

Alexander Hamilton's Rules for Living

1. Know what in life you consider *non-negotiable* and take *action* when the line is crossed.

For Hamilton, a handful of issues were at the top of his list of non-negotiable items. Two of the primary ones were:

- Liberty—the right to vote for those who govern.
- Union—the thirteen states must be united to prevent foreign invasion.

These were powerful drivers for Hamilton. When his mentor and boss, President George Washington, asks him to stop publicly wrangling with another cabinet member, Thomas Jefferson, Hamilton refuses. In a letter to George Washington dated September 9, 1792, Hamilton states:

I find myself placed in a situation not to be able to recede *for the present*...I determined to avoid giving occasion to any thing which could manifest to the world dissensions among the principle characters of the government; a thing which can never happen without weakening its hands, and in some degree throwing a stigma upon it. BUT when I no longer doubted that there was a formed party deliberately bent upon the subversion of measures, which in consequences would subvert the Government...I considered it as a duty...to draw aside the veil from the principal Actors. To this strong impulse, to this decided conviction, I have yielded.

2. Keep your promises.

“For a promise must never be broken; and I will never make you one, which I will not fulfill as far as I am able.”

—Letter to Philip A. Hamilton (son), Philadelphia December 5 1791

3. Master subjects—don't settle for mediocrity.

“Men give me credit for some genius. All the genius I have lies in this, when I have a subject in hand, I study it profoundly. Day and night it is before me. My mind becomes pervaded with it. Then the effort that I have made is what people are pleased to call the fruit of genius. It is the fruit of labor and thought.”

—Oral history, *Manual of Useful Information* (1893)

4. Check for prejudices.

“There is bigotry in politics, as well as in religion, equally pernicious in both. The zealots of either description are ignorant of the advantages of a spirit of toleration.

—Second Letter from Phocion, New York, April 1784

“Men upon too many occasions do not give their own understandings fair play; but yielding to some untoward bias they entangle themselves in words and confound themselves in subtleties.”

—Federalist No. 31

“Vanity and jealousy exclude all counsel. Passion wrests the helm from reason.”

—Letter to Rufus King, New York, January 5, 1800

5. Always seek the axioms, truths or principles upon which a subject rests, as all reasoning depends on them.

“In disquisitions [a formal discourse on a subject] of every kind there are certain primary truths or first principles upon which all subsequent reasonings must depend...”

“Of this nature are the maxims in geometry, that ‘The whole is greater than its part; that things equal to the same are equal to one another; that two straight lines cannot inclose a space; and that all right angles are equal to each other.’ Of the same nature are these other maxims in ethics and politics, that there cannot be an effect without a cause; that the means ought to be proportioned to the end; that every power ought to be commensurate with its object; that there ought to be no limitation of a power destined to effect a purpose, which is itself incapable of limitations. And there are other truths in the two latter sciences, which if they cannot pretend to rank in the class of axioms, are yet such direct inferences from them, and so obvious in themselves, and so agreeable to the natural and unsophisticated dictates of common sense, that they challenge the assent of a sound and unbiased mind, with a degree of force and conviction almost equally irresistible.”

—Federalist No. 31

6. Be who you are.

“It has been the rule of my life...to *appear truly what I am.*”

—Letter to Robert Troup Albany April 13, 1795

7. Be discrete.

“Discretion is the MENTOR which ought to accompany every Young *Telemachus* in his journey through life.”

—To James Hamilton (son), New York, June 1804

8. Be polite and apologize if you offend.

“Behave in such a manner as will secure to you the good-will and regard of all those with whom you are. If you happen to displease any of them, be always ready to make a frank apology. But the best way is to act with so much politeness, good manners, and circumspection, as never to have occasion to make any apology.”

—Letter to Angelica Hamilton (daughter), c. November 1793

9. Do your duty.

“It is the duty of every man, according to situation, to contribute all in his power towards preventing evil and producing good.”

—Letter to George Washington, Philadelphia April 1794

“’Tis a good old maxim to which we may safely adhere in most cases that we ought to do our duty and leave the rest to the care of heaven.”

—Letter to William Gordon, West Point, New York, September 5, 1779

