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ALEXANDER HAMILTON: THE UNLOVED AND FORGOTTEN
FOUNDING FATHER

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Abstract

As Americans, we tend to place a high importance on our Founding Fathers. There are streets, schools, monuments, cities, money and more all bearing the name or image of Founding Fathers. In looking at these it becomes apparent that history has not treated all of the Founding Fathers kindly, or equally. Alexander Hamilton, who was undeniably vital to the country's formation, has become forgotten and actually viewed unfavorably. This negative perception that people have of Alexander Hamilton has been somewhat written about, but among scholars no one has been able to pinpoint its origin. The goal of this paper is to analyze the theories that have been previously written, combined with letters from Hamilton and his peers, in an attempt to come to a conclusion regarding Hamilton's perhaps unfounded bad reputation. Based on this method, a new theory has been found by looking at the previous theories in a new way: as a whole. Alexander Hamilton has come to be regarded with a negative reputation because of his disagreements with Thomas Jefferson, his own personality flaws, combined with Americans tendency to push him away because he reminds us of facts we would rather not remember. Hamilton was also an easy target for those seeking to attack him. This uneven memory of the Founding Fathers is changing though, with new and more truthful biographies about the individuals being published.

Introduction and Background

The memory of Alexander Hamilton is vastly different from the memory of other Founding Fathers, in part because he is often simply not remembered or not accurately remembered.¹ Often, he is remembered for single aspects or events of his life such as being killed in a duel, having his face on the ten dollar bill, or writing the Federalist Papers. But more often than not, Alexander Hamilton, one of our Founding Fathers, is simply forgotten. In addition, he is remembered with a negative reputation rather than as someone who was involved in the military during the Revolutionary War or was important to the early government. To begin understanding how Hamilton has been forgotten and become a sort of black sheep of the Founding Fathers, it is first important to know who Hamilton was and what he did. Through this it will also provide a starting point for understanding the political feud between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, which is likely connected to Hamilton's memory and reputation.

On January 11, 1757 Alexander Hamilton was born on the British West Indies island of Nevis to Rachel and James Hamilton, although there has been some dispute over the year of his birth. His childhood was not an easy one with his father abandoning Rachel and her two young children sometime in 1765. When Hamilton was nine he lost another parent, this time his mother who died of a fever, which he had also suffered from, in 1767.² After this Hamilton and his older brother were shuffled around extended family members until both finally found their temporary home, although neither ended up with family. For Hamilton, life became more stable when he moved in with one of his

¹ For the purpose of this paper the term Founding Fathers is used to describe the men that were sent to the Constitutional Convention as well as those who signed the Declaration of Independence.

² Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004) 21, 24.

friends and gained more responsibility at his job. He later began receiving an education from Reverend Hugh Knox, which would give him the connection he needed to begin his journey to Princeton University. But his journey to Princeton was not to be. He was not accepted into Princeton and instead he ended up at King's College, which today is Columbia University.³ He had always been quick at learning and at Columbia he once again proved his intelligence with the ease he learned the material and finished early. New York at this time was overflowing with politics and revolutionary ideas, which would soon explode into a full revolutionary movement. One author sums up the events during Hamilton's first year as such: "The Boston Tea Party came two months after Hamilton entered King's, Britain's retaliatory Coercive Acts came five months later, and the First Continental Congress was meeting before the end of Hamilton's first year."⁴ Hamilton longed to join the revolutionary movement and soon began to write political articles, which marked the beginning of his life-long political involvement. Along with writing, Hamilton became involved militarily.

Along with some of his peers, Hamilton started a volunteer drill company and together they learned how to be soldiers. Hamilton's quick learning ability once again helped him and soon he earned a promotion to captain of an artillery company he had recently formed.⁵ In February of 1777, he would receive another promotion; this time to lieutenant colonel and perhaps more importantly to becoming General George Washington's aide-de-camp, which he continued to do until 1781.⁶ Hamilton and Washington would become close, with Washington almost becoming the father figure

³ Forrest McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 10-12.

⁴ McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton: A Biography*, 12.

⁵ McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton: A Biography*, 13.

⁶ McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton: A Biography*, 14, 23.

Hamilton never really had. Even after Hamilton resigned from being an aide-de-camp, the two men remained close friends and continued to work together later in the government. Early in 1780, Hamilton met and soon fell in love with Elizabeth Schuyler, who was the daughter of General Philip Schuyler. Before the year was over, the two were married at the Schuyler family's mansion on December 14, 1780.⁷ Some thought that the biggest motivator for the ever flirtatious Hamilton to finally settle down with Elizabeth was the Schuyler family fortune, which may have been possible considering he had previously told friends that was one thing that he looked for in a wife. In addition, marrying Elizabeth provided him with military connections through General Schuyler. Whatever the reason for the marriage, the two appeared to genuinely be in love and would remain together, along with their children, until Hamilton's death.

After Hamilton left the military and his position with Washington, he decided to study law which he would later be highly successful at. This is also when his involvement in government began, starting with a minor position collecting taxes which enabled him to continue his law studies and soon become part of the Congressional delegation from New York. Between 1787 and 1788, Hamilton along with James Madison and John Jay wrote *The Federalist*, which was a collection of papers discussing and promoting their ideas for the proposed Constitution.⁸ This, the writing of *The Federalist*, is perhaps one of the things that Alexander Hamilton is the most remembered for. This is also what pushed pushes him into the national spotlight for the first time. Another big achievement, one that is sometimes remembered, is that Hamilton was the first Secretary of the Treasury. During part of his appointment,

⁷ Chernow, 148.

⁸ Michael Lind, "Hamilton's Legacy," *The Wilson Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1994), 42.

Thomas Jefferson served as Secretary of the State. The two men are infamous for their political differences and feuding. Thomas Jefferson even had a bust of Hamilton in his home across from his own, saying that they were “opposed in death as in life”.⁹ Perhaps, ultimately what Hamilton is best known for is his death and the events surrounding it. He was famously killed in a duel with Vice-President Aaron Burr in 1804. Although there are still some questions about why the duel between the two occurred, authors agree on the basics. We know that Burr was upset by something that Hamilton had said, although no one is certain exactly what he had said, and asked Hamilton to apologize. Hamilton refused, saying he did not know what he had said to offend Burr. This made Burr even more upset because he perceived it as a slight to his honor, so he challenged Hamilton to a duel, which ultimately ended in Hamilton’s death.¹⁰

The last thing that is important to understand about Hamilton before analyzing the theories is what he believed politically. It is fairly widely known that Hamilton was a member, and actually the founder, of the Federalist Party. Their political rivals were none other than Thomas Jefferson’s Democratic Republicans. These differences in political view, of which they held opposite views, are generally understood as the basis for their quarreling. Hamilton and the Federalists believed in a strong central government, focused on larger companies and the wealthy, and were Pro-British. On the other hand, Jeffersonians were Pro-French, promoted states’ rights and a weaker central government, and identified more with the average person. They did not give power to a strong, central government when they had recently fought to gain their freedom from one. In addition, Jeffersonians wanted Americans to be involved in

⁹ Lind, 41.

¹⁰ McDonald, 359-360.

government, but opposed the position of career politicians. Jefferson's group has often been dumped in the catch-all term: Anti-Federalists.¹¹ Simply put those in the group opposed the ratification of the Constitution and as the name suggests they also opposed the Federalist Party which is where they got their name. The two groups also disagreed upon the necessity and danger of incorporating parties into the new country. However, there was one thing that both the Federalists and the Democratic Republicans agreed on. Both believed that the country had to have a federal government in order to keep the states peaceful and not at war with each other.¹²

Understanding Hamilton's life is important because it provides a foundation for the theories surrounding his acquired reputation, which will be discussed in depth in a later section. After analyzing these theories, along with the primary sources that will add credibility to them, another theory will be formed based off of the information found. Before discussing the new theory, the paper will look at Alexander Hamilton in present day America. Finally, the promotion of a new theory will be discussed, including where the ideas come from. There are also signs that Hamilton's future will be more positive and prominent than it has previously been.

¹¹ Akhil Reed Amar, "Anti-Federalist, The Federalist Papers, and the Big Argument for Union," *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1993).

¹² Amar, "Anti-Federalist, The Federalist Papers,".

Historiography

Throughout time historical topics are researched and written about over and over. Historians come to different conclusions and perspectives, introduce new information and in the end this leads to changes that we can see in how various topics are written about. One of the many historical figures that has been a part of this cycle is Alexander Hamilton. Scholars have been writing about Hamilton since the late 1800s. The earliest article that attempts to explain why, despite all of his accomplishments, Hamilton does not have a favorable reputation was written in 1890 by Anson D. Morse. Simply titled “Alexander Hamilton”, the article focuses on Hamilton’s political career, and includes his writings for *The Federalist*.¹³ The article closes with the idea that Hamilton is often negatively remembered because some of his last ideas and writings were not embraced, and are labeled by Morse as “mistakes”.¹⁴ Since these were the last people heard from Hamilton, they essentially left people with a bad taste and “they proved fatal to his influence”.¹⁵

After Morse, another author named Emory Speer wrote an article with the same title that outlines Hamilton’s life from birth to death in a surprisingly short number of pages.¹⁶ Speer seems to have a fairly high opinion of Hamilton, bouncing from one accomplishment to the next. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, as a source it is somewhat one-sided potentially leaving out valuable information. Using this along with numerous other sources should cancel out any bias transferring. One of the most

¹³ Anson D. Morse, “Alexander Hamilton,” *Political Science Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (March 1890).

¹⁴ Morse, 23.

¹⁵ Morse, 23.

¹⁶ Emory Speer, “Alexander Hamilton,” *The Yale Law Journal* 16, no. 2 (December 1906),

interesting things about this article is the way the author chooses to address Hamilton's death. She simply skips it without mentioning the events surrounding his death, moving straight into his remembrance and the intensity with which he was mourned. While Speer does not set out to argue whether or not Alexander Hamilton should be remembered in a positive light, she inadvertently does. From the way that Speer chose to write she obviously believes that Hamilton was a good guy. The intensity of the country's mourning for Hamilton, which Speer describes, shows that he was not always thought of negatively, and was once beloved with the rest of the Founding Fathers. But where this switch occurred is still undecided.

Then there is a gap in research that concerns Hamilton's reputation until Michael Lind's article, "Hamilton's Legacy", is published in 1994.¹⁷ As the title suggests, the article's goal is to explain how and why Alexander Hamilton is remembered. More than once Lind points out times where Hamilton's presence was key, yet he is never remembered for them. The article does tend to feel as though the author is defending Hamilton's place and importance in history. He argues that Hamilton is more than many people realize, and refutes the negative images that some have come to associate him with. Often Hamilton is thought of "as a champion of the rich" or declared to be the opposite of his rival Thomas Jefferson.¹⁸ Lind points out that this negative perception is even more apparent in the political circle, where few people would "admit to being Hamiltonians".¹⁹

¹⁷ Michael Lind, "Hamilton's Legacy," *The Wilson Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1994).

¹⁸ Lind, 41.

¹⁹ Lind, 41.

Ron Chernow, who is notable for his biographies, wrote a biography on Hamilton in 2004. Simply titled *Alexander Hamilton*, the book is a true biography covering Hamilton's childhood all the way until his death in 1804.²⁰ Chernow does an excellent job at providing a detailed overview of Hamilton's life, but does something unique too. Where many authors might stop with the subject of the book's death, Chernow keeps going. He switches the book to focus on Elizabeth Hamilton, Alexander Hamilton's wife. In this way he continues the story of Alexander Hamilton through the way his wife coped with his death. The ways she was able to survive, especially financially, until her own eventual death are examined and written about as carefully as her husband's life was. Since this is a biography, the author is not taking a stance on Hamilton's reputation. Even so the book provides crucial information on Hamilton's life, including his interactions with others.

The most recent source is Darren Staloff's book *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson: The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding*, which was published in 2005.²¹ The book is broken into three sections with Alexander Hamilton, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson each getting one. In Hamilton's section there is an entire subsection devoted to the "Legacy of Alexander Hamilton". While this is not the focus of the book, the section is very well written and informative. Staloff discusses four different theories on Hamilton's acquired negative perception, without advocating for one or another leaving the reader questioning the correct one. The only thing that Staloff makes clear is that he supports Hamilton, opening the section with this statement: "By almost any

²⁰ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004).

²¹ Darren Staloff, *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson: The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005).

measure, Alexander Hamilton was the most important figure in the founding of the American republic".²² He later goes on to say that "Hamilton is perhaps the least loved founding father".²³ Staloff's overview of different theories of the negativity towards Hamilton provides an excellent starting point for research and will be discussed in depth later.

In looking at the historiography of Alexander Hamilton, it becomes apparent that there are gaps where very little research was done. For example, there are sources from the late 1800s to early 1900s and then sources start again in the 1990s, with only a couple sources between these. The way that scholars have written about Alexander Hamilton has changed through history, varying their views or the thing that they focused on. Some scholars, such as Emory Speer, have analyzed the positives that Hamilton did for the country, ignoring things that may be considered wrong. On the other hand, authors Michael Lind and Anson D. Morse attempt to tackle the reasoning behind the negative view that some people have of Hamilton. The two authors analyze Hamilton's life to find out how someone who was once loved by the country could have gained such negative perceptions. This sample of articles provides insight into how the way authors have written about Hamilton has changed.

²² Staloff, 125.

²³ Staloff, 126.

Theories and Evidence

In looking at the reasoning behind Alexander Hamilton's acquired negative reputation, there are some published theories. However, there is not any agreement or acknowledgment by scholars that one is correct, or even that one is better than the rest. As a result, there is no concise answer to how Hamilton became so unloved. To start off, information on some of the theories will be provided. From there I will analyze primary sources, specifically some of Hamilton's letters and *The Federalist Papers*, which will be used to provide evidence for or against the theories. Eventually this will lead to a theory that will not only bring something new to this debate of the origin of Alexander Hamilton's negative reputation, but also provide some insight on the validity of the theories previously published.

Anson D. Morse's Theory

The earliest, and possibly least written about, theory was written about by Anson D. Morse in 1890. Morse wrote that Hamilton is not fondly remembered because some of the last ideas and writings he published were not really supported by people at the time. These last writings were the ones that really stuck with people and in the end "proved fatal to his influence".²⁴ While this theory makes sense and is logical, it is hard to believe that after all Hamilton had achieved and done for the country that people to this day would dislike him. This would definitely explain why people during Morse's time had negative feelings towards Hamilton, but today there are many people that have

²⁴ Morse, 23.

never read *The Federalist Papers* or anything written by Hamilton. Because of this, it is unlikely that this theory holds any truth for present day America.

Darren Staloff – Theory 1

Author Darren Staloff discusses and analyzes four different theories in his book, *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson: The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding*. Similarly to other scholars, Staloff does not promote one theory more than another or leave the reader with a clear answer to the question. The first theory is that Hamilton's negative reputation is a result of "the propaganda of his Jeffersonian opponents".²⁵ It has been widely documented that Hamilton and Jefferson were political opposites, even enemies, making it likely that Jeffersonians would use propaganda against Hamilton. Jefferson once remarked on his relationship with Alexander Hamilton by saying: "As politicians it was impossible for two men to be of more opposite principles."²⁶ Again this theory would make sense in Hamilton's day, but why would Jeffersonians still be doing this? Especially if what Michael Lind wrote, that few people would "admit to being Hamiltonians", is correct.²⁷ If this is true, then there is no need for Jeffersonians to still be fighting against Hamiltonians.

We can see evidence of the rough relationship between Hamilton and Jefferson through letters written by both men, generally with George Washington as the unfortunate middleman. At one point Washington writes in response to a letter from Hamilton that "differences in political opinions are as unavoidable as, to a certain point,

²⁵ Staloff, 126.

²⁶ Judith St. George, *The Duel: The Parallel Lives of Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr* (New York: Viking, 2009), 53.

²⁷ Lind, 41.

they may perhaps be necessary; but it is to be regretted, exceedingly, that subjects cannot be discussed without having the motives which led to them improperly implicated on the other.”²⁸ These letters show that in their day Hamilton and Jefferson were at odds, and were both aware of this fact. Hamilton proves his awareness of this in his letter to George Washington on September 9th, 1792. He writes that “I have been an object of uniform opposition from Mr. Jefferson....I know from the most authentic sources, that I have been the frequent subject of the most unkind whispers and insinuations from the same quarter.”²⁹ Hamilton does not specify what these sources are, but it is clear that he is feeling the effects of propaganda from the Jeffersonians. Hamilton makes sure to point out that he has not “directly or indirectly retaliated” against the Jefferson camp, writing that he “was instrumental in preventing a very severe and systematic attack upon Mr. Jefferson by an association of two or three individuals.”³⁰ This is interesting because in the research there has been evidence of the Jefferson camp attacking Hamilton, but none of Hamiltonians attacking Jefferson.

Another intriguing aspect about the letter is that Hamilton mentions multiple times how he has not wanted to bring this issue up, not because of his own feelings, but because he has not wanted to cause dissidence in the United States Government, where Hamilton is the Secretary of the Treasury and Jefferson the Secretary of the State. In the letter he appears to genuinely not to want to cause any problems based off of his concern for adverse effects on the government, but it is also possible that it is a

²⁸ George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, August 26, 1792, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 12: 276.

²⁹ Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, September 9, 1792, Cengage Learning, accessed October 15, 2012, http://college.cengage.com/history/ayers_primary_sources/hamilton_washington_1792.htm.

³⁰ Hamilton to Washington, September 9, 1792.

façade for George Washington. Jefferson also writes about the differences between the two men. He writes about a conversation that he had with George Washington, where that main subject was the Hamilton-Jefferson fight. Jefferson writes that:

Washington expressed his concern at the difference which he found to subsist between the Sec. of the Treasury & myself, of which he said he had not been aware. He knew indeed that there was a marked difference in our political sentiments, but he had never suspected it had gone so far in producing a personal difference, and he wished he could be the mediator to put an end to it.³¹

The disagreement between Hamilton and Jefferson was also apparent to others around them, and roped in supporters of both sides. This is apparent in a letter that Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison on July 7th, 1793. Jefferson, in regards to Hamilton, says “For god’s sake, my dear Sir, take up your pen, select the most striking heresies, and cut him to pieces in the face of the public.”³² He goes on the rest of the letter essentially bashing Hamilton, stating that he makes Jefferson’s position as Secretary of the State “immensely difficult.”³³

Hamilton was aware and suspicious of Jefferson and Madison working together. In an earlier letter to Edward Carrington, Hamilton wrote “Mr. Madison cooperating with Mr. Jefferson is at the head of a faction decidedly hostile to me and my administration.”³⁴ The entire letter is basically consists of Hamilton complaining to his friend, Carrington, about how Jefferson and Madison are speaking unfavorably about

³¹ Memorandum by Thomas Jefferson, October 1, 1792, The Claremont Institute, accessed October 15, 2012, http://www.claremont.org/publications/pubid.601/pub_detail.asp.

³² Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, July 7, 1793, James Madison’s Montpelier: Center for the Constitution, accessed October 15, 2012, https://learn.montpelier.org/learning_resources/113.

³³ Jefferson to Madison, July 7, 1793.

³⁴ Alexander Hamilton to Edward Carrington, May 26, 1792, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 11: 429.

him, in addition to leading this hostile group against him. He also writes about his suspicions that Jefferson had placed someone at one of the newspapers that is known to be supportive of him, in order to control what is printed. He wrote that the paper “is conducted under the patronage & not against the views of Mr. Jefferson.”³⁵ Once again Hamilton is the one that is writing about Jefferson and this time Madison too, attacking him. But interestingly, there is still not evidence of Hamilton slandering the Jeffersonians.

One difference between the two men that occurred relatively early in their lives, goes back to the Revolutionary War and both men’s participation in it. While during the war both men participated, they both joined the war effort in different ways. Jefferson was Governor of Virginia, although not until later in the war, and also involved in writing political articles. Hamilton also produced political writings at the very beginning of the war, but then he turned to a more hands on involvement in the war by becoming a part of the military.³⁶ What differentiates the two men is that while Jefferson was writing political sentiments at the beginning of the war, Hamilton was forming a company in the military. Could it be that some of the animosity between the two men stems from this instance? While it is possible that this caused some tension between them, there is no evidence supports this.

Darren Staloff – Theory 2

³⁵ Hamilton to Carrington, in *The Papers of Alexander*, 11: 431.

³⁶ McDonald, 13.

The second theory builds on the first with the idea that it was “exacerbated by the real flaws in Hamilton’s personality”.³⁷ Hamilton was different from other Founding Fathers in the sense that he was not considered approachable, instead labeled as being haughty and having “a remote and almost forbidding persona”.³⁸ On April 5th, 1803 Hamilton received a letter from Timothy Pickering, who wrote that Hamilton being labeled as an “aristocrat and a Monarchist, is not new.”³⁹ From this, we can see that there is merit to the argument that Hamilton’s personality added to his un-likability. These labels were not something positive in his day or ours, and provide evidence for where we get this idea of Hamilton as arrogant and an advocate for the wealthy. Thomas Jefferson also writes about Hamilton’s Monarchist tendencies, writing that “there were a numerous sect who had monarchy in contemplation. That the Secretary of the Treasury was one of these.”⁴⁰ Hamilton’s arrogance is still mentioned today, often being connected to him being an advocator for the rich.

Some of the Founding Fathers are thought of as being one of the people or just like you and I, even though in reality this may not be true. However, Hamilton is not remembered in this way. There seems to be this feeling, perhaps a result of his arrogant reputation that he was not looking out for the common person but for the wealthy. But here, in this thought there is some disconnect with the historical facts. Unlike some of the other Founding Fathers, Hamilton did not come from a wealthy, or even middle class family. Hamilton and his older brother were poor orphans who were passed

³⁷ Staloff, 127.

³⁸ Staloff, 127.

³⁹ Timothy Pickering to Alexander Hamilton, April 5, 1803, Farrand’s Records, Library of Congress, accessed October 15, 2012, The Library of Congress: American Memory.

⁴⁰ Memorandum by Jefferson, October 1, 1792.

between family and friends. He did gain wealth later in life, but after growing up without money he likely appreciated it more. On the other hand it is well known that Thomas Jefferson was a wealthy Virginia planter and government official. Yet there is not the same stigma attached to Jefferson's name and reputation as there is to Hamilton's.

Darren Staloff – Theory 3

The next theory suggests that our issue “with Hamilton lies in the self-image of the American people and the way we like to think of ourselves and our past.”⁴¹ Staloff explains that we, as Americans, tend to think of ourselves as “blessed” or having a “unique character” that has led our country to such wealth and power.⁴² But, Hamilton tells us that this is wrong and we are simply “more fortunate in our immense resources and lack of traditional cultural and political baggage.”⁴³ He is referring to the fact that compared to other countries the United States is young, which was especially true during his life. This translates into the country having fewer, if any, traditions to deal with in its formation. The colonies were able to form a completely new government instead of having to deal with and revamp one that was already in existence. Also, the United States is fortunate to have many natural resources, when there are some countries that have not been as lucky. As a result of this unfavorable realization, we reject Hamilton because we do not like what he has to say. Staloff sums up this theory by writing this:

“He reminds us that only a child or a fool could believe that a colonial backwater could emerge as a global hegemon by means of neutrality, high-mindedness, and pacifism. No one becomes a superpower by being

⁴¹ Staloff, 127.

⁴² Staloff, 128.

⁴³ Staloff, 128.

nice. Hamilton forces us to acknowledge this obvious truth. And so we turn away from him.”⁴⁴

In a way, this connects back to Morse’s theory of people rejecting Hamilton’s ideas so they turn against him too. While Morse’s theory applied specifically to the last writings of Hamilton, the general idea of the two theories is the same: We do not like what Hamilton has to say, so we do not like him.

Darren Staloff – Theory 4

Concerning the fourth and final theory, Staloff writes that “Our greatest problem with Hamilton, however, involves our understanding of the nature of American government itself.”⁴⁵ Perhaps the most complicated theory that Staloff writes about to understand, it may also be the least supported with reliable evidence. Basically the theory is that as Americans we like to think of, and even brag about, our government as a democracy that is ruled by the people, even though it is technically untrue. Hamilton reminds us of the lack of truth in this mentality, saying that the people “seldom judge or determine right.”⁴⁶ However, Hamilton was just one of many Founding Fathers who believed the people should not have control over the government. In the early United States, not all citizens were allowed to vote. In addition to women and African Americans being barred from voting, many times poor whites without land were also turned away. So why has this idea been connected specifically to Hamilton and no one else? I would argue that this could actually be combined with the third theory, because

⁴⁴ Staloff, 129.

⁴⁵ Staloff, 129.

⁴⁶ Staloff, 130.

once again Hamilton is reminding us of something in our past that we would rather forget.

Alexander Hamilton Today

Today there are still differences in the treatment of the Founding Fathers. One aspect that makes this apparent is the management of their respective homes. Most people know that Mount Vernon is the former home of George Washington and Monticello is Thomas Jefferson's. Many people might also know where the homes are. But if asked where Alexander Hamilton's home is or even what it is called, few people could answer correctly. Not only has Hamilton's house been forgotten but has, until recently, been physically neglected. The house, named The Grange after Hamilton's Scottish heritage, was originally in present day Manhattan, New York. The Grange has been moved twice, once in 1889 and again in 2008.⁴⁷

One way to analyze how Alexander Hamilton is remembered today is to look at current news article that mention him and see how he is talked about. For the purposes of this paper this will consist of a simple search of the LexisNexis database, which if searched for "Alexander Hamilton" returns 994 mentions dating back to 1969. Surprisingly when the data base is searched for "Thomas Jefferson" there are an almost identical number of results with 998.⁴⁸

Another search that yields telling information about how Americans today view Hamilton is to search for Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson together. When searched for both men, LexisNexis brings up 1,087 results.⁴⁹ Many of these results are about various biographies of the two men, but there are other more telling sources. There are results

⁴⁷ "Hamilton's House Gets a Makeover," *American History* 46, no. 6 (February 2012).

⁴⁸ "Alexander Hamilton"; "Thomas Jefferson," *LexisNexis Academic*, accessed December 16, 2012.

⁴⁹ "Alexander Hamilton AND Thomas Jefferson," *LexisNexis Academic*, accessed December 16, 2012.

about everything from the infamous duel to Hamilton being “the American republic’s first immigrant success story.”⁵⁰ As for Jefferson, there are a variety of topics ranging from Monticello to his personality, but there is one recurring topic: Sally Hemings. Hemings was one of Jefferson’s slaves, with whom it is believed he had a family, although there is still some debate surrounding the truth of this. Some scholars argue that one, or both, of Jefferson’s nephews are actually the father of Hemings’ children. It has also been dismissed because it simply would have been “out of character” for him to have an affair with his slave.⁵¹ Clearly to argue that he did not have an affair with someone because it is not his character does not prove in any way that it is false. The subject of Jefferson’s involvement with Hemings has recently been gaining more attention, research, and publication. This, the focus of a negative aspect of Jefferson’s life would suggest that a shift is starting where Americans start to see the Founding Fathers for who they really are. But it is not limited to Jefferson; there are other figures that this trend has also started to affect. This idea will be discussed more in the next section.

⁵⁰ Michael Lind, “The Federalist; The Founding Father Who Was Also the American Republic’s First Immigration Success Story,” review of *Alexander Hamilton*, by Ron Chernow, *The Washington Post*, May 2, 2004, Final Edition, Book World.

⁵¹ Woody West, “Jury’s Still Out on Historians, Jefferson and Hemings Affair,” *The Washington Times*, April 13, 1997, Part B – Books.

Conclusion: A New Theory?

After reviewing these five theories, along with the pros, cons, and primary source evidence for each, one thing becomes clear: almost all have validity. I believe that the reason scholars have not been able to agree on a single theory is because they have not considered the theories all together. The theories have been read as individuals without any attempt to view them together, as pieces to the same puzzle. With the exception of Morse's theory, I would argue that a combination of the theories explains not only why Alexander Hamilton has become forgotten but at the same time why he is negatively remembered. Anson D. Morse's theory of Hamilton's negative memory being linked to his final writings being poorly received by the public was a valid theory at the time he published it. This is not to say that Morse's theory is wrong, but when applying the theory to present day America, where many people do not know what these writings were, it does not make sense. Instead of there being four competing theories, all of which Staloff discusses in his book, they should be combined into one new theory. Each of these four theories has aspects that we can prove are true based on the primary documents that we have from Hamilton and some of his peers. This new theory argues that the reason for Alexander Hamilton's less than positive memory is a result of the Hamilton-Jefferson differences, his own personality flaws, and combined with this tendency to push him away because he reminds us of things we would rather forget (Staloff's third and fourth theories combined).

All of these factors, his personality, his bickering with Jefferson and his unfortunate reminders, have all played a role in creating this negative image that many of us have of Alexander Hamilton. This also connects back to the loss of his memory.

Just as Staloff wrote about, Hamilton's acquired negative reputation he also inadvertently wrote about the public forgetting who he was. What Staloff wrote about as his third and fourth theories helps explain why Hamilton may have been forgotten. Generally when we do not like what someone is saying we try to block them out, which is exactly what happened to Hamilton. The combination of these factors makes Hamilton an easy target to be labeled with a negative reputation. Essentially, the basic facts of his life give plenty of fodder for his rivals, such as Thomas Jefferson and his followers, to use against him.

With all of this considered, it does appear that the academic atmosphere is shifting. There has been more focus, perhaps because of public demand, on writing about the Founding Fathers as they really were instead of idolizing them on a pedestal. In recent years books such as *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*,⁵² *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*,⁵³ and *Aaron Burr: Conspiracy to Treason*.⁵⁴ These books, and many more with similar intent, show that the Founding Fathers were not perfect and focus on aspects of their life that has generally been blocked out. They show that America is on the right path towards a more realistic and therefore more equal memory of the Founding Fathers.

Hamilton himself has also begun to gain more attention in a couple different ways. First, there have been multiple new biographies written about him since 2000. In addition there was "a major new exhibition celebrating his life and work....in New York",

⁵² Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).

⁵³ Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (Union Square West, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

⁵⁴ Buckner F. Melton, Jr., *Aaron Burr: Conspiracy to Treason* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2002).

his home state.⁵⁵ The exhibition, entitled “Alexander Hamilton: The Man Who Made Modern America” is being run by the New -York Historical Society and utilizes “documents, artifacts, and artworks” to tell the story of Hamilton’s life.⁵⁶ Another way that there has been a sort of Alexander Hamilton revival is in the area of politics. Where previous political scientists have sought to delineate themselves from Hamiltonians, there has been a new move that embraces the idea. A group of neoconservatives made up of William Kristol, David Brooks, and Robert Kagan, have started their own version of Hamiltonianism, which they call “national greatness conservatism.” One of the men, David Brooks, commented on it saying that “the idea that the government should get out of the way wouldn’t work. But the ideal of becoming a liberal wasn’t an option. So there was this lost tradition I could turn to.”⁵⁷ Brooks sees Hamiltonianism as almost an option between conservatives and liberals. William Kristol adds on to this idea with this: “Hamiltonianism never finds a fully comfortable home in either party. But that’s why it’s necessary and worth fighting for—as a valuable corrective.”⁵⁸ Being a Hamiltonian in this case is the middle road option, a way to avoid subscribing to the ideology of the two major parties.

While Alexander Hamilton has not been treated kindly by history, or Americans, it does appear that this is changing. His previously negative reputation and lack of public memory is a result of multiple theories; which are that his personality, disputes with Thomas Jefferson, his unwanted reminders and the fact that these factors plus others simply make him an easy target for political attacks. These factors resulted in his

⁵⁵ Jay Tolson, “Hamilton’s Moment,” *U.S. News & World Report* 137, no. 9 (September 20, 2004).

⁵⁶ Tolson, “Hamilton’s Moment,”.

⁵⁷ Tolson, “Hamilton’s Moment,”.

⁵⁸ Tolson, “Hamilton’s Moment,”.

current forgotten state and less than positive association. But the American public's renewed interests in early American history is beginning to, whether purposely or not, correct their misjudgment of Hamilton. Part of this has occurred simply by correct representations of other prominent early American figures, especially that of Thomas Jefferson, in literature. His honest portrayal is particularly important because Hamilton was compared to him more than any other man.

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