



In this version of the event, drawn by a Hamilton supporter, Burr, at left, shoots Hamilton, who fires harmlessly into the air.

THE POLITICS OF THE PISTOL

A young nation is shocked by an ancient ritual of honor when Vice President Aaron Burr kills Alexander Hamilton in a deadly duel.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON AND AARON BURR WERE COMPLICATED, colorful men whose large talents were almost the equal of their enormous ambitions. And when those ambitions collided on July 11, 1804, atop a rocky ledge in Weehawken, N.J., blood was spilled and two brilliant careers came to an end—although one of the antagonists would not die for another three decades.

Alexander Hamilton still looms large in American life, but the man who killed him, Aaron Burr, remains an enigma. Burr was the son of a respected New Jersey clergyman; his grandfather was Jonathan Edwards, the great Puritan preacher. By age 13, the bright young man was a sophomore at the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University); by 17, he had graduated and taken up the study of law. Burr set aside

his legal ambitions two years later, in 1775, when he enlisted in the Continental Army. Serving under Benedict Arnold in the American assault on Canada, he displayed a gift for guile, disguising himself as a Catholic priest and traveling more than 100 miles behind British lines to deliver an important message. His bravery in two losing battles, at Quebec and Long Island, earned him an officer's commission.

By 1777 both Hamilton and Burr had been appointed to George Washington's personal staff. But while Washington and Hamilton began a lifelong friendship and political partnership, the general didn't take to Burr and soon transferred him to a field command.

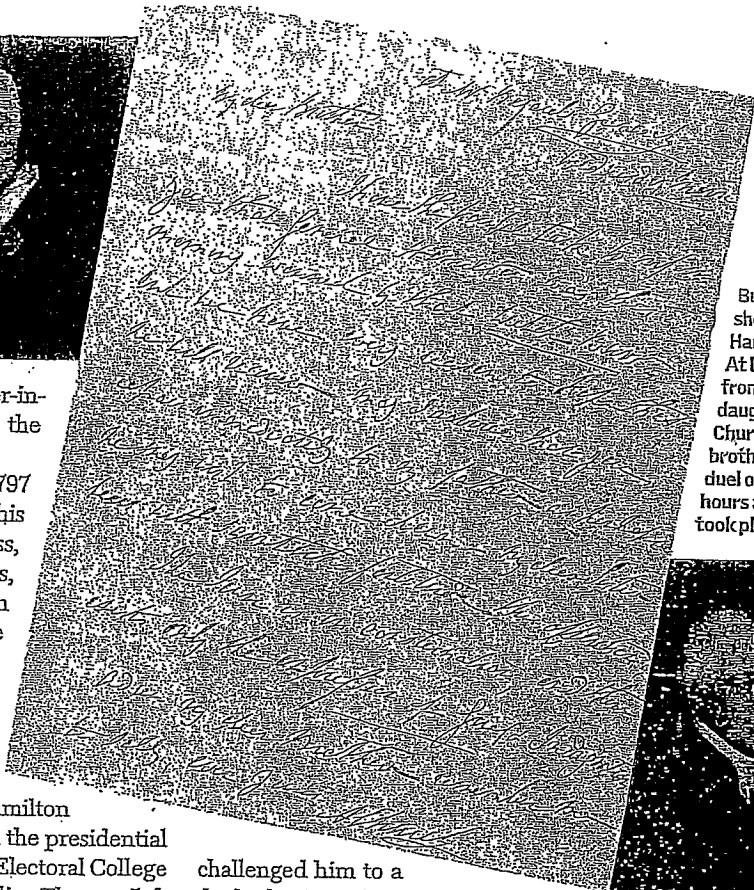
After the war, Hamilton became a leader of the Federalists, while Burr sided with the Democratic-Republicans. Yet their

lives continued to follow a parallel track. Both settled in New York City and embarked on successful legal careers; both were influential in winning support for the new Constitution in 1789. Hamilton became America's first Secretary of the Treasury, while Burr served as a Senator, winning his seat from Hamilton's father-in-law, Philip Schuyler. Burr's victory turned the two men, long rivals, into outright enemies.

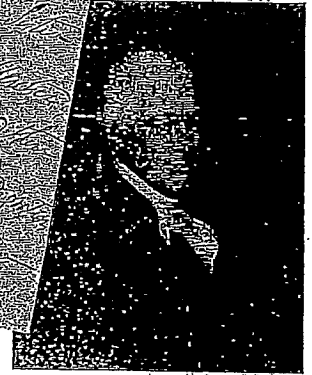
When a jealous husband discovered in 1797 that Hamilton was engaged in an affair with his wife, Burr represented Hamilton's mistress, Maria Reynolds, in her divorce proceedings, handing Hamilton a very public humiliation that effectively ended his chances for elective office. In 1800, Burr further hurt his enemy, obtaining and published a scathing broadside that Hamilton had written privately about then U.S. President (and a fellow Federalist) John Adams.

Even with his political career in ruins, Hamilton retained his influence behind the scenes. In the presidential election of 1800, which exposed flaws in the Electoral College by ending in an unexpected tie between allies Thomas Jefferson and Burr, Hamilton lobbied tirelessly—and successfully—for Jefferson. In fact, Hamilton detested Jefferson, but not with the intensity he reserved for Burr. Four years later, with Burr serving as Vice President, Hamilton helped undercut Burr's campaign for the governorship of New York.

Around this time, Hamilton attended a New York dinner party in which he was heard to utter what was later described as "a despicable opinion" about Burr. When accounts of the event were published in newspapers (although exactly what Hamilton said was never specified and remains a mystery), Burr demanded an apology. When Hamilton refused, Burr



Burr, far left, shot and killed Hamilton, below. At left is a letter from Hamilton's daughter Angelica Church, telling her brother about the duel only a few hours after it took place



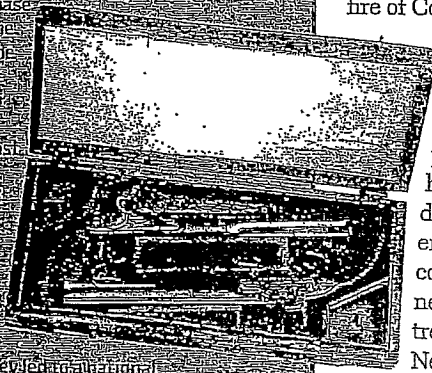
challenged him to a duel. That Hamilton did not hesitate to accept (even after the death of his son Philip in a duel three years earlier) speaks volumes not only about the era but also about the depth of the hatred these men felt for each other.

The site in New Jersey was chosen because settling disputes with pistols was, by 1804, a serious crime in New York. So on the morning of July 11, the men and their aides rowed across the Hudson to defend their honor. "Both parties took aim and fired in succession," the men's seconds wrote later in a joint statement. Hamilton fired high and wide, shooting into a nearby tree. His supporters would later argue that this was a deliberate attempt to settle the dispute without bloodshed; Burr's partisans would claim it was merely an accident. Burr's aim was sharper. "The pistols were discharged within a few seconds of each other," the aides would remember, "and the fire of Colonel Burr took effect. General Hamilton almost instantly fell." Struck in the stomach, Hamilton was paralyzed from the waist down. Ferried back to New York, he died in agony the following day.

Burr's decline was longer, and perhaps more painful. While Hamilton was mourned as a national hero, the sitting Vice President was indicted for murder in New York and New Jersey, although he was never tried. A few years later, Burr's stillborn scheme to conquer part of the Louisiana Territory and found a new nation, with himself as emperor, led to his trial for treason. Acquitted on a technicality, Burr languished in New York in the years before his death in 1836—destitute, largely forgotten and living under his mother's maiden name lest he be recognized.

Artifact

The pistols shown are those used in the duel they are now in the possession of the JPMorgan Chase...
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