Handout A: The American Success Story of Alexander Hamilton and Diligence

Background

The Constitutional Convention was held in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787. After the delegates produced a new framework of government, they sent it to state ratifying conventions for approval. During 1787 and 1788, the representatives of the people assembled in each of the states to debate the Constitution. Those who supported the Constitution were called Federalists and those opposed were known as Anti-Federalists. The Federalists included Alexander Hamilton, who wrote Federalist essays in defense of the Constitution that were published in New York and the other states. In an incredibly diligent effort, Hamilton produced over fifty essays that served as a successful political propaganda for the Federalist effort ratifying the Constitution as well as a lasting examination of American political principles.

Narrative

Alexander Hamilton was born and raised in the Caribbean and had a very difficult childhood. His father, James Hamilton, abandoned his family when Alexander was ten years old, leaving his mother a twice-divorced, single mother struggling to make ends meet. The young man did not receive much of an education and was forced to work at an import-export business to help support his mother. Tragically, she succumbed to a tropical fever when he was thirteen years old, leaving him and his brother to make their own way in the world. The chances that Alexander Hamilton would be successful in life seemed very remote indeed. Fortunately, Hamilton had some excellent mentors who helped give the determined young man a chance. His employer taught him a great deal about the business and the youth applied himself diligently to mastering the complexities of accounting, international trade, and shipping. A Presbyterian minister moved to the capital where Hamilton lived and introduced him to the Christian faith, principles of liberty, and the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment in his vast library. Finally, several important local men recognized Hamilton's natural genius and work ethic and decided to pay for his education in America. It was a golden opportunity to succeed in life, provided he continued to earn it.

When Hamilton arrived in America, he lacked sufficient academic preparation to attend Princeton University, where his sponsors wanted him to attend college. He hit the books hard at a preparatory school and quickly finished the necessary work. When he met with Princeton President Rev. John Witherspoon, Hamilton felt so confident of his abilities and diligence that he asked to complete the four-year education in only two years. Witherspoon turned him down, so Hamilton attended Columbia University instead. He was a successful student when the larger events leading to the American Revolution intervened and provided another opportunity for him to demonstrate his commitment to liberty.

Hamilton was drilling an artillery company in New York when the war moved there after the siege of Boston ended. The British invaded New York with a massive armada carrying 32,000 redcoats and German mercenaries. The enemy army and navy easily drove the Americans out of New York, across the Hudson River, and deep into New Jersey. Many colonial militiamen had their enlistments expire, and they returned to their farms in the fall of 1776. Nevertheless, General George Washington persevered in holding the army together and battling the British. Throughout the long retreat, the general noted the great courage and leadership of Hamilton, particularly during the daring attacks across the Delaware at Trenton and Princeton, where the artillery played a significant role in the success of the battles. Washington invited Hamilton to join his staff as an aide because the general believed that merit, not birth or wealth, should determine who advanced in the army.

Hamilton accepted the position and was one of Washington's most trusted aides for the duration of most of the war. Washington entrusted Hamilton with sensitive correspondence with generals and members of Congress, and sent the twenty-two-year-old aide on several important missions. He bravely endured the horrors of Valley Forge and fought at Washington's side at the battles of Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth Courthouse, and finally, Yorktown, the decisive battle that essentially ended the war. At Yorktown, Hamilton demonstrated tenacious courage by leading an audacious charge on a redoubt that turned the tide in favor of the Continental Army and their French ally.
Hamilton had won fame and rose to an important position because of his continued dedication to the American cause of liberty. He contributed even more to the founding of America during the next decade. After rapidly studying law and passing the bar exam to support his growing family, he was strongly committed to serving the public good. He was a representative in New York and in the national Congress. In 1786, he attended the Annapolis Convention to strengthen the Articles of Confederation and attended the Constitutional Convention the following year. After the Constitution was written, Hamilton demonstrated perhaps the greatest example of diligent effort in his life. He was the author of fifty-one *Federalist* essays in defense of the Constitution during the debate over ratification. In July, 1788, he overcame overwhelming opposition to the Constitution in the New York Ratifying Convention and was instrumental in securing ratification—but only by three votes! He deserves a large share of the credit for winning the ratification of the Constitution and then seeing the new government take shape.

Hamilton had invested a great deal of time and energy into the creation of the new Constitution and wanted the “more perfect Union” to succeed. He thought it was critical that Washington serve as the first president and virtually demanded that he come out of retirement to serve. In turn, President Washington tapped Hamilton, who was a financial genius, to become the first Secretary of the Treasury. At the request of Congress, Hamilton produced several important reports—the Report on Public Credit, a proposal for a National Bank, and a Report on Manufactures—which contained his proposals to put the United States on a strong financial foundation. Congress passed measures instituting the first two reports, and President Washington signed the bills. As a result, the American economy prospered. Hamilton continued to serve as Washington’s main confidant and policy advisor on many other important issues until retiring to his legal practice in 1795.

Hamilton was deeply involved in politics and practiced law for the rest of his life, which was tragically cut short in a duel with Aaron Burr in 1804. He left behind a large family and a legacy as an important Founder of the American political system and economy. His diligent effort to rise above his humble circumstances and succeed in life is a classic American rags-to-riches story. He was also an example of an immigrant who came to America and worked hard to take advantage of the opportunities the country had to offer.

Questions

1. How did Alexander Hamilton's diligence advance the freedom of himself and others?
2. What was Hamilton’s identity as a child? As a young man? As a student? As a member of the Continental Army? As a Founder?
3. What was Hamilton’s purpose at the different stages of his life? How did that affect his diligence?
4. Hamilton faced many difficulties throughout his life. How did his diligence help to define his performance in each role he had throughout life?
5. What is the link between Hamilton's identity and purpose throughout his life?