

Biographical Briefing: Alexander Hamilton

Directions: The Reader will read the following "Biographical Briefing" aloud to the group. After each segment, discuss the "Stop and Discuss" questions. Make sure you carefully read the entire handout. You will use this information to create a visual representation on the ideals of Alexander Hamilton.

Background: Alexander Hamilton was born in the British West Indies in 1755, the son of James Hamilton and Rachel Lavine, who were not married. Hamilton's father abandoned the family when he was ten, and his mother died three years later. Young Hamilton had started working as a clerk in a countinghouse (an office in which business is transacted or bookkeeping is done) at the age of 11, and by the time he was 18, Alexander had so impressed his superiors that they sent him to King's College in New York. When the American Revolution broke out, Hamilton again distinguished himself and was soon asked by General Washington to become an aide. After the war, Hamilton earned his law degree and was elected to represent New York in the Continental Congress. When President Washington launched the first federal government under the new U.S. Constitution, Alexander Hamilton was named the country's Secretary of the Treasury. Hamilton left the Cabinet six years later, and in 1804 he was killed in a duel by political rival Aaron Burr.

Stop Here
& Discuss



- What positions did Hamilton hold during his career?
- Based on these positions, what types of abilities do you think Hamilton had?
- Considering his upbringing, do you think Hamilton would have been generally very trusting of people or rather suspicious of them? Explain.

View of the nature of human beings: Perhaps influenced by his difficult childhood, Hamilton held a generally negative view of the nature of humankind. He viewed people as generally ignorant, selfish, and untrustworthy. He felt that most people's actions were determined by their "passions" and self-interests. He did not think people usually based decisions on what was best for everyone; instead, he believed people acted selfishly. As a result, Hamilton thought that a small, sensible group of men must govern for the people. This elite group, of which he was a member, held the important responsibility of using their collective talents and wisdom to govern in the best interest of all people.

Stop Here
& Discuss



- What words might Hamilton use to describe people? Did Hamilton think all people were like this? Explain.
- Considering his attitudes toward the "common man," do you think he would favor a strong central government or a government that distributed power among the states and the people?

Best Type of Government: Hamilton was a strong supporter of a powerful central or federal government. His belief was that governmental power should be concentrated in the hands of those few men who had the talent and intelligence to govern properly for the good of all the people. Hamilton feared that if most government power was given to states or to the people, it was more likely that self-interest on the part of individual states or people would determine decisions, not what was best for everyone. Not surprisingly, Hamilton was a sharp critic of the Articles of Confederation precisely because they gave too much power to the individual states and not enough to the central government.

Stop Here
& Discuss



- What type of governmental system did Hamilton support? Why?
- Did Hamilton like the Articles of Confederation? Why or why not?
- Do you think Hamilton would have supported ratification of the U.S. Constitution? Why or why not?

Constitution: While Hamilton strongly opposed the Articles of Confederation, he was a strong supporter of the United States Constitution. In his mind, the Constitution corrected the most serious problems of the Articles of Confederation. It provided for a strong executive—the president—to provide leadership for the country, and it also gave more power to the federal government over the individual states. In fact, if Hamilton had his way, the federal government would have been made even more powerful—such as a life term for the president—than it was under the provisions of the Constitution. When it came time for the various states to approve the Constitution, Hamilton took a leading role in rallying support for it. Through a series of essays that he helped to write, known as the Federalist Papers, Hamilton explained his understanding of the Constitution and the powers that it gave to the federal government. These essays were extremely important in helping to win support for approval of the Constitution in the various states.

In his writing, Hamilton argued that the federal government had wide-ranging powers. He pointed out that Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution stated that Congress had the power to make *any* law “which shall be necessary and proper.” According to Hamilton, the wording of this clause gave the federal government broad powers. Those people who supported this idea were said to believe in a “broad” or “loose” interpretation of the Constitution. Using the “broad” interpretation of the Constitution, the federal government would be able to exercise much power in making any laws which seemed “necessary and proper.”

Stop Here
& Discuss



- What did Hamilton think of the U.S. Constitution? Why?
- Did Hamilton have a “loose” or “strict” interpretation of the Constitution? Explain.

Political Party: As the states decided whether or not to approve the Constitution, there was serious debate as to whether it gave too much power to the federal government. It is important to remember that America had just fought a war for independence largely because the central government in England had in the opinion of Americans, too much power. In this debate, many politicians shared Hamilton's views that a strong federal government, fewer states rights, and a "broad" interpretation of the Constitution was necessary for the survival of the young nation. These men banded together during the approval process and formed the nation's first political party, known as the Federalists. Hamilton, of course, became one of the party's leading spokesmen.

Stop Here
& Discuss



- What effect did Hamilton's views have on other politicians?
- What were the views of the Federalists? Explain.

Ideal Economy: Hamilton also held strong opinions about America's economy. In keeping with his political philosophy, Hamilton believed that an elite few, rather than the general population, had the ability to lead America's economy. Rather than continuing as a nation of small farmers, he favored an industrial economy. He wanted the elite—the small number of wealthy, well-educated citizens to lead America's businesses, factories, and companies. Hamilton believed these business leaders had the responsibility of making economic decisions that were not only best for their companies, but also for their employees and for the country's economy as a whole. Hamilton also favored the establishment of a government-sponsored national bank—later called Bank of the United States—that would help these businesses by loaning them money. A national bank would also tie the interests of these economic leaders to the interests of the federal government, since the federal government was aiding their businesses through the bank.

Stop Here
& Discuss



- What did Hamilton believe was best for the American economy?
- How was Hamilton's economic philosophy similar to his political philosophy?