

## BUSINESS-CLASS HERO by Mike Wallace

I think Edward Rothstein's *New York Times* review of the Alexander Hamilton exhibition at the New-York Historical Society is right on target: the show is seriously flawed and deeply condescending.<sup>1</sup> But I'm not convinced it's correct to lay the lion's share of responsibility for the exhibition's failings at designer Ralph Applebaum's door. Applebaum's client wanted a "blockbuster" – mammoth crowds, lines around the block – and the designer sought to oblige. He provided a format heavy on audiovisual gimmicks – "straining for sensation" (as Rothstein puts it) – and light on explanatory text, as if a more reasoned presentation would alienate attendees. James Traub essentially concurs with Rothstein's assessment, suggesting in his *Times Magazine* review that the exhibition – which he finds by turn baffling and hectoring – dumbed down its presentation to pack people in.<sup>2</sup>

It's true that in an effort to enhance turnout and reach new audiences, worthy goals I heartily share, the show opted for flash and scrimped on text – without, in the end, garnering the desired crowds. But the exhibit's flaws go beyond packaging and style to conception and content – to *what* it says, not just *how* it says it – and responsibility here properly rests with Applebaum's client.

That client, we should be clear, was only technically the New-York Historical Society. Responsibility for the Hamilton exhibition is explicitly attributed to, and proudly claimed by, the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History, an organization founded by recently arrived N-YHS Trustees Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman. James Basker, Gilder-Lehrman's President, is listed as Project Director. The exhibition was in effect outsourced – or in-sourced, given the Institute's expanding presence within the Society. The N-YHS served merely as host body.

Before the show opened, there was widespread concern that the right wing proclivities of Messrs. Gilder and Lehrman might color future Society offerings. I took a wait-and-see position, because the Gilder-Lehrman Institute had been scrupulous in the past about not imposing a political litmus test on scholarship it supported. Besides, a conservative assessment of Hamilton might well have proved interesting, and the curator assigned the task, Richard Brookhiser (an editor of the right wing *National Review*), had written a good short biography of Hamilton – polemical and boosterish, but smartly argued and elegantly written. Now, however, with the disappointing results on view, it seems appropriate to ask if the exhibit's flaws are in fact related to its promoters' politics.

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Rothstein, "Our Father The Modernist," *The New York Times* (September 10, 2004). [[http://www.gothamcenter.org/hamilton/articles/9\\_10.shtml](http://www.gothamcenter.org/hamilton/articles/9_10.shtml)]

<sup>2</sup>James Traub, "The Stuff of City Life," *The New York Times* (October 3, 2004). [[http://www.gothamcenter.org/hamilton/articles/10\\_3.shtml](http://www.gothamcenter.org/hamilton/articles/10_3.shtml)]

At a technical level, some of the show's more amateurish defects can perhaps be attributed to Gilder-Lehrman's reliance on staff chosen more for ideological than museological credentials. Project Manager Basker, when not managing Gilder-Lehrman affairs, is an English professor at Barnard. Curator Brookhiser has never worked in museums, so far as I'm aware, and mounting exhibits demands different skills than writing books.

The constraints of ideology are more directly evident in the spin put on Hamilton's career and its putative impact on our contemporary world. Most visitors will have trouble discerning any coherent thesis here, but for those aware of what's been downplayed or excised from the historical (and contemporary) record and who know just how debatable some of the interpretive assertions are, the exhibit takes on a more partisan cast. There's nothing wrong with having a point of view on these issues – Hamilton's been a lightning rod for criticism and acclaim for over two hundred years now – but it would have been more respectful of (and interesting for) museum-goers had Gilder-Lehrman's biases been acknowledged.

In the analysis that follows I'm going to restore some of the deleted information and recall some of the contending interpretations, on the assumption that most viewers aren't professional historians. I'll draw on a variety of scholarly studies, but limit direct references to Ron Chernow's marvelous *Alexander Hamilton*, the most recent biography, and in my judgment the best. Chernow is as ardent and persuasive an admirer as one could hope for in one's biographer. But he scrupulously acknowledges criticisms of Hamilton by contemporaries and historians, rebutting those he considers ill-founded, accepting those he believes merited, and this gives his occasional reservations particular weight and force.

A final prefatory note: my goal in undertaking this lengthy (eighteenth-century pamphlet length!) exegesis goes beyond reviewing a particular exhibit. I also want to assess the implications – or, hopefully, irrelevance – of the show's failings for the future of the New-York Historical Society, an institution in whose success I and many other New Yorkers are deeply invested. I hope my critique will spur readers to post their own commentaries on the Gotham Center's discussion board – about the exhibit, about the merits and demerits of my take on it, about the future of the N-YHS and the future of New York City's past.

[<http://www.gothamcenter.org/discussions/displaygroup.cfm?ForumGroupID=6>]

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I'll begin at the end, as does Rothstein, with the specially-commissioned dueling bronzes, one of Hamilton, one of Aaron Burr. (Awkwardly placed, they confront visitors on entering, though they're supposedly the denouement). I agree that the statues are a highlight – not because they inject a bit of (badly needed) drama, but because they're life sized (roughly 5' 7"), and because they're placed on the floor, not perched on pedestals. One can peer over the combatants' respective shoulders to check the site lines of their respective pistols. This endearingly human scale is the more welcome as it provides a blessed relief from the outsized giantism – and

pedestalization – that dominates everything else in the exhibit.

Starting with the immense, block-long ten dollar bill blanketing the entire Central Park West facade of the N-YHS building. When I first heard this was in the works, it sounded like a wonderfully whimsical marketing device, an encouragingly Barnumesque bit of barkerism. But in the event, the gargantuan head and gigantic logo (“The Man who Made Modern America”) proved oppressively in tune with the exhibit within: a hagiographical glorification of Hamilton as Hero.

Hamilton is a significant figure in American history, and eminently deserving of an exhibition, but “Modern America” did not spring from his forehead. There’s a more modest case to be made for his role in the development of key U.S. financial and political institutions – I admire some of Hamilton’s accomplishments – but outsized claims like these are deeply anachronistic. Worse, to hammer them home, the Gilder-Lehrmanites have summoned from the dead a 1950s-style filiopietistic museology that historians and curators interred long ago.

The initial gallery – entitled *His World* – gets us off to a problematic start. Two huge screens (one blazoned non-stop with the History Channel’s logo) display dueling quotations from rival Founders – chiefly Hamilton and Washington versus Jefferson and Adams. The juxtaposition of texts suggests that Hamilton was a pioneering and progressive American (albeit prey to a couple of humanizing peccadilloes) while his contemporary opponents were racist hypocrites and “uncomprehending” men of limited vision; foils for the Hero. This battle of blurbs – Adams excoriates Hamilton’s character, Washington is wheeled in to defend him – is Founding Fatherology at its worst, with history – reduced to biography – presented as a zero sum catfight. Maybe shout-TV was the model here; it’s equally un-illuminating about the issues at hand.

An introductory gallery might more profitably have claimed that Hamilton has been unjustly ignored by history, and invited the audience to participate in a reevaluation. But this would have required a full and honest engagement with Hamilton’s projects, and an equally thorough explanation of why so many of his contemporaries (and subsequent generations), rightly or wrongly, objected to them. This, the show is deeply reluctant to do.

A secondary problem with *His World* is how circumscribed that world appears to be. Two of the gallery walls are covered by 32 portraits of Hamilton’s contemporaries, some famous, most long forgotten (Egbert Benson, Ambrose Spencer, et. al.); each canvas is accompanied by the merest snippet of information about who the subject is and how he or she relates to Hamilton. This reticence might have been acceptable if the massed oils served as a de facto playbill, introducing the cast of characters of a forthcoming drama; but no drama ensues, and most are never seen again. The assemblage also signals a focus on the portrait-worthy, portending a drawing room history that will ignore the far wider range of characters who actually peopled Hamilton’s World.

From *His World* the visitor segues through a doorway into *His Vision* – a great

rectangular hall constituting the show's principal gallery space. Five giant video screens (each roughly 17'x17') stretch out ahead down the long left-hand wall. Each screen endlessly-loops a sequence consisting of a title (RULE OF LAW / FREE PRESS / THE ECONOMY / NATIONAL DEFENSE / THE CITY); some quotations from Hamilton; and a few short film clips. The screens are meant to represent the Present – the America Hamilton Made. As the official guide puts it, they offer “a series of filmed vignettes of modern American life, fading in and out with projections of Hamilton's words: a continuous alternation of 18<sup>th</sup>-century plans and 21<sup>st</sup>-century fulfillment.”

Across the way, running down the gallery's right-hand wall, are six glassed-in cabinets filled with artifacts – objects, paintings, documents, drawings, – pertaining to Hamilton's life. These, too, are arranged thematically: IMMIGRANT / SOLDIER / LAWMAKER / ECONOMIST / ACTIVIST / VISIONARY. They are meant to represent the Past and to lay out Hamilton's Vision. As the N-YHS web site explains, “Cases on the righthand wall display objects – a musket, money, slave shackles – illustrating his concepts.”

Between Past and Present, laid out on individual platforms running down the center of the hall, are thirteen documents, most written by Hamilton. These, presumably, are the words by which Modern America was Made flesh.

It's not easy to see these words, or much of anything else, as the entire gallery has been deliberately kept murky, partly to preserve delicate documents, partly because the design prioritizes the video screens, making the eighteenth century material even harder to see. (The screens' oscillating intensity – they glow more brightly when the film snippets cycle on – further disorients would-be readers, though the moments of gloom-lightening brightness do provide the best opportunities for maneuvering about the sepulcher.)

It's hard to fathom why the docu-centric underwriters acquiesced in sacrificing the legibility of prized and supposedly featured manuscripts. Unless, perhaps, the documents aren't meant to be read at all – reviewers have been dumbfounded by the absence of transcriptions – but rather to serve as relics of the Hero. Could the real point of the little altars and the somber atmosphere be to inculcate an appropriately reverential attitude? That may be – it's certainly in keeping with the hagiographical quality of the entire exercise – but I think an examination of the show's depiction of the Past, and its rendition of the Present, will afford a better explanation of why the Then has been subordinated to the Now.

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Extracting Hamilton's Vision from the six cases of the Past is impeded by more than dim wattage. The artifacts in each cabinet are numbered from left to right. But the natural pedestrian flow runs down the long wall from right to left. Attentive visitors leapfrog each case from right to left and then double back, only to collide head on with guests plowing straight ahead, either because they don't care about proceeding in proper order, or at least as likely, because they

haven't been able to read the numbered captions. These have been placed a scant two feet above the floor, a serious burden for those with bad eyes or bad backs. "The sight of visitors leaning over like feeding storks is a common one," one reviewer has noted; I've spotted gamely determined attendees crouching, kneeling, even sitting in an effort to make out the text.

Fledgling curators usually get inoculated against such elementary errors of craft in Museology 101. They also get warned off jumbling together authentic period pieces with materials produced a hundred or more years after the events they depict, as is done here routinely. 18<sup>th</sup> century artifacts mingle promiscuously with 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century depictions fashioned during centennial celebrations or Colonial Revivals. Museums usually treat such items as illustrative of the temper of the times in which they were created, rather than evidence about the period under examination.

Whatever their provenance, the objects are presented virtually without context, apart from wisps of text, and in a few instances an Acoustiguide elaboration. It's assumed they can speak for themselves. This is all the more frustrating as they are burdened not only with evoking Hamilton's life but elucidating his "concepts," and how much "concept" can an unexplicated musket convey? Nor do the cases provide a narrative thread to string the isolated pieces together, weaving them into a larger story; nor are the cases connected one to the other. Rothstein refers in his review to "the sheer accumulation of artifacts and portraits" as being one of the exhibit's few achievements, but what we really have here is a "mere" accumulation, scattered bits of evidence in search of an argument.

These sins of omission, however, are decidedly preferable to the sins of commission that can occur when curatorial interventions *do* take place, of which I'll give just one example.

The text and Acoustiguide declare that Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury "found a way to pay off America's lingering war debts" – and to pay them "*fairly*" [my emphasis] – over the "bitter objections of less progressive opponents." By the time he retired in 1795, it's claimed, Hamilton had brought the nation "into the modern financial era"; forestalled the possibility of its becoming a "banana republic"; and left it "poised to become a major financial power." Setting aside the final preposterous assertion – under any reasonable construction of "poised" it's off by roughly a century – this package of propositions, presented as self-evident truths, coolly finesses the hottest debate of the 1790s, one that nearly tore the fledgling Republic apart.

Revolutionary War soldiers had been paid for their service with paper IOUs whose postwar value plummeted in the 1780s, as it seemed increasingly unlikely that the Articles of Confederation government would ever redeem them. Strapped for cash in the hard economic times, many desperate veterans sold off their notes to speculators – principally urban merchants well stocked with hard coin – who snapped them up for as little as ten cents on the dollar. These speculators well knew that plans were afoot to strengthen the federal government, thus enhancing its capacity to (among other things) pay its debts. Many were themselves key participants in these initiatives, which came to fruition with ratification of the Constitution.

Speculation in the debt accelerated with the establishment of a new government, and again with Hamilton's appointment as its Treasury Secretary, as he was determined to fund the outstanding obligations – issue new notes to replace the old – at full face value plus accumulated interest, handing a massive windfall profit to those who'd bought on the cheap. One of the biggest speculators was William Duer, Hamilton's number two at the Treasury, who passed along to his cronies (and foreign backers) what Chernow calls “the sort of priceless insider gossip that moves markets”. Another market emerged in notes issued by the individual states, which Hamilton intended to have the federal government assume. Amid [Chernow again] an “atmosphere of contagious greed,” speculators in the know dispatched agents to backwoods areas to scoop up depreciated state paper from those out of the loop.

Hamilton formally presented his *Report on Public Credit* to Congress in 1790, precipitating a firestorm of opposition, led by Jefferson and James Madison, *precisely* on the grounds that his funding and assumption plan was not “fair”. Madison thought speculation in the debt was “wrong, radically & morally & politically wrong.” Jefferson believed “speculators had made a trade of cozzening [notes] from the holders by the most fraudulent practices,” and that “immense sums were thus filched from the poor and ignorant....” Both urged splitting the windfall profits between current and original holders.

Hamilton responded that veterans who had sold out were entitled to nothing further, having shown insufficient faith in the country's future, while speculators, having risked their capital, should be rewarded accordingly. He knew full well that their risk had been minimal (especially in the case of insiders), and that many were [in Chernow's words] “mercenary scoundrels.” But Hamilton was dead set on rehabilitating the fledgling country's battered credit rating, and regaining access to local and foreign capital markets. He believed this required guaranteeing “security of transfer” – the right of those who bought government paper to all subsequent profit or loss.

Hamilton's position is a defensible one, especially if one uses a Leninist moral calculus that privileges the systemic over the individual, the long range over the short term, but that doesn't mean his opponents' claims to superior “fairness” can simply be ignored. Nor can his critics be dismissed out of hand as retrograde, pre-modern, financial illiterates, not least because their reservations were as much political as economic. As Chernow notes, “Jefferson did not exaggerate Hamilton's canny capacity to clothe political objectives in technical garb. There *were* hidden agendas buried inside Hamilton's economic program, agendas that he tended to share with high-level colleagues but not always with the public.”

Those who denounced Hamilton's funding and assumption proposals, as well as his establishment of a national bank, feared he was out to forge a class of “paper aristocrats” – a financial elite, tightly linked to a powerful Treasury. (As Adams argued, “paper wealth has been the source of aristocracy in this country, as well as landed wealth, with a vengeance.”) And they were right. Hamilton's goal was to grapple to government a phalanx of the new nation's wealthiest citizens, by giving them a powerful stake in its success and longevity. Again, an understandable strategy, but again, the fear of Jefferson and many others – that the government-

backed rich might prove a menace to republican government – was equally understandable and should be acknowledged.

Finally, the claim that Hamilton’s financial program saved the country from becoming a backward banana republic is untenable. Yes, funding and assumption had important ramifications, particularly in opening the way for new foreign loans, though their immediate legacy was a mountain of debt that would soon have become unsupportable had revenues not arrived. Revenues – the byproduct of prosperity and economic growth – *did* arrive beginning in the mid 1790s, increasing dramatically in the late ‘90s and early 1800s. But the influx was the result, not of Hamiltonian wizardry, but of the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars in 1793, which generated a massive European demand for neutral America’s grain, and of England’s burgeoning industrialization, which generated a massive demand for American (slave-produced) cotton. Booming agricultural exports made growing imports possible, and with them an abundant flow of tariff-generated funds to the Treasury (customs duties constituted 94% of federal income in 1795). Here and elsewhere, the exhibit misleads by focusing too myopically on Hamilton’s Life, and paying insufficient attention to his Times.<sup>3</sup>

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But the exhibition’s heart is not really in explicating Hamilton’s era, but rather in claiming that he created ours, and it’s in trying to make this case that the show goes radically

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<sup>3</sup>Those interested in wandering into the thicket of scholarly debate on these issues can consult, among many other works: Whitney Bates, “Northern Speculators and Southern State Debts: 1790,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, 19:1 (1962), 30-48; Max M. Edling, *A Revolution in Favor of Government: Origins of the U.S. Constitution and the Making of the American State* (2003); Max M. Edling and Mark D. Kaplanoff, “Alexander Hamilton’s Fiscal Reform: Transforming the Structure of Taxation in the Early Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, 61:4 (2004), 713-44; Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (1993); E. James Ferguson, *The Power of the Purse: a History of American Public Finance, 1776-1790* (1961); John Ferling, *A Leap in the Dark : the Struggle to Create the American Republic* (2003); Dall W. Forsythe, *Taxation and Political Change in the Young Nation, 1781-1833* (1977); John M. Murrin, “The Great Inversion, or Country versus Country: A Comparison of the Revolutionary Settlements in England (1688-1721) and America (1776-1816),” in J.G.A. Pocock, ed., *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776* (1980); John R. Nelson, *Liberty and Property: Political Economy and Policymaking in the New Nation, 1789-1812* (1987); Edwin J. Perkins, *American Public Finance and Financial Services, 1700-1815* (1994); Richard Sylla, “Shaping the U.S. Financial System, 1690-1913: the Dominant Role of Public Finance,” in Richard Sylla, Richard Tilly, and Gabriel Tortella, eds., *the State, the Financial System, and Economic Modernization* (1999); Robert E. Wright, *Hamilton Unbound: Finance and the Creation of the American Republic* (2002).

wrong. The supersized video screens that constitute the domain of the Present have been widely criticized but insufficiently understood, as the critiques focus on the medium, not the message – with which there are two big problems. First, these “filmed vignettes of modern American life” conjure up a cartoon Present, utterly abstracted from the complex realities of our moment. Second, this Present is depicted as being the “21<sup>st</sup>-century fulfillment” of the Hero’s (misrepresented) “18<sup>th</sup>-century plans.” Setting aside for the moment the deeply ahistorical assumptions underlying the posited causal connections between Past and Present, let’s examine the videos seriatim.

The “National Defense” screen sutures together what appear to be outtakes from old recruiting films – leisurely pans over an aircraft carrier flight deck, views of fighter jets scrambling skyward, languorous shots of paratroopers tumbling earthward in slo-mo toward . . . where? Vietnam? Grenada? Inquiring minds wanted to know the provenance. A whirring helicopter picking up heavily armed GIs carrying a blanketed bundle (a dead buddy?) set visitors to debating possible venues – Were those cornfields? Could it be Central America? All-white graduating cadets throw their hats in the air – but when was this? Hasn’t it been ages since the military tintured its Aryan Nation complexion? Whenever. Wherever. The cumulative effect these detemporalized, decontextualized images seek to induce seems clear enough: the Modern American military is a strong, benign, defense-oriented institution. And—according to an array of quotations disembodied from their eighteenth century context – we have Hamilton to thank for it.

The slightest confrontation with contemporary and historical realities sends these airy abstractions thudding back to earth. In the case of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it’s only necessary to imagine the effect on N-YHS visitors had the designers inserted a “vignette” of George Bush strutting about the deck of the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln in front of that Mission Accomplished sign.

Sorting out the 18<sup>th</sup> century situation requires recalling a few aspects of Hamilton’s military career that didn’t make it into the SOLDIER artifact case across the gallery. Hamilton’s service in the revolutionary army, fighting an imperial occupying power, brought him widespread acclaim, though already during the war he displayed a worrisome penchant for using the military for civilian purposes. As Chernow notes, Washington had to rebuff “Hamilton’s misguided suggestions that he exploit army discontent to goad Congress into action on public finance,” with the General feeling compelled to instruct his aide that the army was “a dangerous instrument to play with.”

After the war, Washington also expressed dismay at the policy adopted by the new Society of the Cincinnati—an organization restricted to the ex-officer corps – of passing membership down to eldest sons, thus raising the specter of a hereditary martial nobility. Ben Franklin, John Jay, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Sam Adams were equally disturbed. Hamilton defended heritability (though not primogeniture, he himself being a second son) and would go on to head the organization. Typically, the exhibit displays a Society badge, but offers no hint of its controversial character.

Hamilton's proposal that the new USA establish a peacetime army also rang alarm bells with most Americans. Having suffered occupation by British troops, they remembered (and feared) the uses to which a "standing army" could be put (including enforcement of hated laws). Anxieties over possible misuse of military power mounted when Hamilton, having funded the revolutionary debts, sought new revenues with which to pay them. Reluctant to further increase tariffs – "especially since [as Chernow notes] import duties injured seaboard merchants who were part of Hamilton's social circle and political base in New York" -- he won passage of an excise tax on wine and spirits that fell most heavily on western farmers, in effect transferring wealth from country producers to urban bondholders. To enforce the law he dispatched squadrons of tax collectors, and when a revolt against their "bullying and intrusive" tactics cropped up in Western Pennsylvania – the Whiskey Rebellion – a massive armed force was sent to suppress it. To a populace long touchy about taxes this seemed an ominous development.

Hamilton's taste for military initiatives abroad was equally disturbing. Certainly he desired an armed force for national defense, but he was equally keen on using it to project power overseas. Noting that England had successfully used its fleet "to prosecute wars around the world" and "to maintain a global commercial empire," he urged that "if we mean to be a commercial people, we must endeavour as soon as possible to have a navy." And in 1798, in line with his truculent stance toward possible French aggression – a sharp contrast to his placatory response to English depredations a few years earlier – Hamilton pushed for and got authority to build a vast army, with himself and Washington at its head. When Adams, to Hamilton's great dismay, opted for a diplomatic solution, Hamilton took up political arms against the President – his vicious attack helped destroy the Federalist Party and his own political career – and Abigail Adams, for one, feared the man she called a "second Bonaparty" might take up actual arms as well and stage a coup d'état.

At home, Virginia Republicans thought Hamilton ("our Bonaparte" Jefferson called him) might march his Federalist-led Army into the southern states, to shock and awe his opponents. While Chernow finds that "the record shows that the inspector general did have domestic as well as foreign enemies on his mind," Hamilton did not, in the end, invade the Republican heartland. He did, however, contemplate heading still farther south and launching a pre-emptive strike on two continents. ("We ought certainly to look to the possession of the Floridas and Louisiana and we ought to squint at South America.") Chernow considers this "imperialist escapade" to have been "woefully misguided," "an unspeakable piece of folly," and "one of the most flagrant instances of poor judgment in Hamilton's career." Even Washington grew dubious about any continuing need for the new Army. By 1800, according to President Adams, Hamilton's military had become "as unpopular as if it had been a ferocious wild beast let loose upon the nation to devour it." Congress authorized its dismantling, and Adams swiftly shut it down (noting that had Hamilton been left to his own devices, the country might yet have needed a second army to disband the first).

Where is the exhibition on all this? AWOL. One might have thought Hamilton's thirst for military glory merited at least some attention, given Brookhiser's worries about banana republichood – defined in my dictionary as a country both dependent on a single crop and "governed by a

dictator or officers of the armed forces.” Yet the Whiskey Rebellion rates barely a mention. The analogous Fries Rebellion – a protest, also put down by massive force, against taxes imposed to pay for the new Army – isn’t mentioned at all. And while the “Soldier” case includes (along with flags, muskets, cannonballs and grapeshot) a document labeled “Alexander Hamilton's Commission as Inspector General of the Army,” the laconic label suggests that Hamilton was appointed “against his own inclination.” This is a decidedly minority view among historians (even Brookhiser’s book doesn’t advance it) and Chernow’s position – that Hamilton jockeyed frantically for the position – is much the more compelling. “For someone of his vaulting ambition,” Chernow notes, “the leadership of the new army was a shiny, irresistible lure,” and he proved “cunning, quick-footed, and manipulative” in extracting the post from a deeply reluctant Adams. There’s one additional reference to this episode – a cryptic Time Line notation (“1800: He disbands the army at Congress’s direction”) with zero explanation of its significance. I’m not suggesting that the exhibit should have portrayed Hamilton as a militarist – this remains a subject of scholarly debate (see Kohn vs. Walling<sup>4</sup>) – only that the show’s presentation of its Hero is deeply selective.

The selectivity is on display at the “Rule of Law” screen as well. Here we get long loving zoom-in-zoom-out images of the Capitol (with flags), the White House (with flag), and the (flagless) Supreme Court. The implicit argument, straight out of a 1950s civics schoolbook, seems to be that the separation of powers is the centerpiece of our 21<sup>st</sup> century political universe – though of course, in the real world, so are political parties, corporate lobbyists, the mass media, and big-monied campaign contributors – and that this constitutional structure is another Hamiltonian legacy. But Hamilton, notoriously, proposed to the Philadelphia convention a very different schema, centered on a President elected for life during “good behavior” (imagine growing old with George W. Bush), though privately he believed the office “ought to be hereditary” (imagine Jenna as next in line).

What gets sidestepped here, and throughout the exhibit, are the reactionary aspects of Hamilton’s political vision. Far from being Visionary and Modern, Hamilton [as Chernow notes] “harked back to a past in which well-bred elites made decisions for less-educated citizens.” And while he couched his public reservations about republican government in abstract terms – the difficulty of achieving a proper balance between “liberty” and “order” – his private correspondence more straightforwardly fretted about “the depredations which the democratic spirit is apt to make on property”; he was, Chernow observes, prey to “lurid visions that the have-nots would rise up and dispossess the haves.”

Hamilton opposed the Bill of Rights – “one of his real failures of vision” according to Chernow. He favored transferring power from the states (too accessible to the populace) to a

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<sup>4</sup>Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: the Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802* (1975) is critical, Karl-Friedrich Walling, *Republican Empire: Alexander Hamilton on War and Free Government* (1999) is appreciative.

well-filtered central government. And for all his putative attachment to the Rule of Law, when in 1800 his opponents swept the New York City elections, Hamilton urged Governor Jay to retroactively change the rules and reverse the results – “in times like these in which we live, it will not do to be overscrupulous.” This “disgraceful action,” Chernow notes, was perhaps “the most high-handed and undemocratic act of his career.” Yet apart from a scattered reference here and there, the exhibit refuses to acknowledge Hamilton’s politics in anything like their entirety.

The “Economy” screen is equally obfuscatory. It offers videoclips of a CNN stock ticker, a Times Square stock ticker, and a New York Stock Exchange stock ticker, along with a Wall Street subway station. The only nonfinancial activity on view is a high-rise building going up in lower Manhattan – undoubtedly an office tower or luxury condo. There’s no sign of commerce or agriculture in these “vignettes of modern American life” – unless the glimpse of a Wall Street fruit-and-veg stand is meant as a stand-in for both – nor any trace of manufacturing, for all the claims that Hamilton was its progenitor. Not even banking makes an appearance; this is a stockbroker’s eye-view of the economy.

Even if we restrict our focus to finance, and restrict finance to the stock market, one would never know from this sunnyside-up imagery that tickers record busts as well as booms, that Wall Street has been regularly swept by financial panics, that the American economy has repeatedly crumpled into recession or depression. As there’s no down side to finance capitalism, there’s no need to saddle the Man Who Made Modern America with any responsibility for such debacles. Had the exhibit chosen to glance at the real historical record, however, it might have related to visitors the fascinating drama of the first stock market crash in American history, and the Hero’s role therein.

Hamilton believed that “those who are most commonly creditors of a nation, are, generally speaking, enlightened men.” They would, he was sure, invest their government-bestowed capital in enhancing the country’s commercial and manufacturing base, thus allowing the US to compete with Great Britain in the global arena. Instead they plunged into an orgy of new speculation and market manipulation.

In February 1791, at Hamilton’s urging, Congress authorized creation of a Bank of the United States, to be capitalized at ten million dollars, with the government putting up one fifth, and the remainder to be raised by a sale of stock beginning in July. B.U.S. subscription shares sold out instantly, and were as quickly resold, with eager buyers, visions of future profits dancing in their heads, bidding up the value of a barely existent bank from \$25 to \$60 almost overnight, from \$60 to \$100 in two days, from \$100 to \$150 in a single day. By the end of October shares were at \$170 and a number of Hamilton’s associates had acquired big stakes in the B.U.S. as well as seats on its board.

At the center of the frenzy, once again, was William Duer, the Darth Vader of early American finance. (Though still in close touch with Hamilton, he was no longer at the Treasury: “I have left to do better,” he explained). At the end of December 1791, Duer mobilized a small group of New York speculators – among them one John Pintard, who later would found the

New-York Historical Society – to rig the market by making massive purchases of bank stocks (and government paper), driving up their value by various machinations, then unloading their holdings at tremendous profit.

Borrowing (and embezzling) vast sums to finance their manipulations, the co-conspirators inflated a speculative bubble that sucked in many ordinary citizens. Hamilton, though personally incorruptible, had been stoking the fever as good for business, but now he grew alarmed. “These extravagant sallies of speculation,” he wrote in January 1792, “do injury to the government and to the whole system of public credit, by disgusting all sober citizens, and giving a wild air to every thing.” Far from making sober long term investments, his “enlightened” men seemed gripped by an irrational exuberance. Robert R. Livingston noted that in New York City “hundreds have made fortunes by speculating in the funds ... and have no idea of a more perfect government than that which enriches them in six months.”

Early in March, stock prices leveled off, then declined slightly. Coincidentally, the government notified Duer of a \$250,000 discrepancy in his accounts as Assistant Treasury Secretary. No longer able to raise cash, Duer began to sell. On March 10, as panic engulfed New York, he stopped payment on all his debts; two weeks later he was arrested and thrown in debtor’s prison, one step ahead of a crowd seeking to disembowel him. (One creditor got into the prison, confronted Duer with a brace of dueling pistols, demanded he pay immediately or defend his honor, and left only after Duer forked over what he owed.) Pintard escaped his creditors by fleeing town.

The panic touched off a wider economic crisis. Many leading merchants were ruined; many ordinary citizens lost their life savings; business languished; unemployment spread. “The credit and fate of the nation seem to hang on the desperate throws and plunges of gambling scoundrels,” wrote Jefferson, who calculated that losses exceeded the combined value of all Manhattan’s real estate.

Hamilton hadn’t counted on this. As Chernow notes, “the financial turmoil on Wall Street and the William Duer debacle pointed up a glaring defect in Hamilton’s political theory: the rich could put their own interests above the national interest.” Worried “about abuses committed *against* the rich,” Hamilton had minimized “the skulduggery that might be committed *by* the rich.” He acknowledged to a worried Washington that speculation “may be attended with pernicious effects,” that it “fosters a spirit of gambling, and diverts a certain number of individuals from other pursuits.” Still, he was not prepared to accept Jefferson’s judgment that it constituted a “canker at the heart of the Hamilton enterprise”. Loathing idle capital, he insisted it should be possible to draw “a line of separation between honest men and knaves” – “between respectable stockholders and mere unprincipled gamblers”—by relying on the power of “public infamy.”

Where, and how, to draw the line between “respectable stockholders” and “gamblers” – between the Force and its Dark Side (if indeed such a distinction is possible) – has remained a central dilemma of American capitalism. If the exhibit had truly been interested in exploring the

background of today's Economy, it might have touched on the long history of efforts to regulate and rein in speculative excess (such as those legislated during the New Deal), and right wing efforts to dismantle such constraints. It might have observed that while the 1792 meltdown proved short and shallow, subsequent ones grew steadily more damaging, and that in recent years the potential for national and global financial catastrophe has swollen enormously (as have the attendant costs to taxpayers of cleaning up messes made by assorted sharks and bingers – as in the Savings & Loan, Long Term Capital Management, and Asian Tiger crises). But for all the exhibition's pseudo presentism, it's no more interested in a critical engagement with today's Economy than it is with Hamilton's.

Things are similarly smiley-faced over at the “Free Press” screen where a Hamilton quotation about newspapers being “expedient messengers of intelligence” segues to a stack of *New York Posts* coming off the assembly line. Given that Hamilton was the rag's Founding Father, and given that the current publisher kicked in toward underwriting exhibit expenses, the product placement seems fair enough, though one wonders if the *Post* would have been accorded such prominence had liberal Dorothy Schiff still been at the helm, rather than right wing Rupert Murdoch.

We'll forebear (as does the show) from contemplating the possible deleterious consequences for a Free Press of the monopolization of media outlets in the hands of such barons as Sir Rupert. But on the historical front, we should note (as the show does not) that while Hamilton's legal argument in the *Croswell* case was indeed a milestone in the development of a Free Press, he was also [as Chernow reports] a “full throated” supporter of the Sedition Act, a milestone in the suppression of a Free Press.

Hamilton vigorously supported prosecution of journalists who criticized the – his party's – government. When one opposition editor called Hamilton's projected military a “standing army” he was sentenced to two months in the slammer. Another got eighteen months behind bars “for daring [Chernow says] to print the heresy that the government allowed the wealthy to benefit at the expense of commoners.” Five of the six most influential Republican papers were ultimately prosecuted by a Federalist dominated judiciary. In the case of the *Argus*, New York's leading opposition sheet, the editor was charged with sedition for contending that “the federal government was corrupt and inimical to the preservation of liberty,” and Hamilton opened up a second front by instigating his own libel suit. If [Chernow observes] his “aim had been to crush *the Argus*, he succeeded,” as it shut down the following year. Hamilton's later ringing defense of *Croswell* – a Federalist editor whose ox was being gored by a Republican administration – should, at the least, be set in this larger context.

Similarly, given the exhibit's attention to Hamilton's immigrant status, and his attendant supposed cosmopolitanism, it might have mentioned that, in the Alien Act era, Hamilton [as Chernow reports] “ranted about the need to punish people, especially the foreign born who libeled government officials”; that he sought “to throttle the flow of immigration”; and that he would have liked to kick out most of those who'd made it in: “My opinion is that the mass [of aliens] ought to be obliged to leave the country.” Even John Ashcroft didn't go that far.

It's also worth noting here that while Jefferson and Madison promoted religious tolerance and separation of church and state, Hamilton sought to create a network of Christian Constitutional Societies that would mobilize devout citizens against the presumably godless Jeffersonians – “an execrable idea,” Chernow believes, “that would have grossly breached the separation of church and state and mixed political power and organized religion”.

The point of this extended video screen analysis is not that the exhibition should have drawn a different set of past-to-present lines, connecting unattractive Hamiltonian policies to unappealing aspects of the present – though such an approach would have been at least as plausible as what's on offer. Imagine each giant screen re-titled (PREEMPTIVE IMPERIALISM / ELITE RULE / CRONY CAPITALISM / IMMIGRATION RESTRICTION), each displaying appropriate Modern America film vignettes, and each pinning the sorry status quo squarely on Hamilton with apposite quotations as evidence – “Our real Disease is DEMOCRACY” [*A. Hamilton, Letter to T. Sedgwick, 7/10/04*]. The point, rather, is that thinking the contemporary world can be profitably understood as the lengthened shadow of one eighteenth century gentleman is a deeply misguided and misleading way of doing history.

There's nothing whatever wrong with setting the present in historical context, but this is not the way to go about it. Exploring how and why a particular aspect of the current scene came into being requires going in the opposite direction – working backwards from now, not forwards from then. To investigate why, say, we're at war in Iraq, one must attend to the enormous number of actions and events, which cumulatively constituted the matrix of constraints and possibilities within which contemporary players have acted, and which have made the actual outcome more likely (though not inevitable). Some factors emerged in the recent past – the first Gulf War, the fall of communism, the Iranian revolution; others go back to the 1940s – our burgeoning dependence on mid-east oil, our emerging alliance with Israel; others are still more remote, though the farther back we go, the more attenuated the influence. But on this, or almost any issue, the words and deeds of Alexander Hamilton are light years from being the most salient considerations.

“Modern America” has been shaped by the actions of hundreds of millions of people over the past 200 plus years, all of whom get obliterated by this kind of approach; it's all the Hero's doing. And *when* is Modern America, anyway? Is it just the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Or did Hamilton “make” all the intervening eras as well? Are we to hold the guy accountable for the Gilded Age? The depression of 1929? And *what* is Modern America, how unitary a phenomenon is it in the era of Red and Blue, or was it in the era of Blue and Gray? Has it ever been? And *how* exactly did Hamilton exert his supposed influence over the centuries – are his Words so potent? Sure, it's possible cinematically, by alternating antique texts and current images, to suggest that “18<sup>th</sup>-century plans” have found “21<sup>st</sup>-century fulfillment,” but this is a specious form of magical thinking. It's not the way the world works, not the way history happens.

Emerging from the gloom of *His Vision* the visitor adjusts gratefully to the brightly lit final gallery – *His Life* – only to experience an immediate let-down. *His Life* consists entirely of a corridor-long Time Line, a one-dimensional wall mural that strings dates from Hamilton’s biography along the top, and those of events in the wider world below, all against a backdrop of reproduced portraits and paintings. Glossily designed but deeply boring – *Time Out*’s review counsels hurrying past the “dull” display – it’s a hodgepodge of names and dates of treaties, publications, laws, battles, appointments, elections, and assorted unexplained events – the sort of stuff school kids were once-upon-a-time forced to memorize-then-regurgitate, then promptly forgot, retaining only an aversion to History.

The urge to flight engendered by this hoary contrivance might account for the fact that many people, approaching the corridor’s end, tend to miss (or ignore) the right turn required to reach the dueling statues (situated quite some distance away – another Museology 101 design snafu), and instead hustle straight ahead through a beckoning open door to the Gift Shop and its alluring display of Hamiltonian knick-knacks, after which the obvious next move is out the Exit door.

The problem here, as throughout, is insufficient information. If you’re not already familiar with Hamilton’s story, the Time Line assumes too much (viz. “He disbands the Army”); and if you are, it adds nothing new to your data bank. In either case, there’s not much point in perusing it in the hallway: as there are virtually no artifacts on view, and the text is up on-line, such insights as it affords can be gleaned more comfortably at home.

Besides offering too little, the Time Line arrives too late in the overall exhibition; we should have grasped the essentials of Hamilton’s story far earlier. It feels as if the designers had belatedly noticed that their presentist preoccupations had short-shrifted not only Hamilton’s era, but Hamilton’s life, and set out to fill in the blanks. Indeed the Time Line is just one of a posse of deputies dispatched to fill in the biographical lacunae, but in the end, all these Kings’ Men are unable to compensate for Humpty-Dumpty’s deficiencies.<sup>5</sup> Thus Rothstein’s advice to would-be

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<sup>5</sup>These collateral aides include a specially commissioned playlet – a two person, 45 minute drama that resembles a cross between an old-fashioned high-school pageant and the vintage television show *This is Your Life*. The female lead, portraying Hamilton’s mother, reminds him (and us) of all his wonderful accomplishments – Remember how well you did in Greek, Alexander? Remember how you Invented America? – though she also (after mutating into his wife) affectionately points out some flaws—“You talk too much, Alexander—humanizing him (a la Parson Weems) while retaining his essential Herohood.

The declamatory Hamilton *does* go on a bit much, dialoguing not only with Mom but with cinematic characters who pop up on a screen behind him, like a booming George Washington (“Your country needs you, my boy”), or assorted skulking, long-haired naysayers who hiss (or darkly mutter) one word imprecations against the Hero (“Monarchist! Fornicator!).

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Hokey as it is, the little drama is the only piece of the entire package that assays a run-through of Hamilton's entire life, and it even takes a stab at a psychological interpretation of his career.

I must note, however, that its rendition of the duel offers a worrisomely different interpretation from that embedded in the bronze duet: Hamilton-the-actor fires his pistol straight up while the statue directs its shot past Burr's shoulder. It would probably be less confusing for visitors if the show settled on a single theory. It might be easier (certainly less costly) to have the actor lower his arm than to recast the statue, but revisionism doesn't always come cheap: when architects at Colonial Williamsburg discovered they had reconstructed a house six feet from where new research showed it had actually stood, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. immediately provided the money to move it. "No scholar," he said, "must ever be able to come to us and say we have made a mistake."

A so-called gallery guide, designed to look like a special issue of today's *New York Post*, does offer some missing information about Hamilton's life, tricked out in cute popularese ("Hammie Brained at Rally"; the Maria Reynolds affair gets mentioned on Page Six). What it's not, is a guide to the galleries, being organized completely differently. And should bewildered guests seek nevertheless to press it into serving as such, it would be impossible to read while perambulating the gloom.

In addition to a set of genial Acoustiguide offerings by Brookhiser (whose comments on specific items are usually of interest, though they often either avoid the big issues or, as discussed, tackle them in problematic ways), a second series – aimed at children – presents a running colloquy between one Tommy Tabloid, a reporter on hand to "dig the dirt," and an insufferably hi-toned Mrs. Hamilton, on hand to edify him (and us). In stop after stop, the plebeian Mr. T. – all "dese" and "dose," he's the only working-class figure in the galleries, apart from the on-screen naysayers – gets hectored by the patrician Mrs. H., until he (and presumably the school kids) finally breaks down and admits that Mr. H. was a "great man and a great American".

There's also a *Hamilton* section of the N-HYHS web site, which apart from its provision of transcriptions (for only four) of the documents, is at best a missed opportunity, notable primarily for its reminder – through a link to an on-line presentation of a *former* N-YHS exhibition, "Independence and its Enemies in New York" (2001) – that the Society has in the past done serious social history. [<http://www.amrevoonline.org/>]

On the distinctly positive side, the N-YHS organized a splendid series of talks by eminent scholars—Ron Chernow among them—and put together a diversified package of books and documents, which was sent out to thousands of school teachers.

attendees that they bone up with some bios before stopping by – “one has to come to this exhibition already prepared” – a serious indictment for a supposedly stand-alone show.

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It's not only Hamilton's *Life* that's missing in action: so's *His City*. One of the most prevalent worries of pre-exhibition commentators involved Richard Gilder's public assertions that he wanted N-YHS to move away from its focus on the Big Apple toward addressing U.S. history in general. Some argued that these need not be contradictory goals, that it was perfectly possible to view larger issues through a local prism, and that the forthcoming Hamilton show would provide a model for such an approach. As Hamilton's story is indeed deeply intertwined with that of his adopted hometown, and as I've long been in favor of setting New York City's history in a national, indeed international context, I awaited the results with interest.

Alas, as it turns out, there's no here, here. The fifth video screen - *THE CITY* – gestures half-heartedly at Modern American urban life: people whiz to and fro in Grand Central, at Centre and Canal; we see stock shots of the Brooklyn Bridge and Manhattan skyline. But the designers haven't exhumed any quotations from their Hero's voluminous canon that could plausibly allow them to claim, even by their lax evidentiary standards, that the 21<sup>st</sup> century city is somehow an outgrowth of one of Hamilton's 18<sup>th</sup> century Plans. The best they've come up with is a report from his son that while being rowed to his doom in New Jersey, he “pointed out the beauties of the scenery and spoke of the future greatness of the city.” Even this tidbit is immediately offset by a Hamiltonian assertion that the name of “American” should take pride of place over any “local discrimination,” which seems to row in a different direction.

Hamilton was in fact deeply immersed in, marked by, and left his mark upon the growing city.<sup>6</sup> Yet all the exhibit offers us are scattered shards – here a painting, there a map – which, had they been collected and glued together, could have powerfully evoked his Manhattan milieu. I'm not suggesting they should have added an URBANIST “concept” case – Hamilton, though a city guy, and resistant to agrarian cant, was not a self-conscious advocate of urban life. Had they really wanted to keep one eye on the New York City ball they could have adopted a different museological strategy – one that made Gotham a co-protagonist of their exhibition's drama. Had they done so, they might have solved many of the current version's problems.

Let's imagine such an alternative exhibit – one that dropped the presentism, canned the big screens, turned up the lights to acceptable levels, moved out into the newly available space, scrapped the Time Line, upped the explanatory apparatus, inserted some state-of-the-art technology, and redeployed all the artifacts, paintings, documents, and drawings into an old-fashioned (which needn't mean dull) chronological *Life and Times*, with the de-heroized

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<sup>6</sup>Chernow has penned a short essay to this effect: “Alexander Hamilton, City Boy,” *The New York Times* (April 25, 2004), Section 14, Column 1.

Hamilton thoroughly grounded, every step of the way, in the context of New York City.

A revamped presentation – after a revised introduction – might have begun with Hamilton’s difficult childhood and youthful employment in a Caribbean outpost of New York’s far flung mercantile network, from whence he was whisked to the metropole by members of the Manhattan merchant elite, a class open to talent and willing to recruit promising youths, even from the imperial periphery. He arrived to a city in revolutionary ferment, a field that gave full scope to his pamphleteering genius. The outbreak of war and his rapid ascent through the ranks afforded him marital entree to the Schuyler family, thus reaching the pinnacle of Gotham’s political, social, and economic worlds. It wasn’t immigrant outsidersness that shaped Hamilton’s career (or his nationalist bent), but rather his rapid integration into the uppermost echelons of New York’s merchant-patrician class.

After the Revolution, he emerged as the merchants’ premier spokesman, brilliantly articulating their ambitions and anxieties, and fashioning policies that promoted their enterprises. He would aid them to make their way in a global arena dominated by the mighty British Empire; eliminate provincial impediments to the free flow of continental commerce; develop the financial and legal underpinnings of their commercial operations; help create a state they (and their planter ally-rivals) could effectively control; and use that state to create the capital they sorely lacked.

In the city itself, he defended “loyalist” merchants – those who had stayed in New York to support (and profit from) the British occupation – from reprisals by returning Revolutionary veterans. Whatever their sins, the city (and country) needed their skills, connections, and especially their capital: he was appalled that there were merchants considering departing New York, “each of whom may carry away eight or ten thousand guineas.”

Hamilton’s choice of class over revolutionary solidarity heightened antagonisms with the artisans and sailors – leagued in groups like the Sons of Liberty – with whom rebellious merchants and lawyers had made common cause during the Revolution. (This plebian class, the un-portraitworthy counterpart of New York’s patrician elite, does not figure in the existing exhibition). But Hamilton also took the lead in negotiating an inter-class compromise around mutual support for the Constitution, arguing convincingly that artisanal prosperity depended on mercantile success. The artisans’ solid support made credible New York City’s threat to secede from New York State, which in turn helped push upstate farmers into ratifying.

But class proved thicker than civic loyalty, too, and Hamilton promptly sold New York down the river – the Potomac River – swapping the Capitol for capital. (The existing exhibit scurries over this with unseemly haste, perhaps mindful that Walter O’Malley achieved local infamy merely for moving a baseball team out of town!). The Virginians were eager to extract the national government from Gotham’s clutches, not simply because they could walk (or row) to work in D.C., but because they feared northern “moneyed men” (stock jobbers in particular) would corrupt the political process – Congressmen had been hip deep in speculative shenanigans – and they were disturbed as well by Manhattan’s aristocratic and Anglophile ways. (The show might reflect on the lasting consequences for city and nation of having a bifurcated U.S. capital,

one political, one economic and cultural). This would also be the place to lay out Duer's dramatic story – itself a subset of the overlap between Hamilton's social set and speculative circles (of which NYC was the national center)– and go on to mention the closely related formation of an organized stock exchange on Wall Street, an oddly missed trick in what's now on display.<sup>7</sup>

Our reconstituted chronological survey might throw in the Maria (and James) Reynolds blackmail episode at this point – a juicy story with which the exhibit does next to nothing – noting the intersection of financial and familial affairs. James, after all, was a foot soldier of the speculative army, one of those sent south in 1790 by New York wheeler-dealers to snare depreciated state paper from unsuspecting rubes. He then turned to dabbling on his own account in Hamiltonian-generated securities, profiting from Duer-provided inside information, and it was after the 1792 crash that he turned up the screws on the Secretary. The ensuing sex scandal, along with Hamilton's family life, might be usefully situated within the larger context of the city's gender and sexual order. The show could even explore the (here verboten) issue of Hamilton's possible affair with John Laurens. Scholars have gone back and forth on this one, and Brookhiser in his book (plausibly) votes against, but Chernow concludes only that, “if Hamilton and Laurens did become lovers – and it is impossible to say this with any certainty – they would have taken extraordinary precautions.”

A more probing exhibition might set a very different Hamiltonian relationship – that with Jefferson – into the larger context of conflict and cooperation between Virginia planters and New York merchants on the issue of slavery. The current show settles for patting Hamilton on the back (deservedly so) for his role in the New York Manumission Society, itself an artifact of the city's mercantile elite long-in-gestation rethinking of its reliance on un-free labor – spurred along, our exhibit might make clear, by anxieties about slave rebellions dating back to 1741, by a growing appreciation of the comparative benefits of relying on free labor in an era of expanding immigration, and by the contagion of Revolutionary ideals about liberty.

But our show wouldn't exaggerate these developments, and would note that two-thirds of the city's merchant rich owned human beings in 1790 (as did one of every eight artisans), and that the absolute number of slaves in the city jumped by 25% during that prosperous decade, with the bulk of new owners being the big winners in the economic sweepstakes – merchants, lawyers, bankers, brokers and speculators. If Hamilton didn't own slaves himself – though as Chernow notes, this remains an open question – his father-in-law and principal patron certainly

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<sup>7</sup>For this missing Manhattan context, E. James Ferguson's *The Power of the Purse; a History of American Public Finance, 1776-1790* (1961) remains an indispensable source: “Hamilton's circle of friends and social companions in New York included the very speculators who could gain heavily from advance knowledge of his proposal. Craigie employed Hamilton's legal services, and Constable, who was an agreeable fellow, dined occasionally with him and counted him as a close friend. . . . Hamilton was scrupulous, but he could not keep from imparting information to such companions.” See pp. 251-72, quotation on p. 271.

did, and his wife Eliza helped manage them. The reticence of the current show on Hamilton's personal involvement with the institution is odd, given that one of Brookhiser's best curatorial interventions illuminatingly links a slave shackle with a silver sugar bowl owned by the Schuylers. And it is, after all, perfectly possible to own slaves while condemning the slave system; half the Manumission Society members were in this position. Of course, admitting this would require lightening up on Jefferson.

But the mercantile elite's stake in slavery went far deeper than personal ownership, and was about to get deeper still, for while New York would abolish slavery at home (though only in 1827), it would underwrite the expansion of bondage down South. Gotham's businessmen would flourish mightily by trading and financing slave-grown cotton, forging an economic alliance that would complement the political partnership ratified by the Constitution. At the same time, deep and growing differences – political, cultural, ideological, and economic – would characterize relations between merchants and planters. These divergences were, in turn, crucial components of the vehement political battles that emerged in the 1790s and 1800s between Federalists and Republicans – battles in which Hamilton, and New York City, were crucial protagonists.

A revised exhibition would feature a section on these battles. It would touch on foreign (and military) affairs, the role of the press (and suppressions thereof), and crucially, the defection of the city's artisans from Hamilton's Federalist coalition to Jefferson's Republican column.<sup>8</sup> This transition, facilitated in no small degree by Aaron Burr, came about in part because Hamilton, *pace* his fine words in the *Report on Manufactures*, was unwilling to provide tariff protection for infant industries, lest he alienate his political base of Anglo-oriented merchants, or endanger the customs revenues underlying his financial system, even after an exploding trade with other Europeans had broadened the available income stream. The election of 1800 in New York City – the central cockpit of a key battleground state – was to a remarkable degree a match fought ward by ward in the streets of Manhattan, between Hamilton and Burr. The Republican victory, and Jay's refusal of Hamilton's plea to reverse the outcome, precipitated a fundamental realignment in American politics.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Here the alternative show would benefit, as the current presentation does not, from the insights of Alfred Young's *The Democratic Republicans of New York; The Origins, 1763-1797* (1967).

<sup>9</sup>The current exhibit argues that "Hamilton led his contemporaries in envisioning the future growth of industry in America." But this manages to ignore the manufacturers themselves, who were quite vocal on the subject, and indeed many of them complained repeatedly about Hamilton's privileging of mercantile over industrial concerns. For qualifications of the approach (on offer in the Visionary cabinet) about the Jeffersonians' opposition to manufacturing, and an alternative argument that they were in practice more supportive of actually existing manufacturers than Hamilton was – one reason they deserted his Federalists and voted for Jefferson's Republicans – see John R. Nelson, Jr., *Liberty and Property: Political Economy and Policymaking in the New Nation, 1789-1812* (1987), especially Chapter 3, "Hamilton and

The exhibition would set Hamilton's premature demise firmly in this larger context, going beyond what's on offer now to situate dueling within the changing political, military, cultural and commercial universe. It would end with an exploration of the latter-day impact of Hamilton's contributions, and the vicissitudes of his reputation. If energy and space remained, it could tie his fluctuating fortunes to Wall Street's roller-coaster status in the national culture as it rose and fell with the sine-curve variations of a capitalist economy.

This is, of course, a story line, not an exhibit plan, but it suggests that the current array of artifacts, paintings and documents might have been more fruitfully regrouped into chronological/thematic clusters, each replete with abundant but accessible explanatory material. The portraits whose heads now hang uselessly in the introductory gallery could be worked into the unfolding story at the point at which their subjects became actors in the Hamiltonian drama. The device of having debates between talking heads could be used throughout to illuminate the era's real conflicts. The texts now lying inertly on their altars could be re-housed in document stations within each cluster that allowed visitors (using well-established technology) to delve into the documents and bring them alive. Every step of the way, designers could employ artful interactives to involve the audience, making them active rather than passive participants in the learning process – deploying the kind of hi-tech devices that could have been easily invented and built, given a 5.7 million dollar budget.

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Conversely, it's hard to imagine how they *did* manage to spend over five million dollars on the current version, given its low-tech nature (the web site boasts of "state-of-the-art interactive displays" but these are nowhere in evidence). That's an astonishing amount of money for an exhibition, even when the collateral components are factored in; perhaps some of the money went into N-YHS capital improvements or its endowment? But however many millions were actually expended on this relatively threadbare show – subtract the big screens and you're left with one gallery of paintings and six cases of artifacts, nearly all from the Society's own collections – they got mighty little bang for all those bucks.

Especially as the anticipated crowds haven't been lining up around the block to get in, despite a vigorous promotion campaign that includes ads, which to my eye, seem a wee bit misleading. In his *Times* review, Rothstein wrote that "By Society standards, the show, which will run through February, is a blockbuster..." clearly referring to monies laid out, not visits received (it hadn't yet opened) or quality (of which he was critical). The PR people then extracted the single word "Blockbuster" and re-nested it in e.g. *New York Review of Books* copy, conveying a degree of approbation somewhat out of synch with Rothstein's commentary.

Even by "Society standards" of turnout, the Hamilton show, so far, hasn't measured up to

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Manufacturing: A Reexamination".

past performance. From what I've seen – and my guesstimates may be off – daily attendance appears to run from 200-300 on weekdays, and 600-800 on weekends. Assuming a weekly turnout of 2800 (4 weekdays at 300, 2 weekend days at 800), that comes to 11,200 a month, or 67,200 visitors over its six month run. That's about the rate the lynching show achieved in 2000 and considerably less than the September 11th show drew in 2002, in neither case with anything remotely like the same outlay for publicity.

Even if not a blockbuster by Met or Natural History standards, it's heartening to see substantial numbers attending a history exhibit, and I hope the N-YHS continues to invest in building audience. Though maybe it would be worth exploring in advance whether or not a particular topic has public appeal. "We are financial people," Gilder has said, "and we have a nose for what the market wants," but their nose having proved a bit sniffly, perhaps it's time to give market research a shot?

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So, why didn't they do a better job? Why the faux-presentism? Why the bowdlerized history? Why the heroization? Are the promoters' politics responsible?

At first blush, I'd have to say "No," on grounds of a massive disconnect between the politics of Alexander Hamilton and the politics of Messrs. Gilder and Lehrman. To measure that gulf, we need to be more specific about their proclivities and activities, as the label "conservative Republicans" doesn't quite do them justice. Lehrman's stance on public issues is reasonably well known from his failed 1982 gubernatorial campaign, but some background on Gilder's positions might be helpful.

In a 1995 interview with the *National Journal*, Gilder, already a highly successful stockbroker, described having led his clients into the market during the late 1970s in anticipation of a capital gains tax cut. When it came, the market surged, convincing Gilder that lower taxes meant a better environment for investing. This was exactly the supply-side gospel being hammered out in those years by people like Lehrman, Arthur Laffer, Jack Kemp, Steve Forbes and Jude Wanniski, of whose 1978 manifesto (*The Way the World Works*) Forbes wrote, it "could do for the Republican Party what Marx's manifesto did for communism."

Wanniski recalls Gilder calling him up one day in 1979 saying, "You don't know me, but I'm a money manager in Manhattan and I've been making a lot of money off your ideas. What can I do to help?" With Wanniski's guidance, Gilder went on to form the Political Club for Growth, a group of Wall Street moneymen who funneled aid to supply-side politicians in the 1980s, pooling their contributions to increase their influence. When Reagan lowered capital-gains rates once again, Gilder's fortune was driven to further heights – a happy conjunction of principle and interest.

Gilder helped underwrite Newt Gingrich's revolution, and is credited with being among

the top ten monetary backers of Newt's Capitol Hill career – though he was not an uncritical supporter. When Clinton's Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin got Republicans to agree to limit a new capital gains tax cut to investments held longer than eighteen months – thus favoring long-term investors over quick-turnover speculators – some called Newt a traitor and bayed for his ouster. Gilder disgustedly (but one assumes drolly) remarked: "I don't know why we are Republicans. I am going to quit the Republican Party and join the Communist Party and really have a revolution."

On reflection, he instead twice backed flat-taxer Forbes for president. And in 1999 he founded the Club for Growth, an even more potent engine for marshaling big money behind candidates pledged to eliminate inheritance and capital gains taxes, slash government entitlement programs (prescription drugs are a current *bête noir*), and privatize Social Security (which by some estimates could pump \$6 billion of public retirement funds into the investment markets each month). The Club also targets for electoral defeat those they call RINOs—Republicans in Name Only—in an effort to drag the party to the right. They did brilliantly in the 2004 elections, and reaped an instant reward in Bush's post-victory promise to push ahead on their financial agenda.<sup>10</sup>

Why would anti-taxers and free-marketeers like these wish to elevate Hamilton to Herohood? A man who fought for, won, and vigorously exercised the right to tax (and was himself at one point a tax collector!). A man committed to Big Government (a mercantilist, not a Smithian) who favored state-sponsored economic development. A man who approved of (as Arthur Schlesinger has noted) "government regulation and control." A man hailed by such Progressive (a.k.a. Liberal) Republicans believers in activist government as Theodore Roosevelt, arguably the ur-RINO.<sup>11</sup> And a man hated by many traditional conservatives and libertarians for

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<sup>10</sup>See: Paul Starobin, "Welcome to the Club," *National Journal* (January 28, 1995), 219-225; Glenn Frankel, "As Their Support Thins, Candidates Run on Faith; Forbes Fashions Self-Financed Bid Into Supply-Side Economics Crusade," *The Washington Post* (March 12, 1996), A01; John B. Judis, "Rubin Sandwich," *The New Republic* (August 25, 1997), 11; Bill McAllister, "Wisconsin Backers of Gingrich Termed Hill's Biggest Patrons," *The Washington Post* (September 10, 1998), 19; Michael Scherer, "Donor Profile: Richard Gilder (with Tess)," *Mother Jones* (March 5, 2001) [[http://www.motherjones.com/news/special\\_reports/mojo\\_400/145\\_gilder.html](http://www.motherjones.com/news/special_reports/mojo_400/145_gilder.html)]; Ben White, "Shaping Conservative Agenda; 'Monday Meeting' in New York Draws Influential Crowd," *The Washington Post* (February 12, 2004), A08; "Fourteen Key Club for Growth Candidates Swept to Victory on Pro-Growth Message" [<http://www.clubforgrowth.org/news/041103.php>].

<sup>11</sup>At one point Karl Rove's tutoring program for George Bush promoted T.R. as role model. Less has been heard of Teddy recently, perhaps because some staffer discovered such

his centralizing initiatives and emphasis on money-making: Russell Kirk once said that only rightwingers in “whom the acquisitive instinct is confounded with the conservative tendency” were fascinated by Hamilton.

One might rather have assumed that Gilder and Lehrman would line up behind Grover Nordquist’s crusade to evict Soft-on-Big-Gov’mt Hamilton from the ten dollar bill and replace him with Ronald Reagan.<sup>12</sup> Yet the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank Gilder once chaired, has for four years now been handing out “Alexander Hamilton Awards” to noted conservatives; this year’s honorees included *National Review* founder William F. Buckley Jr. and (posthumously) the *Wall Street Journal*’s longtime editorial page editor Robert Bartley. If the Man Who Made Modern America was responsible for some of the things the sponsors like least about Modern America, wherein lies his attraction?

I think it’s less a matter of Hamilton’s specific policies, than his grand goal of nurturing the merchant class as agent of economic development, and that this show makes political sense when seen as a tribute offered by grateful New York financiers to their very own business-class hero.

From this perspective the exhibition has a long pedigree, running back to Hamilton’s day, and to the mercantile and legal elite of which he was a member. Hamilton helped make his colleagues richer and more powerful, and they adored, respected and honored him from the beginning. In 1791 five merchants commissioned John Trumbull to paint a full-length portrait for City Hall (it’s featured in the exhibition), and in 1795, the New York Chamber of Commerce gave him a valedictory banquet on leaving office.

He was equally revered by subsequent generations. After city businessmen erected a Merchant’s Exchange on Wall Street (1827) they ordered up a fifteen-foot-high statue of a be-

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Rooseveltian epigrams as “the rich have a peculiar obligation to pay taxes at a higher rate than others.” Or his 1912 assertion that “the limitation of governmental power, of governmental action, means the enslavement of the people by the great corporations which can only be held in check through the extension of governmental power.” [[http://www.theodoreroosevelt.org/TR\\_Web\\_Book/TR\\_CD\\_to\\_HTML251.html](http://www.theodoreroosevelt.org/TR_Web_Book/TR_CD_to_HTML251.html)]

<sup>12</sup>Nordquist’s Ronald Reagan Legacy Project – an offshoot of his Americans for Tax Reform – hasn’t had much luck as yet, nor has the campaign to chisel the Great Communicator into Mt. Rushmore gained traction. It has, however, made some progress at sites directly controlled by Big Gov’mt – perhaps because the Project’s Board of Advisors includes the likes of John Ashcroft and Tom DeLay – and we now have a Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site in the Marshall Islands. Nordquist, remember, is the guy who wants to “cut government in half in twenty-five years, to get it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub,” an aspiration echoed by Gilder, who’s on record as hoping to see government shrink every day of the rest of his life.

toga-ed Hamilton for its grand rotunda; when the building was engulfed in flames during the Great Fire of 1835 some nearly lost their lives trying to rescue the marbled Hamilton. In 1880, a ten foot high granite Hamilton (nineteen feet with pedestal) was unveiled in Central Park, just west of the Met, with Chauncey Depew (orator, railroad lawyer, and soon-to-be-president of Cornelius Vanderbilt's New York Central) remembering him with "reverence and gratitude." The 1890s brought a blossoming of Hamilton Clubs, composed chiefly of prosperous Republicans; in 1893 the Brooklyn Heights club unveiled an eight foot bronze (thirty feet when fully be-pedestaled) at the corner of Clinton and Remsen. The twenties were Hamilton's glory years. In 1923, President Harding, a long time admirer (as was Coolidge), dedicated a statue in front of the Treasury, the ceremony presided over by then Secretary Andrew Mellon, vigorous advocate of tax cuts for corporations and the investment communities off which Wall Street lived and thrived.

The crash of '29 discredited bankers and brokers, and Hamilton along with them. The Hamilton Club of Brooklyn went bankrupt in 1936, its statue shuttled to the front yard of Hamilton's Grange on Convent Avenue, where it languished in weedy obscurity. Franklin Roosevelt, though arguably "Hamiltonian" in practice, professed a staunch Jeffersonianism; for FDR the mid 20s resembled the 1790s when Hamilton "ran the federal government for the primary good of the chambers of commerce, the speculators and the inside ring of the national government." After WW2, conservatives also shied away from him, identified as he was with big government (in 1957 *Fortune Magazine* called him "the first Keynesian"). During JFK's presidency Cold War liberals seeking to justify a strong executive picked up his mantle, while Barry Goldwater hoisted a Jeffersonian flag. When Vietnam rendered the Imperial Presidency suspect, liberals dumped him; and during the economic crises of the 1970s, capitalist heroes had few acolytes.

Hamilton made a comeback in the 1980s, thanks in part to neo-conservatives' backing a strong executive to prosecute the Cold War. Hamilton stock was also bulled by rightists like Gingrich, counter-revolutionaries out to dismantle what remained of the New Deal's social welfare provisions and regulatory restraints, but who preferred to think of themselves as revolutionaries. In a similar fashion, as Steve Fraser explains in his excellent *Every Man A Speculator: A History of Wall Street in American Life* (forthcoming from HarperCollins), a rising generation of 1980s Wall Streeters cast themselves as rowdy rebels against an ancien regime of corporate managers and state bureaucrats. Speculators and arbitrageurs were transmuted into Wall Street warriors, whose raids on the bastions of privilege and paternalism would shake things up, unleash creative energies, and extend the realm of the free market, the realm of freedom itself.

As the '80s and 90s economic booms restored Wall Streeters' self confidence, and rehabilitated their standing in the culture, they embraced Hamilton as their man in the Revolutionary pantheon (like the Poles hailed Kosciusko, the Germans Von Steuben). For financial elites and their ideologues, Hamilton was not just a man of business who had set in place a fiscal infrastructure – an important contribution, to be sure, but as Brookhiser notes in his book "nobody loves his accountant." He was also a warrior for freedom (which they, unlike

Hamilton, conflated with the free market) – a full-fledged revolutionary like themselves. None of the other Founders would do – tainted as they were with populist sensibilities, ruralist pieties, anti-financial, and pro-slavery attitudes: Hamilton’s resurrection was enabled by Jefferson’s fall from grace.

True, Reagan-era reality didn’t quite work out as supply-siders intended (any more than the 1790s unfolded quite as Hamilton had hoped). The tax cuts produced not the promised new savings and investments (these fell below even the average level of the 1970s, much less the booming 1950s and 60s) but rather the rampant market speculation (and bonanza for brokers) which blew the bubble that burst in ‘87, a scenario instantly replayed in the ‘90s dot-com boom, punctured in 2000. Deregulation, meanwhile, led to stunning levels of fraud and corruption (not just at Enron and WorldCom, but in much of the Wall Street banking and brokering establishment), featuring flagrant conflicts of interest, insider trading, book cooking, and pension fund looting; and to soaring levels of inequality, as corporate chieftains propped up share prices to cash in on stock options, sending their incomes to stratospheric heights.

A cynical observer might have spotted in all this a certain appropriateness to the latest round of Hamilton veneration, rooted in some unacknowledged parallels between the 1790s and 1990s – with recent tax cuts for the wealthy standing in for Hamilton’s handout to the rich, and his stock-propping rescue of 1792 finding echo in latter-day bailouts, at great public expense, of the savings & loan industry and giant hedge funds like Long Term Capital Management. Indeed, Kevin Phillips has argued that we live in an era of “financial mercantilism,” presided over by an interlocking directorate of Treasury bureaucrats, central bankers, securities firms and hedge fund operators, which the exhibit might have claimed to be a Hamiltonian legacy, if doing so would not have raised embarrassing questions about “free market” commitments on either end of the time continuum.<sup>13</sup>

Instead the promoters seem to have settled for burnishing Hamilton’s image, the better to shine by reflected glory. They’ve even (whimsically?) inserted themselves into the historical narrative, rather as patrons once had themselves depicted in devout attendance at the Crucifixion, as if to underscore a spiritual kinship with (and descent from) their favorite founder. Over at the

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<sup>13</sup>It’s interesting that *Hamilton*’s prime sponsor is Julian Robertson – he reportedly kicked in a million dollars – as Robertson was one of the premier hedge fund operators of the 80s-90s booms. A “Titan of Wall Street,” right up there with George Soros and William Buffet in the speculative hurly burly of the era, he rode the tiger brilliantly for a time. Funds under his management soared to \$22 billion by 1998, only to crash and burn two years later in one of the era’s most spectacular financial disasters. Facing plummeting returns and mounting withdrawals he liquidated the Tiger Fund’s remaining \$6 billion, returned it to investors, and shut up shop (though he continued to manage his remaining \$850 million fortune). [“The Taming of the Shrewd: the World’s Best-known Investors No Longer Understand Financial Markets,” *The Economist* (May 6, 2000); Gary Weiss, “The Buck Stops with Julian Robertson, Not the Market,” *Business Week* (April 17, 2000), 168; Weiss, “What Really Killed Tiger,” *ibid.*, 166].

FREE PRESS video screen, you can spot one exception to the all-Murdoch-all-the-time promotional imagery – a lengthy close-up of a man in a yellow t-shirt blazoned with the "Illuminating Your World" logo of the *New York Sun*, hawking copies of that conservative paper, among whose principal founding financial fathers can be found one Richard Gilder.

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Well, so what? Why should anyone care if these guys raised and spent a small fortune on this? The N-YHS is a private institution; its board can do as it likes with it; as Reagan said, it's their microphone, they're paying for it. On the other hand, the Society has a public dimension, being something of an ancient institution in this town, dating to the administration of (N-YHS member) Thomas Jefferson. The citizenry, I would argue, has the right to remind current board members that they are stewards of a collective cultural heritage. More to the point, when the Society had a near death experience a few years back it wasn't the trustees who rescued it, but the wider public, which intervened precisely because the mission of the N-YHS was to tell our collective history.

The Society was wobbling badly by the 1980s—many things had brought it to this financial pass – and the '87 crash set it on the road to extinction.<sup>14</sup> At the end of 1992 the Museum shut down. In February 1993 the Library followed suit, all public programs were cancelled, and 41 staff members were fired, leaving only a skeleton crew behind to handle disposition of the collections.

At this point a mass protest by New Yorkers who loved the city's history was launched to get the great bronze doors reopened, and to save the library and collections from being scattered. Historians, archivists, librarians, and teachers teamed up with publishers, advertisers, architects, and financiers to circulate a petition and picket the building. CNN covered the story. So did the major papers, the *Times* calling editorially for "Saving the City's Memory". Governor Cuomo called it a "vital part of the cultural heritage of New York State" and in April 1993 the State appropriated \$6.3 million in emergency funding. The City matched this. With the State Attorney General's office observing developments closely – its Charities Bureau has oversight over museums – the trustees formally rewrote the Society's mission statement, and pledged to dedicate their efforts to telling the history of city and state.

In doing so, they were merely ratifying a transformation that had long since taken hold. Back in 1804, when John Pintard – Duer's partner having returned to town once the coast was clear – established the N-YHS, they set out "to discover, procure, and preserve whatever may relate to the natural, civil, literary, and ecclesiastical history of the United States in general, and of this State in particular." This capacious purview was understandable as they were virtually the

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<sup>14</sup>See Kevin M. Guthrie, *The New-York Historical Society: Lessons from One Nonprofit's Long Struggle for Survival* (1996).

only such collecting institution in town – no Metropolitan Museum, no Museum of Natural History, no New York Public Library – and they joyfully accepted anything and everything given them: books, manuscripts, artworks, artifacts, and natural history specimens. The country, indeed the world, became their oyster. They piled up European oils and Egyptian mummies, records of the California gold rush and the settlement of early Florida, American Indian captivity narratives and accounts of the Spanish American War, until they were drowning in their largely uncatalogued accumulation.

When professionally organized museums and libraries arrived later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the N-YHS remained an amateur operation. Linking its fortunes to patriotic and genealogical societies (early Founding Fatherologists), it maintained a wide-angled focus. By the First World War many considered it moribund. In 1917 the feisty Mrs. John King Van Rensselaer – blasting it as an "old man's club" ("dead" "uninteresting" and "dull") – led a breakaway movement. In 1923, another rival group formed the competing Museum of the City of New York. The N-YHS limped along as a private club, refusing to ask for municipal assistance, but was rescued during the depression by a massive infusion of cash – over \$4.5 million (more than 62 million in current dollars, setting a standard against which we can measure the relative beneficence of contemporary donors) – from the children of David Thompson, former president of New York Life. It also began to whittle back its holdings (the Egyptian collection went to the Brooklyn Museum in 1937) and to circumscribe its catchment (in the '40s it began rethinking its European holdings), concentrating more and more on metropolitan area materials as the century wore on. Although in moments of prosperity, it rebroadened its ambitions, increasing long-term strain.

The 1980s-90s crisis concentrated the institution's mind, and in 1993 it declared that, "the primary mission of The New-York Historical Society shall be to develop, preserve and interpret to the broadest possible public, material relevant to the rich history, cultural diversity and current evolution of New York City and State and the surrounding region." When a new administration under Betsy Gotbaum sought permission from the Attorney General to deaccession some now-extraneous holdings to raise money, it was granted as being "consistent with the mission of the Society".

The new regime got the place back on its feet, made necessary repairs, tapped some new funding sources, and mounted some interesting shows, but it continued to skate on thin financial ice. In 1996 several historians proposed a merger of the N-YHS and the Museum of the City of New York, the point being to pool resources in order to achieve long-term economic stability, and undertake bold new initiatives, like "a full-dress permanent exhibition that tells the history of the city in a truly comprehensive way." When negotiations foundered they tried again, in 2002, noting that "if the Gilder-Lehrman Collection joined the new institution, and perhaps at a later date, the Municipal Archives were moved to the site as well, the new organization – already host to the Luce Center – would immediately become one of the premier research institutions of the City."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>For the text of both letters, see <http://www.gothamcenter.org/hamilton/resources>

As this suggests, the possible arrival of wealthy new N-YHS trustees, passionately committed to history, was seen as a promising development, heralding great potential for finally creating a world class institution dedicated to explicating New York's past. It seemed a renaissance was in store, and that Gilder and Lehrman might take their place alongside the civic patrons then refurbishing old landmarks like the Planetarium and the Museum of Modern Art. Indeed their arrival betokened the infusion of more than cash, as they seemed willing to bring along their significant collection of early American historical documents.

Vigorous public outreach strategies seemed newly plausible, as well, given that their Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History had done exemplary work in making historical scholarship accessible to wider publics: it had sponsored history schools, history programs within schools, research centers, teacher training programs, public lectures, traveling exhibitions, a web site, and an on-line journal, and had also established fellowship programs and two historical prize competitions. Nor had their rightwing personal politics led to imposition of a political means test before bestowing support; in 2001 they contributed to a conference on New York City History of which the Gotham Center for New York City History was a co-sponsor (we appreciated their assistance then, and we appreciate it still).

But then the new day dawned, and attached strings came dangling into view. The price exacted for depositing the documents, and the possibility of eventual support from their deep pockets, was the Society's agreeing to abandon its focus on New York history, sniffed at as parochial. "Mr. Gilder acknowledged," the *Times* reported, "that he and Mr. Lehrman were evaluating the society on the basis, among other things, of whether it fulfilled their desire to make its focus more national." They built a million-dollar segregated vault in the N-YHS basement, for Gilder Lehrman documents only, and while they let some out to commingle in the Hamilton show, each was labeled "The Gilder Lehrman Collection, on deposit at the New-York Historical Society," as if to underscore the collection's provisional status which Gilder had spelled out bluntly to the *Times*: "it's the society's to lose."<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, several New York City-oriented exhibitions then on the N-YHS drawing boards were truncated or dumped. "There was nothing wrong" with the shows, Gilder

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<sup>16</sup>Ironically, for all the vault's vaunted depth, especially in this area and era, its holdings didn't add much to the exhibition. Traub thought "the Gilder-Lehrman Collection would furnish most of the material for the Hamilton show," but in fact it supplied only 19 items out of 175 (and some of these duplicated items in the N-YHS holdings). It would indeed be a great pity for the research library if G&L picked up their marbles and went home – though for all the undoubted strengths of their forty-plus thousand item collection, it pales in comparison to the truly spectacular (and far broader) two million plus item collection the N-YHS itself has amassed over the centuries. And from the Museum's perspective – especially if it wasn't tethered to early Americana exhibitry – it wouldn't be much of a loss; when original artifacts were needed, they could be borrowed from other major institutions, as was done for this show.

told the *Times*. "They just weren't really in the mainstream of American history. We want to focus on bigger things." Bigger things? If the new desiderata were shows that looked at national issues through the prism of New York City, why scuttle a show on the centennial history of Times Square? Certainly the proposal had been ambitious enough: it planned to tackle developments in theater, movies, popular culture, architecture, language, advertising, shopping, journalism, real estate, urban decline, and urban renewal.<sup>17</sup> The abandonment was doubly bewildering because if funded at anything remotely approaching the outlay on the Hamilton show, a Times Square exhibition could *really* have been a blockbuster.<sup>18</sup>

"Dick and I are reformers," says Lewis Lehrman. "We are not interested in insulating the status quo from new ideas." Feisty words. But the Hamilton show betrays a musty reality. How likely is that such narrow gauge nationalists, focused on Founding Fatherology, will be open to what's happening out in the wider world? It's hard to imagine them sponsoring an international conference of city museums, much less helping New York City get involved in the broader urban heritage issues now being discussed in the global arena.<sup>19</sup>

The N-YHS position seems to be that while "local" issues may be fine in their place, they can be safely left to the MCNY while they attend to matters of more pressing moment. Russell Shorto, in a recent piece in the *Times*, suggests similarly that we let ourselves "dream a happy dream in which the lofty New-York Historical Society sits grandly on Central Park, unfurling big shows about the big New York, while the Museum of the City of New York does the boroughs

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<sup>17</sup>For an excerpt from the original proposal, see <http://www.gothamcenter.org/hamilton/resources/ts.shtml>. In the interim, a stripped-down version has found a home and is scheduled to open on December 9, at the AXA Gallery, 787 Seventh Avenue at 51st Street, and run through March 2005.

For a sense of the national significance of the history of Times Square, see my review of recent books on the subject in "Babylon on the Subway," *New York Review of Books* (June 24, 2004).

<sup>18</sup>The merger with the Museum of the City of New York was also definitively laid to rest (by both parties), along with the notion of a core exhibition spanning the city's entire history. The Gotham Center suggested the two might collaborate (with other institutions) in creating a New York City History Center at Ground Zero. This went nowhere. See [http://www.gothamcenter.org/hamilton/resources/9\\_points.shtml](http://www.gothamcenter.org/hamilton/resources/9_points.shtml) and <http://www.gothamcenter.org/historycenter/historycenter.pdf>

<sup>19</sup>See for example the work of the League of Historical Cities, which holds World Conferences every two years on urban heritage conservation and development. See <http://www.vieux.montreal.qc.ca/2003/> and <http://www.city.kyoto.jp/somu/kokusai/lhcs/lhc/conference01.htm>

with gusto and the Seaport sails into the schools.”<sup>20</sup> But the question is whether or not the N-YHS has any interest in “unfurling big shows about the big New York.” Given *Hamilton*, I suspect the new trustees would prefer to mount exhibitions about U.S. History, stressing the subjects and eras on which they have long focused their collecting energies – creating in effect a Gilder Lehrman Museum of Early American History within the shell of the N-YHS. And from their perspective, why not? It’s understandable they would want to make use of the materials they’ve accumulated, most of which don’t relate to New York City or State. But from New Yorkers’ perspective a nationalizing strategy would subtract from an already historically underserved city one of the only general-interest institutions dedicated to exploring its legacy.<sup>21</sup>

I confess, however, that with *The Man Who Made America* on the scene, I now have deeper concerns about Gilder’s professed intention to mount “mainstream” exhibits. History exhibits in museums, let’s remember, have been battlegrounds in recent years, and the definition of “mainstream” has been hotly contested. Since the 1960s, a generation of historians and curators has largely succeeded in throwing open the doors of many a marble mausoleum, and getting museums to embrace the experience of a far broader range of Americans than they had ever before been willing to represent. Not only are women and people of color now routinely depicted extensively but vast numbers of white males as well—the farmers and miners and sailors and steelworkers and clerks and professionals who had never before been deemed of sufficient stature to warrant inclusion in the halls hitherto stuffed with the portraits and possessions of “historically correct” statesmen and entrepreneurs. At long last the American past is as crowded and diverse and contentious and fascinating as is the American present, and the

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<sup>20</sup> Russell Shorto, “The Future of the Past,” *New York Times* (September 12, 2004).  
[[http://www.gothamcenter.org/hamilton/articles/9\\_12.shtml](http://www.gothamcenter.org/hamilton/articles/9_12.shtml)]

<sup>21</sup>And problems can crop up when the collections-cart drives the exhibition-horse—when the stuff you’ve got constrains the questions you ask—as Gilder and Lerhman found out when they underwrote a documentary history of America through the Civil War (*The Boisterous Sea of Liberty*,) but wanted the editors (the eminent historian David Brion Davis and Steven Mintz) to use only materials from their collection to tell the story. An H-Net reviewer concluded that, “Boisterous Sea is just not suited for use in a survey course. While Davis and Mintz have done the historical profession a service by providing an illustration of just what is available in the Gilder Lehrman Collection, the limitations of restricting themselves to that one collection and compiling a useful teaching text were just too great to overcome. . . . In his note on the ‘Nature and History of the Gilder Lehrman Collection,’ Davis does acknowledge that, on the earliest colonial period and nineteenth century women’s rights, he and Mintz ‘felt it necessary ... to include some outside documents to ensure an accurate and coherent view of a given subject’ (p. 562). One wishes they had strayed outside the collection a little more often.” [<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=16726966265595>] Also see: Louis P. Masur, “History by the Letter,” *The Nation* (February 15, 1999).  
[[http://www.gothamcenter.org/hamilton/resources/2\\_15.shtml](http://www.gothamcenter.org/hamilton/resources/2_15.shtml)]

people packing into history museums, local historical societies, preserved historic places and National Park Service sites have been drawn in part by the novel presence of their forebears' voices and stories.

History museums have also taken to exploring a far wider range of subjects than politics and finance—certainly important but hardly all-encompassing. They now tackle sexuality and consumerism, journalism and crime, architecture and cinema, religion and race relations, class conflict and foreign policy, among many other topics.<sup>22</sup>

These advances (I betray my bias) galvanized vigorous resistance from right wing ideologues, prominent among them being Newt Gingrich (that aegis most useful to Gilder and his colleagues). This is not the place to rehearse the last dozen years of combat, but just to remind readers that Gingrich has been a stalwart soldier in the history wars. He's attacked the History Standards, assaulted the Smithsonian as "a plaything for left-wing ideologies," and denounced this generation of historians as being too critical of America. As an antidote, Gingrich, who for a time offered a televised course called "Renewing American Civilization," has proposed we stop "laughing at McGuffey Readers and laughing at Parson Weems's vision of Washington" and get back to "teaching about the Founding Fathers".<sup>23</sup>

In this context it's a bit alarming that Gilder has been pushing a Ben Franklin show toward the N-YHS batter's box. It's not just that there ain't much Gothamite about the great Philadelphian. What if it proved only the first of a series of celebratory shows on assorted Founding Fathers (at least those of a Federalist persuasion) with John Adams, John Marshall, and Rufus King (a home town hero, at least) crowding the on deck circle? And why would they stop there, if they are really out to Renew American Civilization, and save America from the nattering historical nabobs of negativity? The ranks of great Men Who Made America are legion: antebellum statesmen (Webster, Clay, Calhoun), the Civil War leadership (Lincoln, Grant, Lee), captains of industry and finance (Rockefeller, Carnegie, Morgan), right wing Republican Presidents (Coolidge, Hoover, Reagan). So many Heroes, so little time: the possibilities are endless.

Although space is not. What if they decided to commission a statue to commemorate each Hero? To which nooks and crannies of the N-HYS building would the metallicized patriots be retired after their turn in the limelight? Presumably they could be left in the hallways for a while – like patients in under-funded hospitals – but sooner or later mightn't the corridors be

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<sup>22</sup>See my "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," in Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (1996).

<sup>23</sup>See my "The Battle of the *Enola Gay*," in Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History* (1996). Also Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (1996), and Eric Foner, *Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (2002).

crammed with great bronze men? Perhaps they could mount them on the roof, have the building sprout heroes, as does the Surrogate's Courthouse (originally the Hall of Records) down on Chambers Street, which was festooned with 54 heroic sculptures (actual and allegorical) back in 1899-1907, when this sort of thing was last really popular.

This fantasy is far fetched, I admit, but perhaps not totally so. In an article for the Manhattan Institute's *City Journal*, architectural historian and *New York Sun* columnist Francis Morrone fondly recalls this memorializing era – he applauds the massed legions atop the Surrogate's Court in particular – and regrets only that we've fallen away from statuolatry. Indeed he calls “for a revival of the tradition” in order “to fill out the picture our forebears began,” because “in the long run, a society can't flourish without vibrant public ideals and reverence for its heroes.”<sup>24</sup>

I'm in fact quite sympathetic to Morrone's desire to strengthen civic memory by recollecting forebears who exemplified cherished collective values, though I would opt for a more diversified spectrum (and definition) of civic heroes – there weren't many women up there on the roof, nor many working-class (or African-American) heroes on public display – and the spheres of New York's civic life are far more variegated than the political and literary bandwidths to which he and sculptors-past have been attuned. (I'm with him on a statue for Edith Wharton, however: long overdue!)

Nor do I really think statues are the best way to honor our exemplary citizens. They're far too limited a form, reliant as they are on prior knowledge of the individual being pedestalized. They're also far too one-dimensional, unable in their muteness to convey the complexity of the person being heroized, much less the times in which they lived. One reason statues have been superseded is that we have come up with far better methods of commemoration – popular biographies, tv docudramas and documentaries, film epics, web sites, and yes, museum exhibitions – all of which afford the possibility of explaining not merely exhorting, historicizing not simply fetishizing.

I believe our generation finds these approaches more congenial in part because they're less condescending. It would be a pity if the possibilities of the museological medium, so dramatically expanded and enhanced in recent years, were to be reversed by a return to 1950s (or 1890s) mindsets and methodologies, themselves tied to the notion that civic virtue was something to be inculcated from above, rather than cultivated through reasoned interaction with the public. The great irony and failing of the current show, as Rothstein notes so perceptively, is that it “respects the citizenry less than Hamilton did,” for the Founder, though decidedly no populist, always argued his case in the court of public opinion.

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<sup>24</sup>Francis Morrone, “Statues and Civic Memory,” *City Journal* (Summer 1999).  
[[http://www.city-journal.org/html/9\\_3\\_urbanities\\_statues.html](http://www.city-journal.org/html/9_3_urbanities_statues.html)]

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But perhaps I worry needlessly. Maybe, having gotten *Hamilton* off their chest, the trustees will now sit back, stop kibitzing, and let the new President of the N-YHS, Louise Mirrer, get on with her job. Mirrer's not a U.S. historian nor an authority on New York City's past – she's a scholar of medieval Spain – nor does she have a background in museums. But she did a brilliant job as Academic Vice-Chancellor of the City University of New York, dramatically enhancing that institution's contributions to our city's life of the mind. She has, moreover, a mind of her own, and in her public statements has put considerably more emphasis on “big shows about the big New York” than have the new board members.

In particular, she is committed to carrying on with a long gestating exhibition on the History of Slavery in New York City, a story about which too many of our citizens remain unaware. It could be a great opportunity to demonstrate the power of a museological depiction of the interplay between local, national, and planetary developments. It might lay out how the Dutch and English imperial systems webbed Gotham into the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Atlantic slave trading system. It could pick up from where *Hamilton* petered out, by describing how the post-revolutionary city inserted itself between the slave-based cotton producing South, and the industrializing English midlands, the two most dynamic areas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century global economy, becoming in the process utterly imbricated in the slavery regime. It could explore “local” ramifications of these developments ranging from the experience of the slaves themselves, to the establishment of Jim Crow racial segregation, to the eventual overthrow of slavery in the city and the emergence (against enormous odds) of a New York-headquartered movement to abolish it in the South as well. It could people its canvas with a far vaster array of historical actors than's now on display, including the bondswomen and men themselves, the free African-American community, evangelical ministers, artisans and laborers, businessmen and journalists, and many, many others. (Such a show, moreover, would dovetail with Gilder-Lehrman interests and documents, though that could prove a mixed blessing if it invited trustee micromanagement).

Down the road, there's an endless list of issues of national historical importance – many with presentist implications – that could be explored by examining them through a New York prism. Take transportation. The N-YHS is proceeding with a modest show commemorating the subway's centennial, a worthy if not galvanic enterprise. But imagine if the centennial had been used instead as the occasion for mounting not just a full fledged recounting of the history of mass transit in New York City over the course of the twentieth century, but the city's simultaneous role in crucibling a competing car culture. It would then be positioned to examine the comparative consequences (cultural, environmental, sociological, geographical) of the rival rail and road systems (locally, and of necessity on the national level as well, given the role of Congressional funding). Such a retrospective could end with the very practical issues facing the city, state, and region, inviting visitors to consider as citizens how we want to shape and fund our future transportation arrangements in the light of our historical experience. Given that we are once again facing an MTA crisis – with higher fares and declining services looming – and given that politicians and the media have so far shied away from putting the issue on the public agenda,

a grand Historical Society presentation of this sort could have been of inestimable value. And by engaging New Yorkers on issues in which they are vitally concerned, rather than hectoring them about heroes, I suspect it would have been a far greater draw than what's currently on offer.

Another example? Take immigration. It's hard to imagine a more timely topic, or one nearer to the marrow of Gotham's past and present being. One way to tackle it might be to present a show called *Nueva York*, that would, for the first time, boldly examine the overarching trajectory of New York City's relations with Latin America since colonial days, paying particular attention, perhaps, to the interplay between the export of New York goods and capital south, and the dialectical migration of Latin American peoples north. It could range from the colonial era establishment of the Caribbean connection, when our ships dispatched food and slaves and returned with sugar to process (that now winked-out Domino Sugar sign on the Brooklyn shoreline being a last reminder of that relationship); through the role of metropolitan capitalists (like John Jacob Astor) in running guns to revolutionary anti-colonial governments; to the dramatic growth of trade with Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, and Cuba; the Central American interventions of William Walker and Cornelius Vanderbilt; the role of New York based exiles like Jose Marti in winning Cuban independence, and the subsequent penetration of Cuba's economy, and that of many other Latin American countries, by Wall Street financiers and New York sugar barons; the initiatives of Nelson Rockefeller in World War II; the postwar interaction between an expanded corporate presence in Puerto Rico and an exploding migration from the island to East Harlem, and the similar saga in the Dominican Republic; and the interplay between Reagan-era military incursions and Clinton-era financial crises, with the latest surges into the city from Central America and Mexico. All throughout, attention to global developments would be paired with an examination of the local experiences of successive waves of Nueva immigrants, and their growing impact on the city's social, cultural, religious, economic, and political life. Such a show would also provide an opportunity for the Society to reach out to today's Latino communities and solicit their memories and artifacts, a strategy the Brooklyn Historical Society has followed with great success, reaping not only an enhanced collection, but an expanded audience.

Big enough? Mainstream enough? If not, there are plenty of other possibilities. I've proposed shows on the history of New York crime, poverty, infrastructure, health, shopping, housing, deindustrialization, tourism, religion, war, and the media (especially changing representations of the city over time).<sup>25</sup> And visitors to the Gotham Center site are herewith invited to post their own suggestions of exhibitions they'd like to see N-YHS (or other institutions) tackle.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>See my "Razon Ribbons, History Museums, and Civic Salvation," in Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History* (1996).

<sup>26</sup>For Discussion Boards, go to <http://www.gothamcenter.org/discussions/displaygroup.cfm?ForumGroupID=6>

In the end I'm hopeful that—under the stewardship of Ms. Mirrer and an expanding and diversified board—the Society will opt against becoming a conservative version of the Smithsonian's American Museum of National History, something that even with Gilder-Lehrman's documents it is singularly ill-equipped to be. And that it will, instead, dedicate itself to becoming a bigger and better version of what it's been at its best—a vital link between New York's past, present and future.

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