Alexander Hamilton: Book Review

The 2004 New York Times best-selling book, Alexander Hamilton, written by Ron Chernow, follows the life story of the United States' first secretary of treasure, Alexander Hamilton. From the beginning of Alexander’s life as an immigrant in the Caribbean to his life ending battle with Aaron Burr, this book thoroughly encapsulates the theme of overcoming personal adversity and challenging obstacles, during the birth and rise of our great nation. The story of Hamilton's life not only represents the classical tale of an underdog reaching mass success through sheer motivation and hard work, but supplies the individuals of today hope, that they too, can create an impact much greater than themselves. The purpose of this essay is so analyze the stages and experiences in Hamilton's life that also serve as life lessons for the readers.

The book begins with Alexander’s birth on the Caribbean Island of Nevis. The first chapter explains his complex family dynamic and the various struggles he faced during his childhood growing up on the island. Prior to Alexander’s birth, his mother Rachel married a man named John Levian, who later turned abusive and attempted to take all of Rachel’s inheritance. Rachel eventually fled with her son to the island of Nevis and arrived on St. Kitts, where she met Hamilton's father and gave birth to Alexander. Alexander’s father eventually left the family, leaving Rachel and her two sons impoverished. At age eleven, Alexander’s mother passed away which essentially forced Alexander and his brother Peter, to move in with their cousin and find jobs. Alexander eventually became a clerk at a nearby store which exposed him to the world of money and trade. During this time, he also wrote a famous letter published in the newspaper, documenting the travesties that took place during a devastating hurricane. This letter not only awed Alexander’s boss but gave him the opportunity to move to the U.S and pursue an education. One major idea we can take away from analyzing Alexander’s childhood is that the although he faced adversity at a young age, it only allowed him to gain a greater understanding of the unprincipled world around him. He was introduced to the ideas of business and commerce and directly saw the brutality of the slave trade take place around his environment, which in later years impacted his perspective on slavery. One theme us readers can take away from this time in his life, is that even when tragedy may strike our personal and home lives, persistence and strength have the ability to bring us back up and continue on. Dealing with the death of his mother and absence of his father at a young age, gave Alexander the independence he needed in order to take risks in hope of reward, later on throughout his life.

Once Hamilton immigrated to America he ended up attending King’s College, aspiring to become a doctor. In college, he started a small literary circle with friends to read papers and have political discourse. At King’s College, Hamilton's views began to evolve and he eventually joined the American cause, writing outspoken “anonymous” anti- pieces of writing. He eventually dropped out of college in order to aid the fight in the American revolution and started off as artillery captain, where he consistently demonstrated strict accordance with military attire, drills, and training. One day a general known as Nathanael Greene, told George Washington all about Hamilton's impressive military expertise and he was asked to become Washington's military aide. During the beginning of his new position, Hamilton began establishing the foundations for his political base. He eventually became a lawyer and actually represented New York during the second meeting of the continental congress. At just 23, Washington would ask

for Hamilton's views on decision making and it was evident that he would have a future in politics. This phase of Alexander’s life encompasses his claim to being self-made. Reading about how he was able to move up through the ranks, by sacrificing his education in order to gain hands on experience in a completely new field, shows readers that sometimes you must take risk in order to gain reward. By joining the war, Hamilton was given opportunities that pushed him to achieve things he would’ve never expected.

Hamilton's political views primarily stemmed from his belief in a strong central government. He aimed at fixing the constitution and did so through writing a majority of the Federalist Papers. The Federalist Papers were a collection of essays which aimed at pointing out the weaknesses of the constitution and convincing New York to approve and vote on ratification. Moreover, George Washington asked Hamilton to accept the position of being the United States' first secretary of the treasury. It was during this time that Hamilton proposed the idea of creating a national U.S bank with one form of currency. He also stated that the government should take on individual states debts so that in the case of a foreign country, like France for example, where to go to an individual state demanding repayment, it would not undermine the authority of the national government. Hamilton came up with a plan to offer foreign creditors a list of options they could choose from for how interest rates were decided. It is noted in the book, that Hamilton did not do things “halfway.” He was constantly driven and often had trouble balancing his work and personal life. Even after he completed establishing funding programs and writing up new plans, he never took a break He was seen as being extremely agreeable to others and his curiosity for the world around him was endless. He was often painted in a positive light and was friendly to those around him. He stood for promoting self-made people and believed that the government should encourage self reliance. His character was founded on the idea of not allowing past struggles to weigh him down. One theme we can take away from this Alexander’s active days in politics is that it is important to stay level-headed and open-minded, especially while being in positions of power and in decision making.

Hamilton faced opposition from many people throughout his political career. Two individuals in particular who were against seeing him rise with success was James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. Their opposition with Hamilton can be seen as aiding in the establishment of the bipartisan system we have today. The emergence of these “parties” did not create distinct fixed political groups, as of at the time, but was more of a clash between two individual’s beliefs. Washington was consistently known to have sided with Hamilton during this time and they shared many of the same opinions and political beliefs. This angered Jefferson, as he shared many defaming stories, criticizing Hamilton's sense of character. Before Hamilton stepped down from his position as secretary of treasury, the Whiskey rebellion took place. Hamilton realized that an event such a this, could destroy the U.S if the government did not step in and establish its full authority. He was caught in a bit of dilemma with this tax because he supported the idea of supporting federal government but needed to pass taxes in order to do so. Although Hamilton faced personal and political hostility at times, he never allowed this to bring him down. Instead, he turned the betrayal and threats to his reputation from former friends, into determination and focus on creating new programs and fulfilling his duties. One of Hamilton's most successful achievements was aiding in setting the foundation for capitalism to flourish. Even when the country fell amidst financial panics, Hamilton stayed motivated to guide the country into a new based on a belief he so strongly stood for- promoting self-improvement.

Another majority of the book follows and goes back and forth between the “feud” of Hamilton and Jefferson. Hamilton was consistently noted to view society with a lens that depicted human

nature in its natural essence, while Jefferson saw individuals as people with full potential. While the two consistently said unflattering things about each other and disagreed in many areas, Hamilton was essentially forced to side with Jefferson when his opponent, Aaron Burr was running for presidency. After Jefferson became president, Alexander began to slowly fade away from his public presence. Towards his final years of life, he found himself preoccupied with religion, publishing “The Federalist” in book form, and political law. Moreover, Hamilton was noted to an individual who always faced a duel or debate head on, without backing out. This can be seen when Hamilton and Aaron Burr decided to set a planned date to duel. Hamilton wrote goodbye letters and pre arranged his affairs, in the event that he died during his anticipated battle. On the final day of Alexander Hamilton's life, he met with Aaron Burr for a duel on July 11th, 1804. Both men drew out their guns for battle and Hamilton was fatally shot.

In conclusion, Alexander Hamilton completed many accomplishments that had long lasting impacts on our nation’s foundation. Through his endless motivation and hard work in ratifying the constitution, stabilizing the economy, and his duties in the American revolution, he embodied qualities and attributes that many individuals can only wish to see in political figures. His life not only conveys a story of triumph and defeat, but shows readers that they too can achieve their goals even when adversity may strike our lives.