ALEXANDER HAMILTON: SLAVERY, POLITICS, AND CLASS STATUS

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Introduction

- Slavery is often connected with the Civil War, however…
- During the Revolutionary period, many people questioned the morality of slavery
- Some people took offense, while some did not
- Slavery was just one of the tensions during the building of a new nation, though it was often placed on the back burner
Enter Hamilton...

- Alexander Hamilton was just beginning his political career after a successful career in the military and in law.
- Best known for being on the ten dollar bill and as America’s first Secretary of the Treasury.
- Lived the typical ‘rags to riches’ life...
Upbringing

- His childhood was spent in the Caribbean islands of Nevis and St. Kitts
- This put him in close contact with slavery and the slave trade on a daily basis
- This helped him develop opinions on slavery which followed him into adulthood
Hamilton’s Influence

- “Hamilton achieved his success by the profound influence which he exerted on the public mind. No statesman in our history has every swayed so many of the leading men among his contemporaries as Hamilton, and at the same time he appealed by his pen to the largest popular audience of any man of his time.” – Henry Cabot Lodge

- Hamilton had to remain conscious of what he said, due to his great influence

- He would have been aware of his ability to use said influence to his advantage, both in terms of slavery and in general
Questions to Answer

- Did Hamilton use his influence to push his agenda with slavery?
- Were his views commonplace during the Revolutionary era?
- To what extent did his childhood influence his position on slavery?
- Was his class status more important to him than his morals were?
Hamilton’s Views of Slavery

- Hamilton was in opposition to slavery, supporting the idea that the founding fathers had a sense of justice and desire for freedom for all.
- “The page of history is replete with instances that loudly warn us to beware of slavery.” – Alexander Hamilton
- Michelle DuRoss argues that while he was against slavery, he was not open about it because it would have stifled his personal agenda.
- So was Hamilton an abolitionist or not? Is it possible he was both?
Revolutionary Views of Slavery

- “Liberty” and “freedom” were commonly used terms at the time
- Even though this population was so sensitive to the concept of slavery, they still kept about 20% of their population in slavery
- Much like the years leading up to the Civil War, much of the Deep South relied heavily upon slavery and the cheap, efficient labor it provided for the economy to remain stable
- “it was … the political problem with the deepest social and economic roots in the new nation, so that removing it threatened to disrupt the fragile union just as it was congealing.” – Joseph J. Ellis
- The abolition of slavery threatened to upset the balance between the North and the South
- Though many people, especially in the North, wanted to see the abolition of slavery, they were more concerned with solidifying the ties between the colonies
Continued…

- Though many people were not public about their views on slavery, it did show up in personal correspondence.

- It was a touchy subject in the political and professional realms, but could be found when one was confiding in someone they were close to.

- “I wish most sincerely there was not a slave in this province. It always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me – to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have.” – Abigail Adams to John Adams
Actions vs. Writings

- Many scholars believe that Hamilton was in opposition to slavery and led the life of an abolitionist.
- Often times, his actions did not reflect this, though his writings did.
- “The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the blacks, makes us fancy many things that are founded neither in reason nor experience.” – Alexander Hamilton to John Jay
- DuRoss argues, with compelling evidence, that Hamilton may have manipulated his beliefs in order to establish himself in social circles.
- Was slavery or social status more important to Hamilton? Why might this be?
Lowly Beginnings

- Grew up in the West Indies, in close proximity to slavery: 22,000 out of 24,000 residents were black slaves
- Hamilton and his brother, James, were born out of wedlock, meaning that they experienced life as outsiders
- They worked hard to support themselves and were familiar with a life of service
- His illegitimacy may have meant that “as an outcast himself, he may have in some ways identified with the slave’s depressed and despised position in West Indian society.” – James Oliver Horton
American Revolution Principles

- Hamilton “… was fully aware that the American Revolution would ultimately be judged by whether it lived up to its own principles. To be sure, Hamilton devoted most of his enormous energy to the more immediate tasks of “nation-building,” but this does not mean that he simply neglected the issue of slavery … Hamilton was steadfastly committed to the eventual abolition of slavery.” – James Oliver Horton

- There is little evidence of Hamilton’s involvement in the antislavery movement outside of many of his writings
Slaves as Property

- “… in a state of nature, no man had any moral power to deprive another of his life, limbs, property, or liberty; nor the least authority to command or exact obedience from him, except that which arose from the ties of consanguinity.” – Alexander Hamilton

- The lines get blurry because he says that no man could be deprived of his property, and slaves were considered property

- How could the liberty of slaves be protected as well as the property of the slave-owner?

- “The only distinction between freedom and slavery consists in this: In the former state a man is governed by the laws to which he has given his consent, either in person or by his representative; in the latter, he is governed by the will of another. In one case, his life and property are his own; in the other they depend upon the pleasure of his master. It is easy to discern which of these two states is preferable. No man in his sense can hesitate in choosing to be free, rather than a slave.” – Alexander Hamilton
Standing Against Slavery

- Hamilton sympathized with those enslaved, and often took a stand against slavery in his writings.
- “Were not the disadvantages of slavery too obvious to stand in need of it, I might enumerate and describe the tedious train of calamities inseparable from it. I might show that it is fatal to religion and morality; that it tends to debase the mind, and corrupt its noblest springs of action. I might show that it relaxes the sinews of industry, clips the wings of commerce, and introduces misery and indigence in every shape.” – Alexander Hamilton
- Hamilton found slavery to be a hindrance on society and also stifling to the economy, as he saw room for a partnership between whites and blacks.
Relating Government to Slavery

- When Hamilton wrote about government, he often said things that could be indirectly applied to the relationship between slaves and slave-owners.
- “Instead of endeavoring to establish their authority in the affection of their subjects, they think they have no security but in their fear. They do not aim at gaining their fidelity and obedience by making them flourishing, prosperous, and happy, but by rendering them abject and dispirited.” – Alexander Hamilton
- Slave owners maintained power through fear tactics, rather than earning loyalty and trust.
- This held slaves back, a clearly intentional decision of slave owners who would want to hold slaves back rather than lose the cheap labor.
- This showed how even though Hamilton was focused on building a new nation and government, he still had his thoughts in a second place.
Fight for Freedom

- The American Revolution was a fight for liberty, putting it in direct contradiction to slavery.
- “… for while everyone believed in liberty and everyone knew that slavery was its denial … fewer still lent active support to the developing antislavery movement, however logically it followed from the principles of the Revolution.” – Bernard Bailyn
- Slavery should have been the next step in achieving total freedom.
- However, slavery was too convenient and “necessary” for the country to remain solid and for the economy to grow.
- There was a fear that abolishing slavery would upset the unity between the separate colonies, threatening the stability of the new nation.
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- Should the freedom colonists were fighting for also include the rights of slaves?
- Thomas Hutchinson criticized the Declaration of Independence by “condemning the apparent history of a people who declared that all men were created equal, endowed with inalienable rights, and yet deprived “more than a hundred thousand Africans of their rights to liberty and *the pursuit of happiness*, and in some degree to their lives”.” – Thomas Hutchinson as quoted by Bernard Bailyn
- Hamilton said that “We are determined to show … that we know the value of freedom.”
- It can be said, based on this, that though many people sought out the true value of liberty, they were perhaps blinded by it too easily, believing that while freedom belonged to them, it did not have to include everyone and slaves could safely be an exception to the rule.
Some could see how unbalances the fight for freedom was becoming, and therefore, they shared a collective guilt about those enslaved.

Those involved in the antislavery movement “came to think of slavery not only as a moral wrong but also of antislavery as a moral good, perhaps even a moral duty”. – Christopher Leslie Brown

Many colonists were sensitive to oppression when it involved themselves, but were uncaring when it involved others, such as African-American slaves.
Words of the Slaves

- Slaves wanted to be included in the liberty for which America was fighting, hoping that their own freedom would closely follow.

- “people of this province seem to be actuated by the principles of equity and justice, [slaves] cannot but expect your house will again take [their] deplorabl case into serious consideration, and give [them] that ample relief which, as men, [they] have a natural right to … that Liberty is Equally as pre[c]ious to a Black man, as it is to a white one, and Bondage Equally as intolerable to the one as it is to the other.” – Peter Bestes, Sambo Freeman, Felix Holbrook, and Chester Joie

- “… but from what authority they assume the power to dispose of our lives, freedom, and property, we would wish to know.” – Nero Brewster, et al.

- Though white men at the time though black men to be illiterate brutes, these African-Americans offered clear and concise arguments.
Including African-Americans in the Fight

- Hamilton advocated raising “two three or four batalions [sic] of negroes; with the assistance of the government of that state, by contributions from the owners in proportion to the number they possess.”
- Many felt their personal property was being threatened by offering slaves freedom in exchange for their service.
- Others felt that giving slaves weapons would give them the means required to revolt against their owners.
- Lastly, people felt that slaves could not make good soldiers.
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- Hamilton wrote “I have not the least doubt, that the negroes will make very excellent soldiers, with proper management … I mention this, because I frequently hear it objected to the scheme of embodying negroes that they are too stupid to make soldiers. This is so far from appearing to me a valid objection that I think their want of cultivation (for their natural faculties are probably as good as ours) joined to the habit of subordination which they acquire from a life of servitude, will make them sooner become soldiers than our White inhabitants.”

- Hamilton recognized that if they did not make use of the slaves, the “enemy” most likely would
Hamilton and Facts

- “… he saw appreciated, and admitted facts. Never did he blink them out of sight or go upon a vain shadow-hunt, but always faced them and built upon them or did battle with them as the case might be. There is nothing vague or misty about Hamilton. Every thing is as clear-cut and well-defined as the American landscape on a bright, frosty, autumn day.” – Henry Cabot Lodge

- Reduces fear that Hamilton may be writing based on his emotional judgment without consideration to facts
Using Slaves for Practical Gain

- Hamilton’s position on slavery was not always moral, but sometimes held a practical approach, such as with enlisting them as soldiers.
- This allowed him to stand with one foot on either side, addressing slavery either morally or practically based upon his audience.
- Hamilton was able to dabble in the slavery discussion without jeopardizing his reputation.
Hamilton’s Desire for Class Status

- Hamilton did not openly state his opposition to slavery, and DuRoss claims that this can be interpreted to indicate that Hamilton was not a full-fledged abolitionist.
- This would relate back to his childhood in the West Indies and illegitimacy.
- He started out in lower social classes and worked hard to earn money and eventually become educated in America.
- It was his lifelong goal to be a member of the higher circles of society and he would do whatever it took to achieve this.
- Speaking openly about antislavery could have damaged his reputation, especially with higher class, slave-owning families.
- He was concerned about slavery, but not to a point where he would sacrifice his reputation over a personal opinion.
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- Hamilton married Elizabeth Schuyler, the daughter of a prominent slaveholder.
- He also conducted transactions that involved the purchase and transfer of slaves for the family.
- This demonstrates how, perhaps, Hamilton was more concerned with social status than he was with the antislavery movement.
- Hurting his reputation would have in turn hurt his influence among contemporaries.
Practical Purposes and Property Rights

- Hamilton supported giving slaves their freedom if they enlisted, possibly more for the benefit it would have for American than for slaves themselves.
- While he may have appreciated that slaves would gain their freedom through this process, he also chose to support it because of the practical service to the country.
- Property rights factored into representation and slaves were viewed as property; he supported the three-fifths clause.
- “Southerners believed they needed the extra representation to protect their slave system, Hamilton recognized that the three-fifths clause was necessary to create union – without the three-fifths compromise the South would never have agreed to the formation of the United States. They reasoned that without the clause, the North would dominate Congress and could destroy slavery. For Hamilton, the prosperity of America depended on the union of the North and South.” – Michelle DuRoss
- Hamilton understood that the destruction of slavery would endanger the economy as well as the union that was just coming together. He put his personal convictions aside for the sake of the new nation.
Argument for Humanity and Religion

- “... Whence arises that violent antipathy they seem to entertain, not only to the natural rights of mankind, but to common-sense and common-modesty? That they are enemies to the natural rights of mankind is manifest, because they wish to see one part of their species enslaved by another. That they have an invincible aversion to common-sense is apparent in many respects: they endeavor to persuade us that ... slavery, so far from being a great evil, is a great blessing.” – Alexander Hamilton

- Hamilton had a distinct advantage by viewing slaves as humans, allowing him to use logic to develop new ideas and opinions which would not be seen by those who viewed slaves as inhuman.
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- It may stem from his religious beliefs when he wrote that “All men have one common original: they participate in one common nature, and consequently have one common right. No reasons can be assigned why one man should exercise any power or pre-eminence over his fellow-creatures more than another; unless they have voluntarily vested him with it.” – Alexander Hamilton

- This makes it clear that slavery does not fall in line with his personal beliefs
“… humanity does not require us to sacrifice our own security and welfare to the convenience or advantage of others. Self-preservation is the first principle of our nature. When our lives and properties are at stake, it would be fooling and unnatural to refrain from such measures as might preserve them because they would be detrimental to others.” – Alexander Hamilton

Though he would not want a slave uprising because it would end in violence, Hamilton felt it perfectly natural for a person to want to act in self-interest
Contemporaries

- Some of the people he worked closely with were slave-owners, while some were not.
- Just because they were slave owners did not always mean that they were in favor of slavery.
- Hamilton never owned slaves, and the same can be said for John Adams and Thomas Paine.
- Those who owned slaves included Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry, John Hancock, John Jay, James Madison, and George Washington – Jay, Madison, and Washington are especially relevant as Hamilton worked closely with them during his career.
“Is it not amazing that at a time when the rights of humanity are defined and understood with precision, in a country, above all others, fond of liberty—that in such an age and in such a country we find men professing a religion the most humane, mild, gentle, and generous, adopting a principle as repugnant to humanity as it is inconsistent with the Bible, and destructive to liberty?” – Patrick Henry

“It is much to be wished that slavery may be abolished. The honour of the States, as well as justice and humanity, in my opinion, loudly call upon them to emancipate these unhappy people. To contend for our own liberty, and to deny that blessing to others, involves an inconsistency not to be excused.” – John Jay
“Upon the decease [of] my wife, it is my Will and desire th[at] all the Slaves which I hold in [my] own right, shall receive their free[dom] .... The Negroes thus bound, are (by their Masters or Mistresses) to be taught to read and write’ and to be brought up to some useful occupation, agreeably to the Laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia, providing for the support of Orphan and other poor Children. And I do hereby expressly forbid the Sale, or transportation out of the said Commonwealth, of any Slave I may die possessed of, under any pretence [sic] whatsoever.” – George Washington
Conclusion

- Though Hamilton had a distaste for slavery, he often chose to let his personal and social gains take a priority over the antislavery movement.
- He made decisions that favored the developing country first, perhaps hoping to tackle the issue of slavery later on.
- Hamilton lived a life that focused on nation-building above all else.
- Hamilton joined the many other founding fathers in silence, so as not to upset the precarious balance between the colonies.
Bibliography

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