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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Alexander Hamilton's Last Stand

By RON CHERNOW

Two hundred years ago today, Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton squared off in a sunrise duel on a wooded ledge in Weehawken, N.J., above the Hudson River. Burr was vice president when he leveled his fatal shot at Hamilton, the former Treasury secretary, who died the next day in what is now the West Village of Manhattan. New Yorkers turned out en masse for Hamilton's funeral, while Burr (rightly or wrongly) was branded an assassin and fled south in anticipation of indictments in New York and New Jersey. To the horror of Hamilton's admirers, the vice president, now a fugitive from justice, officiated at an impeachment trial in the Senate of a Supreme Court justice.

At first glance, the storied Hamilton-Burr duel seems an aberrant, if fascinating, episode in early American history. We prefer to savor the glorious deeds of the Revolution or the resonant words of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. But the truth is that the 1790's and early 1800's were a period of glittering political malice and fierce personal attacks. If political debate had an incomparable philosophic richness, it was no less rabidly partisan than today — and even more bruising. Our modern tabloid press seems almost tame by comparison. There was no pretense of journalistic objectivity and editors flayed politicians with impunity. Under classical pseudonyms, political operatives gleefully murdered reputations — Washington was blasted as a would-be king, Jefferson as a zealous atheist — leaving the founders somewhat scarred and embittered men.

Such invective was perhaps inevitable after a prolonged revolution. Many politicians had honed their skills in attacks on the British and were masters at wielding words as weapons. The intensity of Tory-Whig clashes before the Revolution spilled over into equally nasty quarrels between Jeffersonians and Hamiltonians afterward. Both sides saw themselves as custodians of the Revolution, lending a special venom to their feuds. Amid fears that the democratic experiment would be wrecked by civil war, foreign intrigue or invasion, political discourse was darkly tinged with paranoia.

Perhaps no other founder absorbed such virulent abuse as Alexander Hamilton. Starting out as an illegitimate, orphaned teenage clerk in the Caribbean, he might have seemed headed for obscurity. Then the local merchants on St. Croix, recognizing his outsized talents, paid to educate him at King's College (later Columbia) in Lower Manhattan. After serving as captain of an artillery company, this wunderkind rose miraculously to become aide-de-camp to George Washington, a battlefield hero at Yorktown, a postwar congressman, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, the guiding light of the Federalist Papers, and, when he was 34, the first Treasury secretary.

In this last role, he oversaw a department larger than the rest of the government combined, leaving behind a staggering legacy. He restored public credit in a nation bankrupted by war debt, devised the first tax, budget and accounting systems, installed the customs service and Coast Guard, and conceived the first central bank. At the same time, as chief explicator of the new Constitution — he composed 51 of the 85 Federalist Papers — he transformed the new charter from dead parchment to startling life.

Yet Hamilton was shadowed by merciless slander. Early on, he was reviled as a foreigner, a bastard, a mulatto (no solid evidence here), a cocky upstart and an adulterer. (This last charge would prove all too true when his trysts with Maria Reynolds while Treasury secretary were exposed.) But these slurs were mere curtain-raisers to a shameless campaign of character assassination that only mounted in fury as he put his Treasury programs into place. He was accused of plotting to bring back the British monarchy, of harboring a secret London bank account paid for by the British crown, of improperly speculating in Treasury securities. Not a syllable of this folderol was true, but it was regurgitated hundreds of times.

Other founders, notably Jefferson and Washington, ignored the rampant slander, even as they gnashed their teeth in private. Hamilton's psychology was different. He hadn't been raised on a bucolic Virginia plantation or New England farm and was ashamed of his impoverished upbringing. The gigantic edifice of his intellect rested on fragile foundations. Hypersensitive to attacks on his reputation, he decided to fight fire with fire. He developed a swashbuckling style that mingled acute political analysis with personalized attacks that needlessly antagonized opponents. Even as a student, in his first polemical fight with a Tory clergyman, Samuel Seabury, Hamilton derided the older man's essay as "puerile and fallacious," then added, "I will venture to pronounce it one of the most ludicrous performances which has been exhibited to public view during all the present controversy." Alexander Hamilton embodied all the contradictions of a turbulent period marked by sublime achievements and sharp personal diatribes.

As the years passed, Hamilton exhausted himself trying to counter personal attacks. He became a devotee of those ritualized quarrels known as "affairs of honor," in which the aggrieved party demanded "satisfaction" — an apology or explanation — from the libeler and implicitly threatened a duel otherwise. On six occasions before his deadly rendezvous with Burr, Hamilton had engaged in such confrontations, always as the aggressor. He got detractors to retract or soften their statements, thereby averting duels.

By contrast, Aaron Burr was the injured party in 1804. Three years earlier, Hamilton had helped to block Burr's bid for the presidency after the latter tied with Thomas Jefferson for the presidency in the Electoral College. Then in the spring of 1804, Hamilton worked to spike Burr's quest to become governor of New York. In an effort to resurrect his damaged career, Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel for having uttered an unspecified "despicable opinion" about him at an Albany dinner party months earlier.

Hamilton was so accustomed to initiating such encounters, so geared to counterattack, that he found compromise exceedingly difficult. It was doubly difficult since he had denounced Burr as corrupt and unscrupulous for years. At the same time, he had developed a "religious scruple" against dueling after his eldest son, Philip, died on the "field of honor" in November 1801. So Hamilton, at 49, decided to expose himself to Burr's fire to prove his courage, but to throw away his own shot to express his aversion to dueling. He gambled that Burr would prove a gentleman and merely clip him in the arm or leg — a wager he lost. With Hamilton's death, America also lost its most creative policymaker. (The murder indictments against Burr petered out, and he died a reclusive old man in 1836.)

We like to picture the American Revolution as ushering in an egalitarian, meritocratic society, but vestiges of an older social order remained. Dueling was ubiquitous in the early republic among military men, politicians and those who fancied themselves aristocrats. Forever insecure about his social standing, Hamilton was a natural convert to this patrician custom. It is a bitter paradox that the man who did so much to balance the love of liberty with the rule of law in America lent credence to a barbaric feudal code that was outlawed in New York and New Jersey. In his political life, Hamilton always looked ahead and was the supreme prophet of the urban, industrial society that we inhabit today. In his personal life, Hamilton could never escape from the past.

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