

Hamilton Might Agree – Political Joust Better Than a Duel

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WILLIAMSTOWN, MA – In the pews of the National Cathedral this month, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter sat alongside George H. W. Bush and Gerald Ford, all remembering Ronald Reagan.

Perhaps that is one of the most telling signs of our nationhood. Though we may disagree with one another politically, we respect the offices that our elected leaders hold. Our constitutional system works because we're free to oppose those who govern us and then, one day, to come together to mourn them.

Our political disagreements are nonviolent. When our politicians feud, a code of civility and sportsmanlike decency most often moderates their speech and actions. A few months ago, during bitter primary fights, Howard Dean, John Edwards, and Richard Gephardt tried to cripple John Kerry with wounding words, but all later endorsed him, and some want nothing more than to be his running mate.

Politics, after all, is the art of the deal, not the art of the duel. Even when tempers rise, neither Bill Frist nor Tom Daschle nor Tom DeLay nor Nancy Pelosi counts off paces and fires shots. But tell that to Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr! Two hundred years ago this month, Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel. Though Hamilton could have ignored Burr, he accepted. The antipathy between them went back to 1789, when Burr defeated Hamilton's father-in-law, Philip Schuyler, for a Senate seat from New York. Over the next decade, the mutual hostility intensified. During the presidential election of 1800, when Thomas Jefferson and Burr were tied for the No. 1 spot in the Electoral College, Hamilton decided to back Jefferson, a man he disliked, over Burr, a man he loathed. Four years later, when Burr ran for governor of New York, Hamilton publicly proclaimed his contempt for Burr. By June 1804, Burr had had enough. He demanded a duel. But what is the meaning of this strange ritual? In 1784, Benjamin Franklin voiced astonishment that duels were still in vogue. How could so many otherwise rational Americans, Franklin asked, tolerate this medieval vestige based on the irrational belief that the innocent or injured party would come out on top? In 1804, the duel wildly contradicted the essence of the modern, mobile society that the US was becoming under President Jefferson. After all, a country that seeks to promote economic growth and prosperity requires a predictable and rational environment, buttressed by a legal system that applies equally to all. It cannot tolerate private codes of justice or a legal system based on chance.

The duel also contradicted the meaning of politics in general (an arena for persuasion and negotiation) and party politics in particular (a nonviolent channel for conflict and aggression). But Hamilton and Burr both felt alienated from their political parties, estranged from their old

political allies, and pessimistic about their chances of returning to power. The two New Yorkers found themselves politically adrift, free to turn to violence,, the ultimate antipolitical response.

On the eve of the duel, Hamilton wrote that he would not aim his first two shots at Burr, “thus giving a double opportunity to Col. Burr to pause and to reflect.” Pause and reflect in the middle of a duel? An intriguing scenario. He drew up his will and bade farewell to his wife and children, leaving them to cope with another likely death in the family. Just two years earlier, Hamilton’s oldest son, Philip, had been killed in a duel. On July 10, 1804, Hamilton, the economic genius of Washington’s administration, and Burr, the former senator and vice president, counted off 10 full paces, took aim, and fired. Hamilton instantly fell. “This is a mortal wound,” he whispered to his doctor, who ran to his side. During the next day, his sufferings were “almost intolerable,” but he remained conscious until the end, his doctor reported. Days after killing Hamilton, Burr surfaced for a romantic tryst in Philadelphia. “If any male friend or yours should be dying of ennui,” a depraved Burr wrote to his daughter, “recommend him to engage in a duel and a courtship at the same time.” The absence of any moral conscience was absolute. While Burr had no principles, Hamilton had too many. “Our real disease,” he wrote on the very eve of his death, “is DEMOCRACY.” Hamilton had rejected the dynamic, egalitarian trends that were reshaping American politics. In 1802 he had called the Constitution “a frail and worthless fabric.” Opting out of our constitutional consensus, rejecting our “agreement to disagree,” he chose violence over politics – and destroyed himself. Still, we Americans remember him – the most hardheaded, impulsive, disappointed, and arguably, the most brilliant of the Founding Fathers – with respect. These days we resolve our political disagreements through political parties, not duels, and we mourn our leaders together: This makes us a nation.

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