

IV. History and Culture

BOOK REVIEW

A Nationbuilder's Handbook

by Philip Ulanowsky

Defeating Slavery—Hamilton's American System Showed the Way

by Nancy Spannaus

393 pages

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Aug. 3 —In the current, accelerating turmoil of world conflict, resolution will be found in the realm of ideas, not the battlefields of physical war. Across the globe, leaders in numerous domains have warned of the danger of failing to learn the lessons of history for today's burgeoning crises.

Among the most welcome declarations coming, largely, from voices in the Global South, is that colonialism is over—not merely the locally imposed colonialist governing of foreign powers, but that which has for decades continued to rule by financial manipulation and economic thievery. In this respect, the recent publication of Nancy Spannaus's latest book, *Defeating Slavery—Hamilton's American System Showed the Way*, offers both valuable, myth-busting documentation on America's past, and also a straightforward guide to the principles necessary to eradicate the vestiges of the institution of slavery in its economic guise today.

A Jungle of Untruths

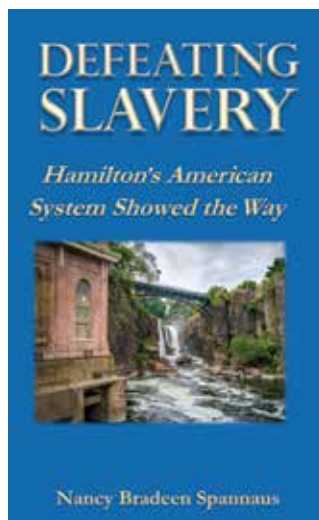
Spannaus explains in the book's preface that, following publication of her earlier *Hamilton Versus Wall Street*, she was prompted to undertake the new volume by three events: the Jamestown Foundation's "1619 Project," the murder of American George Floyd by police in 2020, and a subsequent paper claiming to document Alexander Hamilton's role as an "enslaver,"

which, like the 1619 Project, received uncritical acclaim.

History is complicated, because—thank goodness—we humans are complicated. Principle may have a sharp dividing line, as in the matter of owning another person as disposable property; but rare indeed is the individual who, over the course of a lifetime, can be reckoned to have been all good or bad, always correct or mistaken. The contentious and hard-won forging of the American republic from colonies under British rule, and the long decades of attempts to secure its freedom against foes both internal and external, present a record of enormous such complexity. Spannaus, whose personal research into Hamilton reaches back five decades, leads us through the fight against slavery, from the colonial period up through the years leading into the Civil War. Through her voice and the nearly

thirty-five pages of appendices, we are introduced to scarcely known anti-slavery intellectuals and efforts both activist and legislative to end the practice, and to the reactionary response from its promoters. Her careful and well-documented scholarship aids the reader in grasping the conditions and challenges faced at key points as the fight continued, now in one colony, now in another; later among the states.

But it is the role of Alexander Hamilton, and the legacy of his brilliant economic insight and achievement in setting a positive course for the new republic, carried forward by key individuals up into the Lincoln administration, that deserves study by anyone today looking to blaze a successful path out the wreckage of the current western, financial-speculation-driven economic system. The fundamental divide between



Hamilton and Jefferson on the matter of production, which Spannaus makes clear, resonates loudly in today's battles between those who would denigrate and demolish the industrial foundation of modern society, and those insisting on a new wave of industrialization globally, to meet society's present needs and future prospects. In fact, African voices of reason today are demanding their right to modern technology, science, infrastructure, and education, in opposition to the "green," "decarbonized," "naturizing" plans concocted by a northern elite.

While Hamilton had been preceded by such as Benjamin Franklin in noting the destructive economic effects of slavery, his own experience in the Caribbean and his development into early maturity shaped his unequivocal view:

Were not the disadvantages of slavery too obvious to stand in need of it, I might enumerate and describe the tedious train of calamities inseparable from it. I might show that it is fatal to religion and morality; that it tends to debase the mind, and corrupt its noblest springs of action. I might show that it relaxes the sinews of industry, clips the wings of commerce, and introduces misery and indigence in every shape.

The quote is telling for those who have studied his economics, in which lies a key to comprehending a true science of economics rather than merely adopting or defending an ideological opinion. For Hamilton, as Spannaus elaborates, the "noblest springs of action" lie in the innate creative potential of the mind, that which discovers a new principle, which, applied through invention, may provide universal benefit. The



Portrait Collection, Collection of the City of New York

A John Trumbull portrait of Alexander Hamilton, whose opposition to slavery was not only vocal but intrinsic to the essence of his economics.

various propositions in which the source of wealth is posited in the land, hard labor, Adam Smith's "buy cheap, sell dear" calculus, and so forth, lose any semblance of rationality when placed in Hamilton's comprehensive context of human development.

A Guide for Today

Spannaus concludes her thesis by offering three proposals "for the thinking American citizenry" in her final chapter, "Facing Slavery's Legacy Today." She advises: Get the history straight, get the economy straight, and restore a national purpose. Of the second she writes:

Slavery was, and is, an imperial economic and social system, and it cannot be wiped out without addressing the basic axioms of that system.... Claiming ownership of another human being is only the most extreme form of this system, which effectively dehumanizes all members of society.

She goes on to underline the individual's essential creative potential as the basis of a successful economy, "establishing the conditions for that potential to flourish in community with others." These comprise not only the means to meet physical needs, "they also involve providing education, social development and progress of all sorts."

Defeating Slavery is thus a living history book for today, written in response to an ongoing effort to distort key features of the foundation and development of the United States. Spannaus writes clearly and directly, making the book accessible for high-school-age students, for whom it could certainly be a companion text book of great value.