

AMERICAN PHOENIX:
THE RESPONSE TO ALEXANDER HAMILTON'S DEATH

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“In my defense, and that of the American press, this greatest of men made his mightiest effort” – Harry Crosswell on the death of Alexander Hamilton.¹

“If Hamilton had lived twenty years longer, he would have rivaled Socrates or Bacon, or any other of the sages of ancient or modern time, in researches after truth and in benevolence to mankind” – Chancellor James Kent²

The circumstances surrounding Alexander Hamilton's death shocked the American public. Hamilton had been a major general in the Continental Army, a prominent New York lawyer, the former secretary of the treasury, a “favorite son” of the late George Washington, and a powerful, Federalist political boss. At the age of 49, he was killed in a duel of honor with none other than the vice president of the United States – Aaron Burr. His life was one of intensity and controversy – from his upbringing as an illegitimate child, to his role as Washington's aid-de-camp, to his political battles with bitter rivals such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. He died young, perhaps with his best years as a political figure in front of him. To Federalists, Hamilton was a saint. To Republicans, he was regarded as a destructive power. Despite his controversial political views, the nature of Hamilton's death elevated him to the status of founding father.

After Hamilton was mortally wounded on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River, he returned to Manhattan Island for treatment. When it became obvious that he would die, the Right Reverend Benjamin Moore hesitantly administered Hamilton's last communion. Shortly after the general's last breath, Moore wrote a letter to a Mr. Coleman, the editor of the *New York Evening Post*, Hamilton's own newspaper. It begins:

I have thought it would be grateful to my fellow citizens, would provide against misrepresentation and perhaps, be conducive to the

¹ Richard Brookhiser, *Alexander Hamilton: American* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 214.

² Robert Hendrickson, *Hamilton II (1789 – 1804)* (New York: Mason/Charter, 1976), 657.

advancement of cause of Religion, were I to give a narrative of some facts which have fallen under my observation.³

The letter contains the minister's initial rebuttal of dueling followed by a heart-wrenching account of Hamilton coming to terms with his own death. Moore's narrative portrays Hamilton as a regretful yet composed individual. Hamilton is seen as a God-fearing and wise man who has made a ghastly mistake. The clergyman explains to the dying Hamilton that dueling is against God's law. Hamilton admits his sin, proclaims a faith in the mercy of Jesus Christ, and states that he meant no harm towards Burr during the duel. Hamilton also says he forgives Burr, as if directly targeting an enemy in a duel was unspeakable. Within hours, the *New York Evening Post* published the letter as their top story. As word spread of Hamilton's death, "Thursday Evening, July 12, 1804 by Benjamin Moore" was published in Federalist and Republican newspapers across the United States.

The importance of this article to the nation's perception of Hamilton's death cannot be overstated. The letter represented the last time that the American people would hear directly from Hamilton. Moore's account of Hamilton's death contains deeply religious tones which would have been very popular to an "awakened" population. The message conveyed is one of sympathy towards Hamilton, who is seen in the letter as a religious, judicious gentleman. The publicity this letter received was astounding. Within a few weeks, it had reached every region of the United States. By reading this article, Americans could easily come away with respect and love for a fallen patriot. The theme of this letter is obvious: Hamilton is a devout, genuine Christian who has just made a terrible mistake.⁴ Whether or not this account of Hamilton displayed his true nature, the American public bought the story. Some of his most hated critics lifted him up in his death. According to Robert Hendrickson, "Many editors who had been political opponents generously united in praise."⁵ The article had the ability to change everything people thought of Hamilton.

New England provided the loudest and most mournful cry after Hamilton's death. A region of staunch Federalism, New Englanders looked to Hamilton as a hero. Hamilton's contemporaries in government believed that they were fighting for the very fabric of America.⁶ If control of the country was relinquished to opposing political minds, according to Federalists, then the Constitution would cease to exist. To many in New

³ Benjamin Moore, "Thursday Evening, July 12, 1804," *New York Evening Post*, 13 July 1804.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Hendrickson, *Hamilton II*, 658.

⁶ James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 9.

England, Hamilton was a savior of the Constitution and therefore America. The reaction of newspapers to his death proves this point. The *Catskill Reporter* cried, “Weep! Columbians Weep! For the fall of virtue, talents, patriotism – the firmest pillar of your national dignity.”⁷ The *Columbia Courier* of New Bedford, Massachusetts focused on the virtues of Hamilton as a man.⁸ The *Windham Herald* of Connecticut compared Hamilton’s death to George Washington’s death.⁹ As one would expect, the editors of New England newspapers with political views most similar to Hamilton were his finest eulogists. According to Hendrickson, “newspapers everywhere rivaled each other in expressions of sorrow.”¹⁰ Although many of his decisions as secretary of the treasury were regionally divisive, New England seemed to always get the winning hand, and the people did not forget the friend they had in Hamilton.

Nowhere was the mourning more intense than in New York City. Despite opposing political factions led by fellow New Yorkers George Clinton and Burr, Hamilton was the pride of the city. He was by far its most famous and powerful politician. Hamilton’s dealings in the banks, law, and education made him highly recognizable in the community, even after his withdraw from public office. The city declared the day of his funeral to be a public day of mourning.¹¹ Ron Cherow explains:

Everybody in New York knew that the city had lost its most distinguished citizen . . . the New York Supreme Court draped its bench in black fabric, while the Bank of New York building was also draped in black. For thirty days, New Yorkers wore black bands on their arms.¹²

The Virginia Argus reported that all businesses were shut down and that hundreds of people lined the streets for the funeral procession. British and French ships in the city’s harbor fired cannon in respect.¹³ New York City stood as the epicenter in a storm of extreme mourning.

As news of the duel spread, southern coverage of Hamilton’s death was surprisingly mournful and matter of fact. While Hamilton was secretary of treasury, the South and other generally rural areas had been on the losing end of many national financial decisions. The entire region was more politically aligned with the Republicans. Despite the growing sectionalism

⁷ “Catskill, July 16,” *Catskill Recorder*, 16 July 1804.

⁸ “Gen. Hamilton,” *Columbia Courier*, 13 July 1804.

⁹ “July 13,” *Windham Herald*, 19 July 1804.

¹⁰ Hendrickson, *Hamilton II*, 658.

¹¹ Brookhiser, *Alexander Hamilton*, 215.

¹² Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 710.

¹³ “New York, July 13,” *Virginia Argus*, 25 July 1804.

of the nation, most of the southern press put aside politics to realize the contributions of Hamilton. Not only were truces made, but editors showed genuine sympathy. The South's newspapers focused on the tragedy of losing a national leader. Most papers did not expound on Hamilton as a politician. For example, the *Virginia Argus* provided an account of Hamilton's funeral and its eulogies.¹⁴ The *Maryland Herald* published Moore's letter and a detailed account of Gouverneur Morris' eulogy.¹⁵ In a region of Republicanism and disdain for Hamilton's Federalism, most southern writers were gracious towards Hamilton.

One of the few Republican newspapers that did comment on Hamilton's politics was Fredericktown, Maryland's *Republican Advocate*. Though it acknowledged Hamilton as a prominent figure in the early years of America, the paper did not refrain from publishing jabs at his political ideology: "We entertain the same opinion of General Hamilton now that we ever did. For his genius and talents we admire him . . . but for his aristocratic principles, we dislike him."¹⁶ The article goes on to say: "As a luminary of law, we accord to him the meed of praise, but as a statesman, he was not of that class which is favorable to liberty, and therefore we do not think him a great one."¹⁷ The bluntness of the *Advocate* demonstrates that some Americans refused to glorify Hamilton in death.¹⁸ In fairness, the newspaper also published Moore's letter. No doubt staffed by staunch Republicans, the *Advocate* admitted that Hamilton was a fascinating and bright individual, but it refused to bow in his honor like the majority of the country's press.¹⁹ The seemingly apocalyptic political battles with Federalists over the years proved too immense for some to forget and reconcile.

The reaction of Hamilton's political rivals was less than mournful. Though Aaron Burr would suffer socially and politically for killing Hamilton, the actual event of the duel did not disturb him.²⁰ Burr would jokingly refer to, "my friend Hamilton – whom I shot".²¹ James Madison wrote to James Monroe complaining that Federalists were using the press to glorify a man who deserved no glory.²² John Adams, who blamed Hamilton for costing him his reelection as president, said that "no one wished to get rid of Hamilton in *that way*."²³ Thomas Jefferson stayed relatively quiet on

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "New York, July 16," *Maryland Herald*, 25 July 1804.

¹⁶ "Alexander Hamilton," *Republican Advocate*, 20 July 1804.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, 714.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

the matter. According to historian Richard Brookhiser, “Jefferson included him in a list of ‘remarkable deaths lately’ in a letter to a European friend, and made no other comment.”²⁴ However, Jefferson did wish to have Hamilton’s military rank posthumously demoted from major general to colonel.²⁵ Other rivals believed Hamilton’s death did him more justice than was due. The reactions of his rivals demonstrate the deep hatred for Hamilton in the political realm. Due to years of political combat, they were not ones to cry over Hamilton, and some were rather happy to see him go.

If his political enemies were ungracious, his friends were brotherly. According to Robert Hendrickson, “Hamilton’s New York friends organized themselves to try to mend the destitution in which he had left his family.”²⁶ Rich men from Maryland to Massachusetts sent money to his estate.²⁷ The massive debt Hamilton had left to his wife was quickly paid off, and they gave him only the highest praise.²⁸ Fisher Ames said: “I could weep for my country, which as it is, does not know the half of its loss. It deeply laments. . . and sees what Hamilton *was*; but my soul stiffens with despair when I think what Hamilton *would have been*.”²⁹ His friends held him in high respect. They recognized him not only as a personal friend but a friend to all Americans. They understood the importance of his political work. The acts of kindness by his friends speak of the enormous respect that Hamilton had gained from his closest peers.

Before his duel with Vice President Burr, no one would have ever expected Alexander Hamilton to die as a hero of the entire country. The tragic event enshrined him as a legend. Nothing can illustrate this more than the posthumous title of “Founding Father.” How was Hamilton a founding father? He enjoyed an interesting yet largely concealed role as Washington’s aide-de-camp. He was a rather undistinguished delegate from New York at the Constitutional Convention, and the convention’s final product was penned by rival James Madison.³⁰ Hamilton was secretary of treasury and led a political faction that would later become the Federalist Party. However, his role in executive politics was more divisive than anything else. In fact at the time of his death, Hamilton had inspired at least three major, rival factions who believed that he was trying to destroy the country. After his time in office as secretary of the treasury, Hamilton played a politically subversive role during the Adams and Jefferson administrations and the presidential elections of 1796 and 1800 – all while being a private lawyer in

²⁴ Brookhiser, *Alexander Hamilton*, 214.

²⁵ Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, 714.

²⁶ Hendrickson, *Hamilton II*, 660.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Brookshire, *Alexander Hamilton*, 214.

²⁹ Hendrickson, *Hamilton II*, 660.

³⁰ Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 33.

New York City.³¹ Hamilton's career does not appear to compare with the likes of George Washington, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, or Thomas Jefferson. However, he received praise as a founding father. It was Hamilton's sudden and tragic death that changed his status in America's history. Ill feelings were loosed and tempers immediately cooled. The shock and mourning of the nation as a whole secured his permanent place as an American statesman.

³¹ Ibid., 148-160, 239-240.