

History Makers: A Conversation

AN INTERVIEW WITH RON CHERNOW

KENNETH T. JACKSON AND VALERIE PALEY

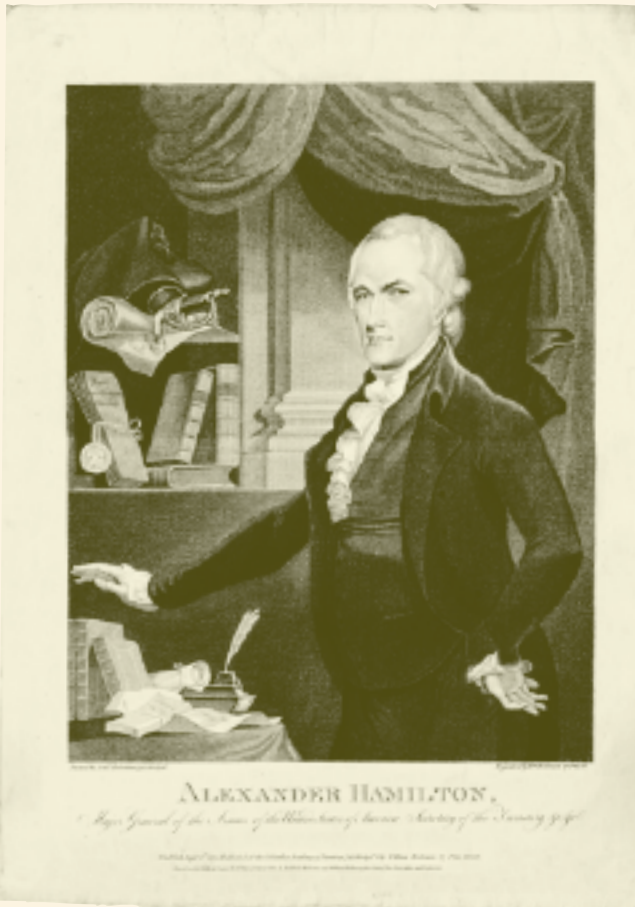
I MANAGED TO SNEAK THROUGH YALE college without taking a history course,” said Ron Chernow, the self-made historian who won the National Book Award for his first book, *The House of Morgan*, and went on to write *The Warburgs* and *Titan*, a biography of John D. Rockefeller, Sr. “Maybe if my first exposure to the material had been in a class, doing tests and term papers, while aware of all the academic in-fighting, I wouldn’t have had the kind of naïve glee I had and still have” for the craft of writing history. Chernow’s most recent work is a landmark biography of Alexander Hamilton. Five years in the making, the book chronicles Hamilton’s personal and political life, from his origins as an illegitimate, largely self-taught orphan from the Caribbean, to his swift progression from King’s College student, to George Washington’s aide-de-camp, a member of the Constitutional Convention, coauthor of the *Federalist Papers*, leader of the Federalist party, and the first treasury secretary of the United States. Chernow recently sat down to discuss his new book with Kenneth T. Jackson, former president of the New-York Historical Society and the Jacques Barzun Professor of History and the Social Sciences at Columbia University, and Valerie Paley, editor of the *New-York Journal of American History*.

*Why did you choose Alexander Hamilton?
Not Franklin Roosevelt, or Bill Gates?*

CHERNOW: Actually, I was asked to write about Bill Gates a number of times, but I have developed a very strong partiality for the dead: they don’t talk back, they don’t sue, and they don’t have angry relatives. But I also think that there’s a tide that tends to carry historians back to the past.

Therefore, you were drawn to Hamilton because, historically, he came before J.P. Morgan.

CHERNOW: That's right. I was becoming stereotyped as the chronicler of Gilded Age moguls, and I knew I would become stale, or repetitive. So my significant advisors, i.e., my wife, my agent, and my editor, all felt I should try to do something that would not be a total departure from what I had been writing about, but would also address a lot of different issues. Hamilton was an ideal figure because he drew me back to the founding of Wall Street, and to the foundation of fiscal and monetary policy in the United States. The subject also opened the door to a multitude of Constitutional and domestic foreign policy issues. Hamilton had one of those extraordinary eighteenth-century minds that touched on virtually every major topic of the day. The founding fathers were not only brilliant, they were system builders and systematic thinkers. They came up with comprehensive plans and visions, and a fully articulated political philosophy. There's a breadth you just don't see today.



William Rollinson, after Archibald Robertson. **Alexander Hamilton**, 1804. Stipple engraving. Gift of the Estate of Hall Park McCollough, 1971. (PR 052)

Is this Hamilton's moment?

CHERNOW: In a way, as a subject for a book, Hamilton was the founder left standing. I don't mean to suggest that all the other books written about him in previous years don't have merit, because they do. But I felt that the large-scale, go-for-broke, authoritative text on Hamilton didn't exist. Everyone was taking a piece of the story—writing about his youth, or his intellectual influences, for example. I also think that the publication of thirty-two volumes of Hamilton papers by Columbia University Press acted as a deterrent, even though that sounds counterintuitive. It scared people away. In addition, writing about dead white males seems to be out of favor among academics, and a lot of journalists who might ordinarily be attracted to this subject get a six-month leave of absence, during which time you can scarcely get through volume two of the papers! As a result, there was a gap in the literature. For a variety of reasons, Hamilton has been the most underrated and most misunderstood of the founding fathers, and we have arrived at a moment in American history in which it is easier to appreciate his value. Partly because his life ended before the age of fifty, Hamilton, to an unusual degree, was defined by the other founding fathers, and he managed, with amazing consistency, to alienate most of them. Very often their grievances against Hamilton can be traced back to values that were widespread at the time, but not values that we share today. It was not just Jefferson, or Madison, or John Adams, who considered banks, stock exchanges, and to a certain extent general commerce and trading to be parasitic, or even evil, activities. The comments of Hamilton's enemies should be viewed through the filter of those attitudes. George Will said something like Hamilton's monument is not a physical building; it is the world that we see around us. In many ways the shape of the government today is much closer to the shape of the government that Hamilton had envisioned.

How important was New York to Hamilton?

Would he have done as well in Philadelphia, or Boston, or Charleston?

CHERNOW: That's an excellent question, and it's not one I do justice to in the book, for there were too many things to cover. Hamilton initially applied to the College of New Jersey, today's Princeton, and didn't get in. Instead, he came to New York, and found it enormously stimulating, for he immediately was operating on a larger political and economic stage than he would have elsewhere. Hamilton's advantage, as a driving force behind the Constitution, was that he didn't have the same kind of attachment to a state as, say, a Madison or a Jefferson had to Virginia. It was easier for him to develop a nation-

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al perspective. But having said that, I think that he did have a tremendous identity as a New Yorker. I did a lot of the research for the book at Columbia, in the Hamilton family papers, and right here at the New-York Historical Society, where I read through the papers of Pendleton and Van Ness, the men who were Hamilton's and Burr's seconds at the duel. One of the moving moments that sent a chill down my spine, in the papers of Hamilton's son, John Church Hamilton, was the description of Hamilton crossing over by boat to the duel in Weehawken. He looked back at the southern tip of Manhattan receding behind them, and he turned to Pendleton and said, "It's going to be a great city someday." That is actually the last recorded statement that we have prior to conversation about the duel. It suggests to me, because it was such an emotional moment for Hamilton, a real identity as a New Yorker, and his genuine gratitude for what the city gave him. He was a rootless outsider, and what other place in the world would have embraced him to the extent that New York did?

And how important is Hamilton to New York? Would New York have become the world financial capital it is without Alexander Hamilton?

CHERNOW: Of course, the history of Wall Street is inseparable from New York. I asked Steven Wheeler, the archivist of the New York Stock Exchange, what were the first securities originally traded on Wall Street at the time of the famous Buttonwood Agreement. There were only five, and Alexander Hamilton directly created them all. It is poignant, symbolic, and fitting that he ended up being buried at Trinity Church, right in the heart of the financial district, and so close to the stock exchange and Wall Street. Early on, New York already had a national and even international identity. It had been a bastion of Tory thought, and Hamilton was instrumental in retaining a large portion of Tory capital and population at a moment when a lot of the other patriots would have happily banished the entire population to Nova Scotia. After the Revolution, Hamilton recognized New York's unique position in terms of international trade; he didn't want to lose these merchants, who had very extensive connections with the Caribbean, with London, and with all of the major European trading centers.

So we should be focusing not on the Loyalists who left for Nova Scotia, but rather the many talented, ambitious ones who remained in New York.

CHERNOW: Absolutely. Hamilton's first specialty as a lawyer, after he qualified in record time to practice, was to defend Tories against what he saw as discriminatory legislation. Hamilton died on Jane Street, in the house of William Bayard, an ex-Tory. Hamilton's story is full of

repentant ex-Tories who stayed behind and formed the core of the Federalist Party in New York. After being Washington's aide for four years, and becoming the hero of Yorktown, Hamilton was viewed with a great deal of suspicion because of his association with these Tories. It seemed like he had defected to the enemy.

If Hamilton was a great champion of New York City, why did he bargain it away as the U.S. capital?

CHERNOW: Hamilton dearly wanted to have New York continue as the temporary capital, and then become the permanent capital. But he felt that the assumption of state debt was a more important policy objective. Ironically, then, one of the greatest New Yorkers made the deal that bargained the city away. But one of the special characteristics of New York is that it is different from a London or a Paris because it's the financial capital, and the cultural capital, but not the political capital. Perhaps there's something about the spirit of this city that is better for having the political capital elsewhere; there may be a kind of intellectual and cultural freedom. In terms of impact, the assumption of state debt was arguably Hamilton's single most important accomplishment. It was a testimony to his political ingenuity. It centralized power in the federal government and welded the states together at a point when they could have blown apart. It shows how much emphasis Hamilton placed on that assumption issue, that he was willing to bargain away New York.

Does the fact that Hamilton's widow lived fifty years after his death make the tragedy worse?

CHERNOW: Yes, and with the added poignancy that at the time of Hamilton's death, seven of their eight children were also still alive, the eighth having died in a duel three years earlier. One of the things that I was most at pains to do was to edit Eliza Hamilton back into the story, because she tried so hard to edit herself out. She ran the New York Orphan Asylum Society for several decades. I dug out all the records, and she wasn't just lending her name to it—she was really running it—dealing with the finance committee, arbitrating disputes—and it frustrated me that there was this missing founding mother. She is usually mentioned as a weak, religious, weepy, neurasthenic woman—as if she hadn't done anything. In fact, she was a strong, gutsy lady who was still mentally sharp and active until the end of her life.

Mrs. Hamilton didn't know that her husband was going to duel; needless to say, she was opposed to it after losing her son.

CHERNOW: Duels were conducted in extreme secrecy. You would not tell your spouse. When Eliza is sent for up at the Grange when the mortally wounded Hamilton returns from Weehawken, he says, "Break the news to her gently . . . tell her I have a spasm." He had spent the night before in their *pied à terre* in lower Manhattan, so she didn't know. Burr, in fact, had breakfast with a visitor later that morning, and made no reference whatsoever to the duel. When the visitor leaves and walks up Broadway, people start stopping him: "Did you hear, Burr shot Hamilton?" No, it couldn't be possible, he said, for he had just had breakfast with Burr, who didn't mention it. That's how secretive dueling was.

Hamilton's story builds up to the duel on July 11, 1804, with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy.

So why did Hamilton have the duel?

CHERNOW: The question is why did Burr want the duel, for he issued the challenge. Joanne Freeman's book explains that a duel is simply the final stage of an "affair of honor." Like with a lawsuit: some go to trial, and some never make it that far. Hamilton had been involved in ten so-called affairs of honor—seven as a principal, and three as a second and/or advisor. Because of his illegitimate, obscure, rather murky origins, he was hypersensitive to any imputations to his honor. He discovered early on that, in fact, the affair of honor was the method of choice for fending off such attacks. Other people might have landed estates, property and social connections, but he had one thing: his honor. So every single time Hamilton is attacked, he fires off exactly the sort of letter that a libel lawyer would fire off today, indicating that without a retraction or apology, the situation would wind up in a duel. Hamilton became a master at this. The only thing unique about what happens on July 11, 1804, is that the other man happened to be the vice president of the United States, and that this was the only affair of honor in which Hamilton was on the receiving end.

Was there any legal room to pull out of an affair of honor?

CHERNOW: Well, yes; you could simply apologize. But Hamilton's story builds up to the duel on July 11, 1804, with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy. He had developed an extremely combative, disputatious personality; he was not the sort of person who, if you said something he disagreed with, would let it go for the sake of politeness, so as to not destroy the dinner party. When he gets this letter from Burr—perhaps just because of a great lapse of judgment—Hamilton starts dueling him verbally, and a certain contempt comes through. Hamilton was a man of letters, and every writing project

took on a life of its own. For example, why does he write about his notorious sexual affair with Mrs. Reynolds while he was treasury secretary? Many people wouldn't. He describes her as a forlorn, abandoned, destitute woman, who made it obvious that "more than pecuniary consolation" would be acceptable from him. Now, clearly, this was a paragraph that should have been edited out. It was as if he realized, hey, this is how Fielding would have handled Tom Jones. He was having fun with it, like an author. It was another weird lapse of judgment. And then he can't extricate himself from it. He approached things in a very characteristic way, so going through his life chronologically, when I came to the duel, even had I not known the story, I could have anticipated his response.

What would have been in store for Hamilton had he not died prematurely — had Burr missed, or had Hamilton avoided the duel in the first place?

CHERNOW: I think he would have made major intellectual rather than political contributions, because he was tied to a dying party: the Federalists. Before his death, he was projecting a series of six to eight books on the history and effect of government institutions — on religion and morals and jurisprudence. Gouverneur Morris was going to write one volume, and Rufus King was going to write another, and needless to say, who was going to write the culminating volume that would draw all the strands together? Hamilton, who said, "This one will be to the *Federalist Papers* as wine is to water." That makes me particularly sorry that he died. When he wrote the *Federalist Papers*, he had a full-time legal practice, but was publishing maybe five or six essays per week. And so I think of what he could have done in his later years, when he might not have had the same distractions.

What would Alexander Hamilton be if he were alive today?

CHERNOW: A cynical friend says he would be doing LBOs on Wall Street. I think he would be a tenured professor of political science at an Ivy League university, and be politically active — like an Alan Dershowitz or a Laurence Tribe — shuttling between the TV studio and the university.

What do you think about the New-York Historical Society's exhibit title: "Alexander Hamilton: The Man Who Made Modern America"?

CHERNOW: Well, maybe I would have called it "The Man Who Imagined Modern America," simply because Hamilton was ahead of his time, which is one reason he was demonized. He imagined things that don't sound so frightening today, but which were controversial then. But you could have done worse with the title. I'm his biographer; I can live with a little hyperbole.