

Hamilton

Note: Significant parts of this article are taken from Public Administration with an Attitude. Passages in quotations are from The Federalist Papers or Papers on Public Credit, Commerce, and Finance.

Rare it is when the theories and practices of public administration are the subject of a Broadway musical; indeed, *Hamilton* is so rare that every bureaucrat should rejoice and sing along. Lin-Manuel Miranda describes Alexander Hamilton as the “bastard son of a whore,” the “founding father, without a father.” All serious students of public administration know he was not only one of the nation’s founding fathers; Hamilton was the father of American public administration. Some argue that Woodrow Wilson is the father, but Vincent Ostrom, in *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration*, destroyed that argument. It is Ostrom’s claim that Madison and Hamilton together crafted the American theory of democratic administration based on management in the context of the separation of powers and overlapping jurisdictions. This claim is pushed even further in Bertelli and Lynn’s brilliant *Madison’s Managers: Public Administration and the Constitution*. But, here the focus is on Hamilton and his particularly compelling story, the quintessential American story.

He was born in St. Croix in the Caribbean, the illegitimate son of James Hamilton, an itinerant Scot, and Rachel Faucett, of Huguenot decent. Prior to meeting James, Rachel had been jailed for declining to live with her husband. Although still married, she and Hamilton had two sons, James and Alexander. Not long after Alexander was born, his father left. Rachel kept a provisions store in St. Croix to support her children. Alexander was bright, had good early schooling and, at an early age, apprenticed as a clerk to a merchant-trader. At 14, he sailed alone to New York with virtually no money. He worked as a clerk, put himself through Kings College, now Columbia University, and read the law. A hero of the Revolutionary War, he served as one of General Washington’s primary aides. At 32, he was appointed Secretary of the Treasury in Washington’s first cabinet and served throughout the president’s first term. It is generally agreed that Hamilton’s organization of the Treasury Department was fundamentally important to the early stability and effectiveness of American government. He took accounts that were in shambles and put them in order, balanced the books, paid off both the national Revolutionary War debt and states’ war debts and built the foundation for what is now the Federal Reserve Bank. He died at 47, killed in a duel with

then-Vice President Aaron Burr. He is buried in the yard of Trinity Church in lower Manhattan, two blocks from the World Trade Center.

Hamilton’s story is compelling and his service to his country remarkable. Yet it is his words and ideas that have endured. More than any other founder, he shaped the Federalist perspective; that perspective has always shaped American public administration. Here are some of his words and ideas.

On the Powers of Government:

“A government ought to contain...every power requisite to the...accomplishment of the objects committed to its care, and to the complete execution of the trusts for which it is responsible, free from every other control but regard to the public good and to the sense of the people.”

On the Executive Branch:

“Energy in the executive is a leading character in the definition of good government. It is essential...to the steady administration of the laws, to the protection of property against...irregular and high-handed combinations, to the security of liberty against the enterprises...of faction.”

“The vigor of government” is “essential to the security of liberty.”

“When the dimensions of a State attain to a certain magnitude, it requires the same energy of government...which [is] requisite in one of much greater extent...The citizens of America have too much discernment to be argued into anarchy. And...experience has...wrought a deep...conviction...that greater energy of government is essential to the welfare...of the community.”

“[T]he true test of a good government is its aptitude and tendency to produce a good administration.”

An energetic executive is necessary “to the protection of property against those irregular and high-handed combinations [factions] which sometimes interrupt the ordinary course of justice; to the security of liberty against the enterprises and assaults of ambition, of faction, and of anarchy.”

On the Legislative Branch:

“The tendency of the legislative authority to absorb every other, has been fully displayed...In governments purely republican, this tendency is almost irresistible.”



“[T]he representatives...in a popular assembly seem sometimes to fancy that they are the people themselves, and betray strong symptoms of impatience and disgust at the least sign of opposition from any other quarter; as if the exercise of rights, by either the executive or judiciary, were a breach of their privilege and an outrage to their dignity. They often appear disposed to exert an imperious control over the other departments; and as they commonly have the people on their side, they always act with such momentum as to make it very difficult for the other members of the government to maintain the balance of the Constitution.”

On the Judicial Branch:

“The independence of the judges is...requisite to guard...the rights of individuals from the effects of those ill humors, which the arts of designing men, or the influence of particular conjectures, sometimes disseminate among the people...and which...have a tendency...to occasion...serious oppressions of the minor party.”

“[T]he interpretation of the laws is the proper and peculiar province of the courts.”

The courts must “do their duty as faithful guardians of the Constitution, where legislative invasions of it had been instituted by the major voice of the community.”

On the Direct Democracy:

“It has been observed that a pure democracy, if it were practicable, would be the most perfect government. Experience has proven that no position in politics is more false than this. The ancient democracies (Greece and Italy), in which the people themselves deliberated, never possessed one feature of good government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure deformity. When they assembled, the field of debate presented an ungovernable mob, not only incapable of deliberation, but prepared for every enormity. In these assemblies the enemies of the people brought forward their plans of ambition systematically. They were opposed by their enemies of another party; and...the people subjected themselves to be led blindly by one tyrant or by another.”

On Federalism and State Rights:

“If a number of political societies enter into a larger political society, the laws which the latter may enact, pursuant to the powers entrusted to it by its

constitution, must necessarily be supreme over those societies, and the individuals of whom they are composed. It would otherwise be a mere treaty, dependent on the good faith of the parties, and not a government, which is only another word for political power and supremacy.”

Hamilton complains of “those practices...of the State governments which have undermined the foundations of property and credit, have planted mutual distrust in the breasts of all classes of citizens, and have occasioned an almost universal prostration of morals.”

On the Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances:

“But a confederacy of the people, without exaggeration, may be said to be entirely the masters of their own fate. Power being almost always the rival of power, the general government will at all times stand ready to check the usurpations of the state governments, and these will have the same disposition towards the general government. The people, by throwing themselves into either scale, will infallibly make use of the other as the instruments of redress.”

“It is a fundamental maxim of free government, that the three great departments of power, legislative, executive and judiciary, shall be essentially distinct and independent, the one of the other.”

“A salutary check upon the legislative body, calculated to guard the community against the effects of faction, precipitancy, or of any impulse unfriendly to the public good, which may happen to influence a majority of that body.”

More than any of the founders with the possible exception of Benjamin Franklin, Hamilton saw clearly what the United States was to become. And, he was the only founder with a well-developed understanding of what was to become American public administration. Hamilton is our founding father.

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