AWESOME stories

Writer of Federalist Papers - Alexander Hamilton

John Trumbull painted a portrait of Alexander Hamilton in 1792. This image depicts that painting.

Among his many other jobs, Hamilton was a soldier. The Center of Military History, for the United States Army, features a story about Hamilton's military background. This excerpt is from *Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution* (a 1987 work by Robert K. Wright, Jr. and Morris J. MacGregor, Jr.), at pages 94-96:

> *Alexander Hamilton, who represented New York at the Constitutional Convention, was a brilliant political theorist and a leading advocate of centralized government. As an immigrant, Hamilton was able to transcend loyalty to any single state or region and think in terms of nationhood. He combined a natural affinity for aristocratic values with a generally pessimistic view of human nature and concluded that successful government must be strong and must win the support of men of property and social standing.*
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> *Hamilton was among the most intellectually gifted of the Founding Fathers, rivaling in ability his arch foe, Thomas Jefferson, but he lacked practical political experience and failed to win support for many of his most cherished ideas. A blunt, practical man, he never understood the role that idealists like Jefferson played in shaping society. Ironically, his major contributions to the political life of the nation occurred only when his specific policies were adopted and carried forward by others with broader vision.*
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> *Hamilton was a master of financial planning and central organization. Many of his ideas about government matured during a youth spent in the uniform of the Continental Army.*
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> *The fact that Hamilton's lifetime was dominated by a series of global wars between Great Britain and France colored his thinking about politics. He came to believe that the survival of the United States depended on its ability to provide for its self-defense, and his plans to strengthen the political union, eloquently expressed during the fight to ratify the Constitution, were directly linked to his ideas on military matters.*
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> *The Patriot*
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> *Hamilton's original prospects were very limited. His parents never married and separated while he was still a child.*
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> *His father, a younger son of a minor Scottish noble, had drifted to the West Indies where he eked out a living as an occasional clerk and minor merchant while dreaming of glory; his mother died when Hamilton was eleven, leaving him to fend largely for himself. Hamilton's childhood was spent on the edge of poverty first on Nevis, the smallest of Britain's Leeward Islands, and later on St. Croix in the Danish Virgin Islands.*
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> *This background produced a boy older than his years, suspicious of human motives, and obsessed with a highly idealistic concept of nobility. It also created a youth consumed by an ambition to conquer the world that had dealt him such a poor hand.*
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> *Fortunately, he found employment on St. Croix as an apprentice in tiny Christiansted, then very much a frontier "boom town." By the time he was fourteen, his employer, a New York-born merchant trading with the American mainland, recognized Hamilton's intelligence, honesty, and gift for finances and gave him considerable responsibility. Others encouraged his voracious reading and made it possible for him to go to New York City to obtain a formal education.*
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> *His patrons back in St. Croix provided him with letters of introduction to a circle of influential men in that city and nearby New Jersey, men who also happened to be among the most important leaders of the mounting opposition to Great Britain. He used their contacts to gain admission to Francis Barber's preparatory school in Elizabethtown, New Jersey.*
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> *Hamilton also lived for a year with William Livingston, later a fellow signer of the Constitution. During these years, Hamilton met a number of men who would become lifelong friends and political allies.*

He entered King's College (now Columbia University), and he also became active in the city's Patriot movement. He gained some local notoriety by writing two pamphlets which attacked one of New York's leading Tories, the Reverend Samuel Seabury. Hamilton never graduated from college; the rush of outside events intervened.

The Soldier

Hamilton's first experience with the military came during the heady days of the summer of 1775, after the outbreak of fighting at Boston. Along with a group of other students from King's, he joined a volunteer militia company, the Hearts of Oak. They adopted distinctive uniforms, complete with the words "Liberty or Death" on their hatbands, and drilled under the watchful eye of a former British officer.

Hamilton's political connections with the Patriot leadership soon led him into full-time service. In March 1776 the state government commissioned him as a captain, with instructions to raise the New York Provincial Company of Artillery (today the Regular Army's 1st Battalion, 5th Field Artillery) to protect Manhattan Island.

In the same month that Hamilton received his commission, George Washington's Continental Army troops forced the British to evacuate Boston. Conceding that opposition was too strong in New England, the King's ministers ordered their forces to occupy New York City, with its superb harbor, as a new base. While the Continental Congress in Philadelphia declared independence, the largest trans-Atlantic invasion force assembled prior to the twentieth century began concentrating offshore.

Congress and Washington assembled continentals, militia, and state units like the Provincial Company to defend the city. Hamilton dutifully reported for orders to Washington's Chief of Artillery, Colonel (later Major General) Henry Knox, and his men served alongside Knox's gunners throughout the fall campaign. They stayed with the rear guard of Washington's main army during the retreat across New Jersey after the city fell.

One of Hamilton's finest moments as an officer came during the dramatic two weeks of the Trenton-Princeton campaign. Knox's fieldpieces crossed the ice-choked Delaware River on Christmas Night, 1776, and supported Major General Nathanael Greene's division through the snowstorm. In a dawn attack on the Hessian garrison at Trenton, their cannon balls and grapeshot contributed directly to one of the most lopsided victories of the war.

At Princeton they then set up outside the college's Nassau Hall and "persuaded" the better part of a British regiment to surrender.

Impressed by Hamilton's abilities, Knox and Greene recommended the young officer to Washington's personal attention. In March he received appointment as an aide to the Commander in Chief, along with a promotion to lieutenant colonel.

Hamilton had been an excellent combat leader; he now had a chance to try his hand at staff work, for Washington used his staff "family" as the center of his military administration. These handpicked young men acted as messengers and prepared Washington's voluminous official correspondence.

Hamilton's workaholic habits made him an instant success and a key member of the close-knit team. From the Philadelphia campaign of 1777 through Monmouth and on into the dark years of virtual stalemate, he stayed with the main army, learning many important lessons about the need for central government to deal with crises. When he eventually came to resent the limits of his role, he seized upon a minor reprimand as a reason to resign in April 1781.

The preceding December he had married a daughter of Major General Philip Schuyler, a powerful conservative political leader in New York and one of Washington's closest supporters. Schuyler sought to heal the breach between Washington and Hamilton.

Although not recalled to the staff, Hamilton was given the command of a battalion of elite light infantry for the 1781 campaign. At the subsequent siege of Yorktown, Hamilton's battalion openly taunted the British by performing close order drill on the parapet of the entrenchments. Hamilton then led his own battalion and two others in the decisive engagement of the siege, a bayonet assault on Redoubt 10 on the evening of 14 October. Five days later Cornwallis surrendered.

There is no question that military service shaped Hamilton's thinking. Years of combat and, even more importantly, the administrative and logistical struggle to keep men from all over the nation working together made him an ardent nationalist and exponent of strong central government. One biographer has even gone so far as to claim that "Hamilton's wartime . . . aideship was, in other words, his postgraduate education."

The Statesman

Hamilton took up the study of the law in early 1782. He completed a program of apprenticeship which normally took three years in as many months, and was admitted to the bar in July.

Within six months he found himself representing New York in the Continental Congress, where he quickly joined a young Virginian, James Madison, as a leading exponent of stronger national government. By August of the following year, frustration with his failure to persuade a majority to support his ideas led him to return to New York, where he rapidly built a thriving law practice and gained fame as a legal theorist.

Hamilton, however, could not long remain out of the public arena.

In 1787, he spent a term in the New York legislature. More importantly, he played an essential role in the movement which resulted in the adoption of the Constitution.

He had attended the Annapolis Convention the previous year when representatives from the middle states met to discuss economic problems of mutual interest. In 1787 he was included in the New York delegation to the Constitutional Convention.

His influence was most pronounced, however, during the ratification battles that followed the meeting in Philadelphia. In an effort to win popular support for the Constitution in New York, Hamilton persuaded Madison and John Jay (a future Chief Justice of the Supreme Court) to join him in publishing a series of essays, The Federalist Papers, which still serve as one of the most fundamental statements of American political philosophy.

The authors successfully argued that strong central government was not an inevitable step toward tyranny. Their efforts not only swung public opinion in other states, but helped pave the way for New York's ratification in July 1788, an event that had appeared extremely unlikely the previous fall. Hamilton's performance as floor manager during the ratification convention provided the margin of victory.

In 1789 when Washington began the task of organizing the new federal government, he asked his old aide to become the nation's first Secretary of the Treasury. For nearly six years Hamilton worked out a comprehensive fiscal and economic program for the national government that remains in place two centuries later. He persuaded Congress to establish a national coinage, a national banking system, a revenue program to provide for the repayment of the national debt, and measures to encourage industrial and commercial development. His goal was a vigorous, diversified economy that would also provide the nation with the means to defend itself.

Such an ambitious economic program was bound to create opposition, especially when Hamilton's strong personality clashed in cabinet meetings with that of Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Frustrated by the political rivalry and exhausted by hard work and personal financial sacrifice, Hamilton retired in the summer of 1795 to resume his law practice.

He was back in federal service three years later when the nation expanded the Army to prepare for a possible war with France, serving as a major general with the additional duty of Inspector General until 1800.

Although Hamilton was a great innovator and statesman, his lack of legislative experience and of faith in the common man made him a poor politician. His tactical failures as a leader of the Federalists on both the state and national level fractured the party into competing groups and contributed directly to the election of Jefferson as President in 1800.

Both Jefferson and his running mate Aaron Burr received the same number of electoral votes. To Hamilton's credit, he refused to back a plan by some members of the party to cast votes for Burr to deny Jefferson a victory.

Burr's bitterness over that decision, coupled with his long-standing rivalry with Hamilton in local politics, led inexorably to tragedy. On 11 July 1804, the two men met at dawn at Weehawken Heights, New Jersey. Hamilton, who detested dueling, participated because he felt that his honor had been impugned.

Mortally wounded, he was carried back to New York City where he died the next day.

Credits:

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