve. As noted by a leading biographer in 1999, Hamilton "is by no means a forgotten man, but his reputation, though vivid, is skewed."<sup>4</sup>

But, thanks to Chernow's and Miranda's respective scholarship and art, Hamilton's accomplishments and complexities have restored him to his rightful place in history, revealing him to be (in the words of critics of Chernow's work), "the boy wonder of early American politics,"<sup>5</sup> "the founding father who did more than any other to create the modern United States,"<sup>6</sup> "the man who planted the seeds"<sup>7</sup> and became, next to Washington, "the indispensable American founder."<sup>8</sup>

Chernow and Miranda also permit a better understanding of the relation between Washington ("the most

famously elusive figure in American history, a remote, enigmatic personage more revered than truly loved,"<sup>9</sup> "a man of granite self-control and a stranger to spontaneity who . . . [from boyhood] had struggled to master and conceal his deep emotions"<sup>10</sup>) and Hamilton, his "right-hand man" in times of war and peace.



Clifford J. Hendel

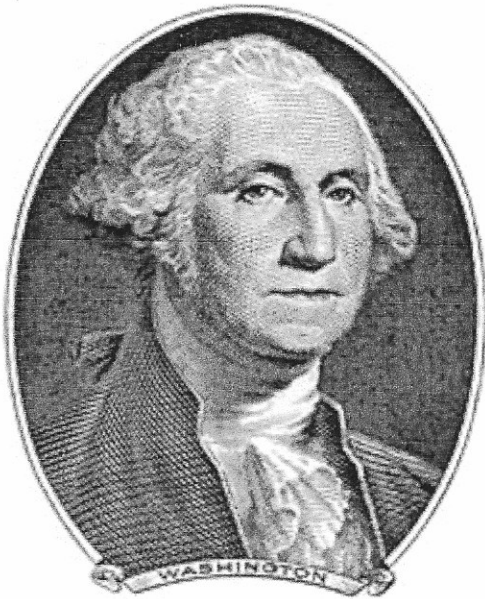
This article—using vignettes from the Broadway musical—will illustrate the symbiotic and complementary relation between the laconic Washington and the volcanic Hamilton, showing that just as Washington was "the indispensable man" for the nascent American republic, Hamilton was the "indispensable man" for Washington and, indeed, that they were indispensable for each other.

## Washington's "Right-Hand Man" in War and in Peace

An illegitimate, essentially self-educated child left orphaned at the age of 14, Hamilton was sent at age 17 to be educated in North America by a local businessman on the Caribbean island of St. Croix who was impressed with his

---

Clifford J. Hendel is a New York lawyer who was seconded to a Madrid firm for a year in the early 1990s and never returned, practicing international finance law in Paris for a New York-based global firm in the late 90s, then doing transactional and disputes work for two decades at a Madrid boutique before setting up a solo arbitral practice in 2018. He currently limits his practice to acting as neutral in international commercial, sports and investment disputes. In addition to being a New York attorney, he is qualified as an *abogado* in Madrid, an *avocat à la cour* in Paris and an English solicitor. He is Co-chair of the 2022 NYSBA Regional Meeting to be held in Madrid in April 2022. Additional biographical information is available at [www.hendel-idr.com](http://www.hendel-idr.com).



aptitude for work shown as a clerk in an import-export firm and his aptitude for writing shown in his famous account of the impact of a 1772 hurricane on the neighbouring island of Nevis, where he was born. Enrolling in New York's King's College (today, Columbia University) in 1773, he perceived military service in the brewing revolution as a promising stepping-stone to social prominence. Quickly, he became a fervent supporter of the pre-revolutionary cause, and an energetic and effective polemicist and orator on its behalf. "Possessed of an aristocratic savoir faire that belied his background, Hamilton turned himself with uncommon speed, from an outcast of the islands into a Revolutionary insider."<sup>11</sup>

As hostilities increased between the British and the colonials, initially in the Boston area, Hamilton—"that singular intellectual who picked up a musket as fast as a pen"<sup>12</sup>—joined a local militia in New York, discontinuing his college studies before graduation during the British occupation of New York (although voraciously studying military tactics and history on his own).

In an early example of his precocious military genius ("an intuitive judgment of the highest order"<sup>13</sup>), the student anticipated the opportunistic military strategy that ultimately would defeat the British, writing that "[I]t will be better policy to harass and exhaust the [British] soldiery by frequent skirmishes and incursions than to take the open field with them."<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, this strategy was also the strategy of Washington, the 45-year-old commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, a role which combined responsibilities typically handled by the president, the secretary of defense and the secretary of state.<sup>15</sup> "Chained to his desk with correspondence, Washington saw himself turning willy-nilly into a bureaucrat. He needed a surrogate who

was not only a good scribe but could intuit the responses he himself would write."<sup>16</sup> Hamilton's battlefield prowess at Trenton and Princeton having brought him to Washington's attention, in January 1777 Washington invited the accomplished 22-year-old artillery captain (an interesting professional parallel to the slightly younger Napoleon) to join his staff as an aide-de-camp.

Initially reluctant to exchange his musket (and the opportunities for military glory that he believed active combat would provide) for a pen, Hamilton accepted the post and served for four years as Washington's principal staff aide. As Miranda's characters express:

**Washington:** Dying is easy, young man.  
Living is harder.

**Hamilton:** Why are you telling me this?

**Washington:** I'm being honest. I'm working with a third of what our Congress has promised. We are a powder keg about to explode. I need someone like you to lighten the load . . . . We are outgunned, outmanned . . . outnumbered, outplanned . . . .

**Hamilton:** . . . I'll rise above my station, organize your information 'til we rise to the occasion of our new nation.<sup>17</sup>

And thus, was born the formidable team of Washington and Hamilton, the younger man evolving during the war years from private secretary to something akin to chief-of-staff, or even alter ego, of the commander-in-chief<sup>18</sup> (who, as both military and political leader of the patriots, acted as a kind of de facto President<sup>19</sup>), and later, during Washington's presidency, as his "unofficial prime minister."<sup>20</sup>

The relationship between Washington and Hamilton was so consequential in early American history . . . that it is difficult to conceive of their careers apart. The two men had complementary talents, values, and opinions that survived many strains over their twenty-two years together. Washington possessed the outstanding judgment, sterling character, and clear sense of purpose needed to guide his sometimes wayward protégé; he saw that the volatile Hamilton needed a steadying hand. Hamilton, in turn, contributed philosophical depth, administrative expertise, and comprehensive policy knowledge that nobody in Washington's ambit ever matched. He could transmute wispy ideas into detailed plans and true revolutionary dreams into enduring realities. As a team, they were unbeatable and far more than the sum of their parts.<sup>21</sup>

In peace as in war, the tandem's complementary talents were put to effective use due to their shared core visions, in particular, their firm preference for concentrated federal power instead of authority dispersed among the several states.

In no circumstance was this better demonstrated than in connection with the calling, the conduct and the aftermath of the Constitutional Convention of 1787. "[A]n assembly of demigods"<sup>22</sup> convened in Philadelphia for a month to come up with a blueprint for a more workable government than the loose confederation established by the Articles of Confederation, which had been in place since Revolutionary days, having been ratified by the 13 original states in 1781 and under which Congress had no power to collect taxes or to demand money from the states. Hamilton was a member of the New York delegation (to which he had been named by his powerful father-in-law, Phillip Schuyler) and Washington was head of the Virginia delegation, and ultimately the unanimously elected president of the Convention and thus president-in-waiting of the country in the event the Convention was ratified.

No one had a more potent influence than Hamilton on the calling of the Constitutional Convention or a greater influence afterward in securing its passage.<sup>23</sup> "[N]obody fought harder or more effectively for the new Constitution than Hamilton, who never wavered in his resolution to support it."<sup>24</sup>

No American judge, lawyer or law student is unfamiliar with the series of articles prepared to persuade New York voters to ratify the Constitution, known as *The Federalist Papers*. Referred to as "the most important work in political science that has ever been written . . . in the United States . . . , the first and still most authoritative commentary on the Constitution . . . *The Federalist* stands third only

to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution itself among the sacred writings of American political history . . . valued not merely as a clever defence of a particular charter, but as an exposition of certain timeless truths about constitutional government."<sup>25</sup>

Written and published by three men (Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay) under the collective pseudonym of Publius, it is Hamilton who "must ever be regarded as the political magician who brought Publius to life."<sup>26</sup> As recounted by Miranda's Aaron Burr before asking rhetorically, "How do you write like you're running out of time? Write day and night like you're running out of time?" "The plan was to write a total of 25 essays, the work divided evenly among the three men. In the end, they wrote 85 essays, in the span of 6 months. John Jay got sick after writing 5. James Madison wrote 29. Hamilton wrote the other 51."<sup>27</sup>

Hamilton's political magic, as demonstrated in *The Federalist Papers*, was a consequence of his unique talent and energy. As Chernow describes him:

Hamilton's mind always worked with preternatural speed. His collected papers are so stupefying in length that it is hard to believe that one man created them in fewer than five decades. Words were his chief weapons . . . His papers show that, Mozart-like, he could transpose complex thoughts onto paper with few revisions. At other times, he tinkered with the prose but generally did not alter the logical progression of his thought. He wrote with the speed of a beautifully organized mind that digested ideas thoroughly, slotted them into appropriate pigeonholes, then regurgitated them at will.<sup>28</sup>

*The Federalist Papers* not only played a key role in securing the pivotal approval of the Constitution by the state of New York, but also set the groundwork for judicial development over the following decades and, indeed, centuries, as to the interpretation of that short and occasionally ambiguous or even contradictory document in a manner consistent with an effective, but divided, government characterized by the strict balance of powers which is its genius.

The importance of *The Federalist Papers*, principally the handiwork of Hamilton, in American constitutional history and American history generally cannot be overstated. Without it, Washington may never have assumed the mantle of the presidency; and, having assumed it, he and his successors may have been excessively hamstrung in defining the scope of and exercising federal powers.

For all of this, in war and in peace, Washington can thank his "right-hand man."

## In Washington's Presidency—Cabinet Battles 1 and 2

Washington served two four-year terms as president. Logically, he relied heavily during his administration on his proven right-hand man, appointing the 32-year-old Hamilton to the critical post of secretary of the Department of the Treasury. Supervising the largest governmental department (with only 39 employees at the outset of Washington's presidency in 1797, far fewer than those employed at the time by Washington at his Mt. Vernon estate in Virginia), Hamilton's range of interests and abilities brought other areas within the scope of his attention, particularly foreign affairs, earning him the lifelong hostility of the first secretary of the Department of State, Thomas Jefferson.<sup>29</sup>

As Chernow notes:

No other moment in American history could have allowed such scope for Hamilton's abundant talents. The new government was a tabula rasa on which he could sketch plans with a young man's energy. Washington's administration had to create everything from scratch. Hamilton was that rare revolutionary: a master administrator and as competent a public servant as American politics would ever produce. One historian has written, "Hamilton was an administrative genius" who "assumed an influence in Washington's cabinet which is unmatched in the annals of the American cabinet system." The position demanded both a thinker and a doer, a skilled executive and a political theorist, a system builder who could devise interrelated policies. It also demanded someone who could build an institutional framework consistent with constitutional principles. Virtually every program that Hamilton put together raised fundamental constitutional issues, so that his legal training and work on *The Federalist* enabled him to craft the efficient machinery of government while expounding its theoretical underpinnings.<sup>30</sup>

Two examples, both represented in Miranda's musical, demonstrate Hamilton's central role in the Washington administration and Washington's unfailing reliance on, and trust in, the younger man.

The first involves another Hamiltonian "magnum opus,"<sup>31</sup> the Report on Public Credit prepared in his early weeks as Treasury secretary. A product of a "sustained bout of solitary, herculean labor,"<sup>32</sup> the report summarized America's financial predicament and recommended corrective measures to deal with the enormous public debt left over from the Revolution.

Drawing on the financial experience of Britain and certain innovations in French political economy, envisioning America as a young country rich in opportunity, particularly for manufacturing and trade, and arguing that the Constitution must be understood to include "implied powers," "necessary and proper" to implement those expressly granted by the states to the federal government, the report advocated a system of public credit designed to generate confidence in public debt and capital markets. Critical features of the report were the recommendation that the federal government assume the war debts of several states and for the establishment of a national bank.

Since the war debts of the agrarian Southern states tended to be much smaller than those of the increasingly manufacturing and finance-oriented northern states, the report crystallized latent divisions between North and South.<sup>33</sup> Madison, until then closely associated with Hamilton as seen in their *Federalist Papers* collaboration, broke with Hamilton. The rift is said to have precipitated the start of the two-party system in America (dividing the more northern-based, manufacturing and commercial-oriented "Federalists," championed by Hamilton and generally reflecting Washington's desire for a strong central government with a strong executive branch) and the more southern-based, agriculturally oriented "Democratic Republicans," reflecting the Jeffersonian-Madisonian preference for states' rights and general hostility to a strong central government, or to a strong executive to counterbalance Congress.

Congress, led by Madison, was not prepared to approve assumption of the debt. As Miranda's characters indicate, Washington instructed Hamilton to find a compromise solution:

**Washington:** You have to find a compromise.

**Hamilton:** But they don't have a plan; they just hate mine.

**Washington:** Convince them otherwise . . . . Figure it out Alexander. That's an order from your commander.<sup>34</sup>

The compromise was reached in a dinner among Hamilton, Madison and Jefferson at Jefferson's home in the then-capital of New York in 1790. Referred to by historians as "perhaps the most celebrated meal in American history"<sup>35</sup> (and, ruefully, by Miranda's Aaron Burr character as "the room where it happened"),<sup>36</sup> the leaders of the two factions agreed to "trade" agreement on assumption for location of the permanent American capital—after an agreed interim site in Philadelphia during the construction of the permanent capital—in the South, on the banks of the Potomac River, just upstream from Washington's Mt. Vernon estate, in what is today Washington, D.C.

In reality, Hamilton's scheme "created an unshakeable foundation for federal power in America. The federal gov-

ernment had captured forever the bulk of American taxing power."<sup>37</sup>

Thus, Hamilton the trained lawyer and principal author of *The Federalist Papers* left his most lasting mark as a self-taught economist in designing the credit-based, manufacturing-oriented American economy, governed by a strong federal government with a strong executive branch. His image on the \$10 bill, and his association with "Wall Street" and the American breed of capitalism, is no accident. Washington, whose condition and character required him to be largely above the fray of partisan disputes, thus saw his own image of the appropriate shape of the American government realized. And, thanks again to his right-hand man.

Another example from Washington's second term is similar.

If the crowning achievement of Washington's first term was putting into place the building blocks for a powerful and efficient state—based on public credit, an efficient tax system, a customs service and a strong central bank<sup>38</sup>—his second term was focused on tricky and defining foreign policy issues, especially those involving the French revolution which, for Hamilton (a native French speaker since his Caribbean childhood) and the Federalists was "a bloody cautionary tale of a revolution gone awry,"<sup>39</sup> while for the Jeffersonians it remained (despite its excesses) an essential extension of the American Revolution and of democratic progress.

Against this backdrop, and the history of French support for the American Revolution nearly two decades earlier, France's declaration of war on England in 1793 created a major foreign policy dilemma for the young American government. As in the case of the economic and constitutional issues at the core of the debt assumption issue several years earlier, Washington followed Hamilton's lead and adopted a policy of neutrality ("friendly impartiality") toward both warring powers.

Setting a vital precedent for a proudly independent America, and giving it an ideological shield against European entanglements, the Proclamation of Neutrality as adopted in April 1793 has been referred to as the strongest example of the influence of the Federalists under the leadership of Washington upon the history of the United States, and the most telling example of the personality of Hamilton impressing itself directly on the future of the United States.<sup>40</sup> "With the Neutrality Proclamation, Hamilton continued to define his views on American foreign policy: that it should be based on self-interest, not emotional attachment; that the supposed altruism of nations often masked baser motives; that individuals sometimes acted benevolently, but nations seldom did."<sup>41</sup>

Again, Miranda captures the upshot of the debate:

**Washington:** Enough. Enough. Hamilton is right . . . We're too fragile to start

another fight . . . Draft a statement of neutrality.<sup>42</sup>

### Washington's Farewell Address—One Last Time

In early February 1795, citing the financial travails of a large family (the Hamiltons had eight children) and his limited income as a public servant, Hamilton left his post as Treasury secretary and returned to the private practice of law. Rejecting an offer to become the second chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, as New York's premier lawyer he nonetheless remained active and opinionated in things public.

Washington surprised many when he decided not to seek a third term as president; after all, he was not bound by term limits and many Americans expected him (the "father of the country") to serve as a quasi-monarch for life, yet in the end, he surrendered power in a world where leaders had always grabbed for more.<sup>43</sup> In a last instance of collaboration with his alter ego, Washington asked Hamilton to prepare a draft farewell address. Washington's goal was to "create a timeless document that would elevate Americans above the partisan sniping that had disfigured public life."<sup>44</sup> It was only natural that he sought assistance from Hamilton: after all, "No man was more familiar than Hamilton with Washington's sentiments."<sup>45</sup>

The result is considered a literary masterpiece, the first and most comprehensive statement of the principles of American foreign policy (stressing neutrality and the avoidance of permanent foreign alliances) as well as a digest of all the domestic ideas that Hamilton had advanced under Washington's aegis during their years of service together.<sup>46</sup>

Once again, Miranda's characters capture the essence of this final collaboration:

**Washington:** One last time.  
Relax, have a drink with me.  
One last time.  
Let's take a break together.  
And then we'll teach them how to say  
goodbye, to say goodbye.  
You and I . . .  
I wanna talk about neutrality . . .  
I want to warn against partisan  
fighting . . .  
Pick up a pen, start writing.  
I wanna talk about what I have learned.  
The hard-won wisdom I have earned . . .  
We're gonna teach 'em to say goodbye.  
You and I.<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion

Hamilton was a prodigiously talented and effective man, "the clear-eyed apostle of America's economic future,"<sup>48</sup> "the master builder of the new government,"<sup>49</sup> and "a prodigy of genius and of strict undeviating integrity."<sup>50</sup> As has been observed, "We look in vain for