

The Duel of Burr and Hamilton

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“... opportunistic Aaron Burr was sincerely committed to himself. Sheer brilliance and shrewdness carried [him] to vice-presidency, and he might have become heir apparent to Jefferson, but for his taste for intrigues.”¹

Few American politicians gained the reputation comparable to Darth Vader only, but Aaron Burr managed it by becoming a symbol of dishonor, evil, and violence. If we do not count the so-called Burr conspiracy, which was never proved, only one event was sufficient to create this image: the duel with Alexander Hamilton. Because Hamilton always thought of the duel as an ideological contest², we may infer that the *main cause for physical disputes between politicians came from the lack of political parties*, which was caused by Washington’s reluctance to factions. *Personal quarrels could have been avoided, had the ideological disputes been limited to the Congress, and had the social prestige and honor not played an ordinary part in the early-republic politics.* The duel created an impulse for active media engagement and propaganda as a part of gaining political support, and made Aaron Burr leave American politics.³

Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr had been rivals for a long time before. Hamilton engaged himself in the presidential elections of 1800, and using the Federalist votes allowed Jefferson to become president, even though both Jefferson and Burr had the same number of votes in the electoral college. Other reasons included personal arguments when Hamilton accused Burr of “irregular and insatiable ambition.”⁴

Both duelist were also confronted at court while working on the same case.⁵ Even so, Hamilton did not believe that they would shoot at each other, having been engaged in eleven affairs of honor before without proceeding to the actual duel.⁶ Furthermore, Hamilton feared the duel, for his son had died in a duel.

Hamilton argued in the Federalist papers that personal responsibility to the public (honor) could restrain self-serving.⁷ He therefore replaced the idea of public virtue by checks and scrutiny, and to remain a true man of his word, he had to follow this idea.

Finally, both participants hoped to prove themselves worthy of leadership, and gain

political support, trying to boost their declining recognition.⁸ Burr lost the presidential elections of 1800 and the New York Republicans denied him to run for governor in 1804.⁹ Hamilton did similarly badly: he led a party in opposition, and the elections of 1804 proved that Federalists did not have the support of the people to govern.

Although Burr did not have sufficient reason, he sent a letter requesting either a duel, or an apology for Hamilton's vague, but derogatory comments. Hamilton accepted the challenge, regardless of his repulsion towards dueling. The law forbade dueling, but it was a common practice, especially between gentlemen from higher society in the South.¹⁰ The duelists met on 11 July 1804 in Weenhawken, New Jersey, and Burr hit Hamilton. We cannot be sure what really happened because both the seconds testified differently, adjusting the "truth" to their advantage.¹¹ We are sure, however, that the same day Hamilton died.

The importance of the duel for Hamilton's carrier is somewhat exaggerated because in that time Republicans were already in power, and Hamilton failed as a politician. He even declared in a letter that if he survived the duel, it would prevent him from serving forth in a public office.¹²

When the news got to the media, it caused great turmoil among the people. Media of the political parties used the outcome of the duel either to praise Hamilton as a martyr, or to support Burr as a man of honor.¹³ Subsequently, Burr received only distaste of the public, for he killed his foe in a duel (because of the precision of the guns, killing was rather rare), and his reason for the duel was vague. Obviously, illegality also limited the aim to use the duel for vice-president Burr's advantage.

Is it naive to think that this violent conflict, demonstration politicians' good manners, could have been avoided? Best example comes from today's America—politicians usually do not shoot one another (with the exception of Dick Cheney), and no matter how much they disagree, they limit their disputes to the discussions in the Houses. Washington, on the contrary, disapproved political fractions and arguments in the Congress, trying to create the impression of unity.¹⁴ Though a young republic admittedly needs a united representation,

one has to accept this effort's negative effects on the system: pursuit of a predominant opinion limits democracy, and the politicians rid themselves of their energy somewhere else. Moreover, nobody can be held responsible for a failure in a system without factions. The duel could have therefore been avoided by setting clear rules for the parties, and denying violence as a means of promoting one's interest, even when it concerns honor.

Consequently, the duel had a considerable influence on American politics: it helped divide the population to groups supporting different parties, and enabled the separation of distinct parties as a reasonable method of government, so that similar conflicts could be avoided in the future. The duel also gave the media tremendous powers to influence the public opinion, together with the establishment of the foundations of creative investigation. Most importantly, the reaction of the public on the duel served as a manifestation that politics should be practiced without violence.

End notes

¹George B. Tindall and others, *The Essential America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 135.

²Mason to William Coleman, July 18, 1804, Coleman, *Collection*, 53 cited as in Joanne B. Freeman, “Dueling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53,2 (April 1996): 317.

³Freeman, “Dueling as Politics,” 308.

⁴Jennifer Harrison, “Burr-Hamilton Duel,” Stanley I. Kutler, ed. *Dictionary of American History*, Vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003): 577.

⁵Thomas J. Fleming, *Duel: Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, and the Future of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 268.

⁶See Freeman, “Dueling as Politics,” 294, footnote 16 for a list.

⁷The Federalist Nos. 69, 70.

⁸Freeman, “Dueling as Politics,” 293.

⁹Harrison, “Burr-Hamilton Duel,” 577.

¹⁰Karen Rae Mehaffey, “Dueling,” Stanley I. Kutler, ed. *Dictionary of American History*, Vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003): 92.

¹¹Fleming, *Duel*, 324.

¹²Harrison, “Burr-Hamilton Duel,” 578.

¹³Freeman, “Dueling as Politics,” 312.

¹⁴George Washington, “President’s Declination,” *Independent Chronicle*, 26 September 1796, 1, paragraph 22; commonly known as Washington’s Farewell Address.

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