Dueling as Politics

On the evening of July 10, 1804, Alexander Hamilton was a man tormented. At dawn he would duel Aaron Burr. Hamilton considered himself "strongly opposed to the practice of Duelling," yet the following morning he would stand opposite Burr on the heights of Weehawken, New Jersey, pistol in hand, awaiting the command to fire.[1]

This day of reckoning had been long approaching, for Hamilton had bitterly opposed Burr's political career for fifteen years. Charismatic men of great talent and ambition, the two had been thrust into competition with the opening of the national government and the sudden availability of new power, positions, and acclaim. Socially and professionally they had remained friendly and cooperative throughout that time, mingling in the same social circles, eating at the same dinner tables, sometimes serving together on the same legal cases. Personally they remained collegial as well.

But Hamilton and Burr were very different men. Burr was the grandson of the great divine Jonathan Edwards, making him the equiv-

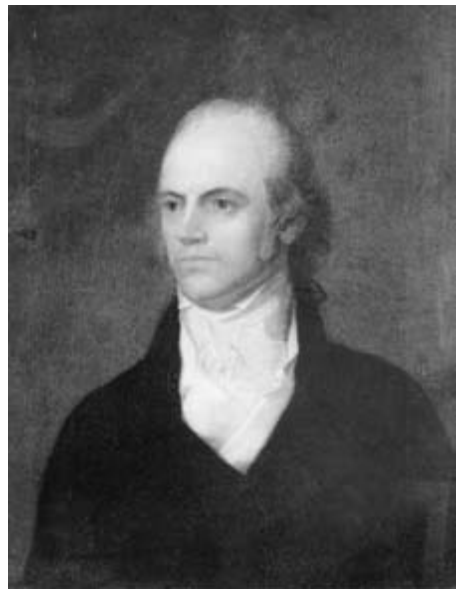

Fig. 22. *Aaron Burr* (1756–1836), by John Vanderlyn, 1802. Painted two years before the duel with Hamilton, this portrait hints at Burr's commanding carriage and piercing dark eyes—his most remarked-upon feature. Burr helped fund Vanderlyn's studies, ultimately sending him to Paris to complete his training. (Courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery, Bequest of Oliver Burr Jennings, B.A. 1917, in memory of Miss Annie Burr Jennings)

alent of New England royalty. He viewed politics as a game and enjoyed playing it. More of an opportunist than an ideologue, he was seemingly dedicated to nothing other than the advancement of his political career. Many considered him oblivious even to the restraints of honor and reputation, a man bemused rather than outraged by disapproval of his lifestyle and appetites (fig. 22). There seemed to be nothing holding Burr back from doing precisely as he chose.

Hamilton was a different sort of politician with a very different

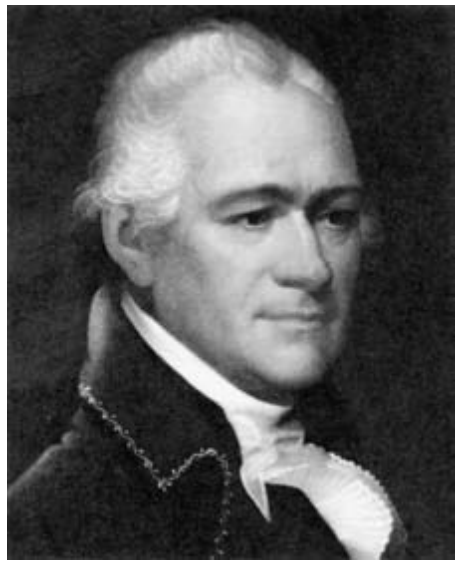

Fig. 23. *Alexander Hamilton* (1755?–1804), by Ezra Ames, ca. 1802. Painted shortly after the death of Hamilton's oldest son, Philip, who was killed in a duel defending his father's name, this portrait shows the tinge of sadness in Hamilton's countenance that friends marked thereafter. Hamilton's wife, Elizabeth, considered it an excellent likeness. (Courtesy of Sotheby's)

heritage. Born poor and illegitimate in the West Indies, he had raised himself to power by his wits, talents, energies, and charm. He was a born fighter, walking a high-wire of self-creation, and the founding of the republic was his ticket to fame and glory (fig. 23). A threat to the nation was a threat to his hard-won status and reputation, and in Hamilton's eyes the talented, power-hungry Burr—virtually bred to a position of leadership—was the greatest threat of all. Add to this Hamilton's unshakable political views, his impulsiveness, extreme candor, and brash confidence—even arrogance—and we can begin to understand the fire and fury of the Burr-Hamilton rivalry, and the reason why they cut such wide paths through the imaginations of their peers.[2]

By 1804 both men had been cast off the national stage and were competing in the more limited circle of New York state politics. Burr, however, seemed to have larger ambitions, courting Federalists throughout New England to unite behind him and march toward secession—or so Hamilton thought—and Burr's first step on that path appeared to be his gubernatorial ambitions in the 1804 election. Horrified that Burr could become New York's chief Federalist, corrupt the Federalist party, sabotage Hamilton's influence, and possibly destroy the republic, Hamilton stepped up his opposition. Anxious to discredit Burr, Hamilton attacked his private character, calling him a "profligate" and a "voluptuary in the extreme," a man whose flawed character would drag his followers to ruin.[3]

Burr was keenly aware of Hamilton's opposition and no longer willing to overlook it, for the 1804 election was his last hope for political power. From the reports of his friends and the pages of the *American Citizen,* he knew that Hamilton was whispering about him. He assumed (wrongly) that Hamilton had written several of the venomous pamphlets published against him in the past few years, and reportedly swore to "call out the first man of any respectability concerned in the infamous publications." By January 1804, *Citizen* editor James Cheetham was publicly daring Burr to challenge Hamilton to a duel.[4]

Burr was thus quick to respond when he discovered concrete evidence of Hamilton's antagonism in a letter published in the Republican *Albany Register*. After noting Hamilton's opposition to Burr, the writer, Charles D. Cooper, assured his correspondent that he "could detail . . . a still more despicable opinion which General Hamilton has expressed of Mr. Burr." Though Cooper only hinted at an offensive personal insult, Burr seized on this remark as provocation for an affair of honor and demanded an explanation from Hamilton.[5] After roughly ten days of negotiation, Burr issued Hamilton a challenge, and Hamilton accepted.

The logic behind both men's actions has largely eluded historians. What prevented Hamilton from ending the affair with an apology or an explanation? And why did Burr instigate a duel on such dubious grounds? Many have attributed these self-destructive decisions to emo-

tional excess, suggesting that Hamilton was suicidal and Burr malicious and murderous. Admittedly, Hamilton and Burr were haunted by private demons. Though born at opposite ends of the social spectrum, each spent his adult life challenging the confines of his ancestry—for Hamilton, his illegitimacy, and for Burr, the saintly mantle of his famed grandfather. Self-created men of high ambition, they were insecure and touchy, ever ready to prove their worth. Yet though personal insecurities may have made Hamilton and Burr likely duelists, they do not explain how the men justified the duel to themselves.[6] One strategy among many for redeeming one's name—though undoubtedly the most extreme weapon in the political arsenal—dueling was part of a larger grammar of political combat.

Of the two decisions, Hamilton's was the more conflicted. Unlike Burr, Hamilton was not prepared to duel upon commencing negotiations. He was the unsuspecting recipient of a challenge, morally and theologically opposed to dueling yet profoundly protective of his honor and "religiously" committed to opposing Burr's political career. Unsure how to proceed upon receiving Burr's initial demand, he consulted with "a very moderate and judicious friend," Rufus King, to discuss the propriety of Burr's demand for an explanation, ultimately deeming it too "general and undefined" to merit a response. Aware that this decision could provoke Burr, Hamilton also told King that he would accept a challenge if offered—but would not necessarily fire at his challenger. King was stunned. A duelist was justified in preserving his life, he insisted; Hamilton would be shooting in self-defense. Nathaniel Pendleton, Hamilton's second, made the same argument a few days later, finally eliciting a promise from Hamilton that "he would not decide lightly, but take time to deliberate fully."[7]

On the evening of July 10, the night before the duel, Hamilton made his choice. In the midst of a final planning session, he told Pendleton that he had decided "not to fire at Col. Burr the first time, but to receive his fire, and fire in the air." Pendleton vehemently protested, but Hamilton would not be swayed. His decision, he explained, was "the effect of a religious scruple, and does not admit of reasoning." Pendleton did not understand. Neither had King. Aware that even his

most intimate friends disapproved of his actions, about to risk his life for his reputation, Hamilton felt driven to explain himself. Alone in his study after Pendleton's departure, he took up his pen.[8]

"On my expected interview with Col. Burr, I think it proper to make some remarks explanatory of my conduct, motives, and views," began Hamilton (fig. 24).[9] He then set down his apologia, a four-page series of lawyerly assertions penned in an uncharacteristically constrained hand. The attorney Hamilton was defending his reputation before the tribunal of posterity, explaining his decision to duel.

Hamilton first solicited his putative jury's sympathy by presenting himself as a law-abiding husband and father. He was "certainly desirous of avoiding this interview," he explained, substantiating his claim with an enumerated list of reasons: the duel violated his religious and moral principles and defied the law, threatened the welfare of his family, put his creditors at risk, and ultimately compelled him to "hazard much, and . . . possibly gain nothing." Given these considerations, refusing Burr's challenge seemed the logical choice.

Yet, he continued, the duel was "impossible . . . to avoid." There were "*intrinsick* difficulties in the thing," because Hamilton had, indeed, made "extremely severe" attacks on Burr's political and private character. Because he had uttered these remarks "with sincerity . . . and for purposes, which might appear to me commendable," he could not apologize for them. More complicating were the "*artificial* embarrassments" caused by Burr's behavior throughout their negotiations. Hamilton's supposed offense was too "general and indefinite" to explain, "if it had really been proper . . . to submit to be so questionned."

Burr's manner was also insulting. In his first letter to Hamilton, Burr had assumed "a tone unnecessarily peremptory and menacing" and in his second, "positively offensive." Such treatment almost compelled Hamilton to accept Burr's challenge, yet even in the face of such an affront, he had "wished, as far as might be practicable, to leave a door open to accommodation." He had struggled so diligently to avoid a confrontation that he was unsure whether he "did not go further in the attempt to accommodate, than a pun[c]tilious delicacy will justify." If so, he hoped that his motives would deflect any charges of cowardice.

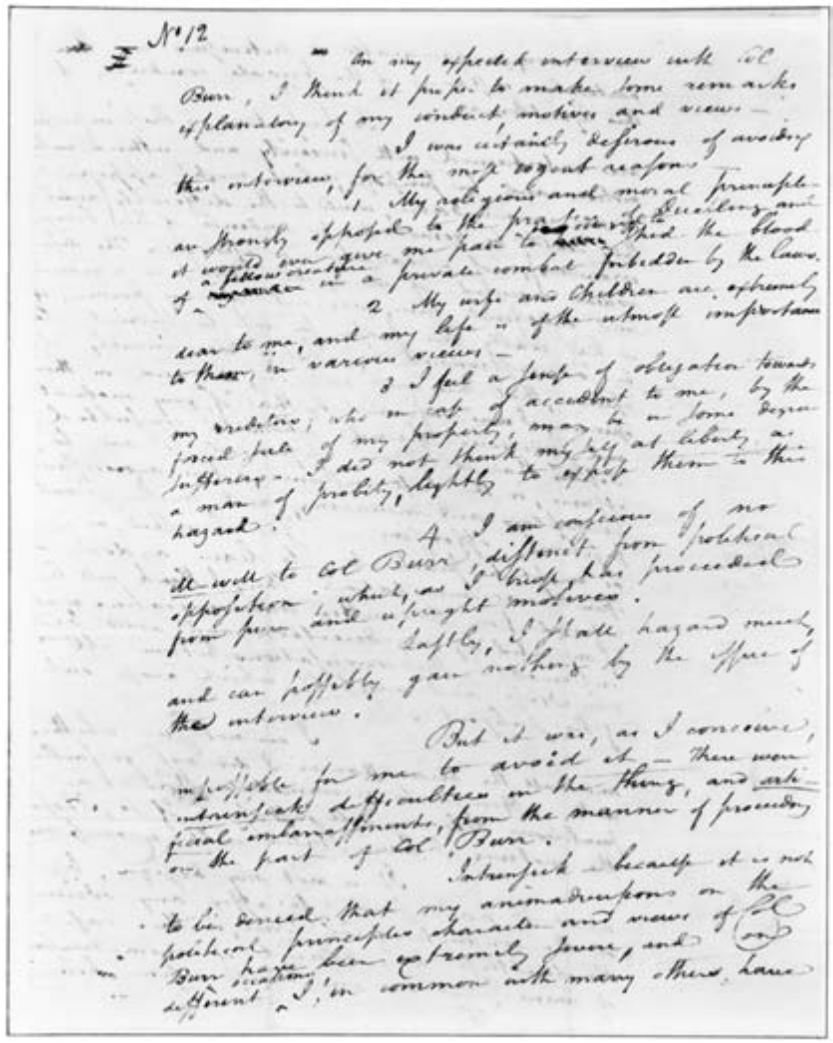

Fig. 24. Front page of Hamilton's apologia, written between June 28 and July 10, 1804. Hamilton's handwriting is unusually constrained in this final statement, probably written the night before his duel with Burr. The revised sentence suggests that Hamilton had some trouble finding the words to discuss bloodshed. (© Collection of The New-York Historical Society)

Hamilton now approached the crux of his defense: his attempt to accommodate the mandates of honor and politics with those of morality, religion, and the law.[10] He had satisfied the code of honor by accepting Burr's challenge, violating civil law only under duress. He had maintained his political integrity by refusing to apologize for sincere political convictions. Now he would uphold his moral and religious principles by withholding his fire. Because of "my general principles and temper in relation to similar affairs," Hamilton explained, "I have resolved, if our interview is conducted in the usual manner, and it pleases God to give me the opportunity, to *reserve* and *throw away* my first fire." Hamilton's seemingly illogical plan thus comprised four reasoned decisions, each prompted by a separate code of conduct.

Hamilton had ruled out many options, but one remained. Why not simply refuse to participate? Addressing himself to "those, who with me abhorring the practice of Duelling may think that I ought on no account to have added to the number of bad examples," he explained his fundamental reason: "All the considerations which constitute what men of the world denominate honor, impressed on me (as I thought) a peculiar necessity not to decline the call. The ability to be in future useful, whether in resisting mischief or effecting good, in those crises of our public affairs, which seem likely to happen, would probably be inseparable from a conformity with public prejudice in this particular."

Hamilton had accepted Burr's challenge to preserve his "ability to be in future useful" in political crises. In his mind, the duel was a praiseworthy attempt to serve the common good: a public, political act. Yet it was also an intensely personal attempt to preserve his public career and private sense of self—to prove to the world, and to himself, that he was a man of his word, a man of courage and principle, a leader. And in less sympathetic eyes, the duel could appear to be a politically motivated effort to prevent a rival from bolstering his reputation at Hamilton's expense.[11] In his final hours before the duel, compelled to transcribe the conflicted logic of a life-threatening decision, Hamilton gave voice to the complex blend of cultural and political influences that led politicians to duel.

"What Men of the World Denominate Honor"

Perhaps the most common misunderstanding about the American political duel concerns its purpose. For twentieth-century onlookers far removed from the culture of honor, the duel was a ritual of violence whose purpose was to maim or kill an adversary. But to early national politicians, duels were demonstrations of manner, not marksmanship; they were intricate games of dare and counterdare, ritualized displays of bravery, military prowess, and—above all—willingness to sacrifice one's life for one's honor. A man's response to the *threat* of gunplay bore far more meaning than the exchange of fire itself. Politicians considered themselves engaged in an affair of honor from the first "notice" of an insult to the final acknowledgment of "satisfaction," a process that sometimes took weeks or even months. Regardless of whether shots were fired, these ritualized negotiations constituted an integral part of a duel.[12]

This more precise understanding of the duel reveals that there were more honor disputes in the early republic than previously recognized; for example, Hamilton was involved in ten such affairs before his duel with Burr.[13] As a partisan leader (and a particularly controversial one at that), Hamilton doubtless attracted more than his share of abuse. Yet his level of involvement in honor disputes was not unique. In New York City, Hamilton's adopted home, there were at least sixteen affairs of honor between 1795 and 1807, most of them heretofore unrecognized because they did not result in a challenge or the exchange of fire. Most of these duels did not result from a sudden flare of temper; politicians timed them strategically, sometimes provoked them deliberately. Often, the two seconds published conflicting newspaper accounts of a duel, each man boasting of his principal's bravery and mocking his opponent's cowardice. Fought to influence a broad public, synchronized with the events of the political timetable, political duels conveyed carefully scripted political messages.[14]

Politicians manipulated the affair of honor to serve their immediate political needs, but they also shared a profound respect for its personal dimension, its impact on their sense of self. The duel was a subtle

blend of the strategic and the sincere, the self-interested and the selfless, the political and the personal, the public and the private. Political duelists were not rapacious predators deliberately masking their evil intentions under the guise of honor. They were men of public duty and private ambition who identified so closely with their public roles that they often could not distinguish between their identity as gentlemen and their status as political leaders. Longtime political opponents almost expected duels, for there was no way that constant opposition to a man's political career could leave his personal identity unaffected. As Hamilton confessed on his deathbed, "I have found, for some time past, that my life *must* be exposed to that man."[15] By opposing Burr's political career, Hamilton had wounded him as a gentleman, making himself vulnerable to a challenge. Nowhere do we witness this ambiguity more affectingly than in Hamilton's apologia, his testament to the complexities of political leadership among men of honor.

Personal honor was a concern of politicians throughout the nation. North and South, they recognized the need to remain alert to tone, intent, and implications to preserve their status. Dependent on the community at large for both personal honor and public career, they had to be acutely sensitive to public opinion, the prevailing tone of a community's conversation. The character of politics in the early republic—the prevailing distrust of political parties, the small-scale, localized political realm—magnified this obsession with reputation. Political combat readily degenerated into battles of "asperities and personalities."[16] Many of these skirmishes were settled in ritualistic affairs of honor.

Northerners were as well versed in this code as southerners; it was in their utilization of violence that they differed most noticeably. A northerner might cane a man or post him as a liar in a newspaper or on a broadside rather than challenge him to a duel, but in densely populated, print-saturated New England, a print attack on a man's honor inflicted a severe wound. It was dueling that proved problematic for New Englanders. A duelist took revenge "in cool blood." Willing to kill or be killed, he calmly and deliberately violated the laws of God and man.[17] In a sense northerners and southerners spoke different dia-

lects of the language of honor, balancing the conflicting value systems of honor, religion, and the law in regionally distinct ways.

Yet even New Englanders who disapproved of dueling often found it difficult to turn their backs on an affair of honor. It was one thing to condemn dueling generally and quite another to ignore a personal insult or challenge, driving many northerners to condemn dueling in one breath and justify it in the next. Massachusetts Federalist Christopher Gore was typical of many when he declared that he could not duel without feeling "disgraced & debased," even as he agreed to accept a challenge. Harvard student John Farnham drew a similar conclusion in 1810 after hearing about a friend's duel. He was "heartily sorry & grieved" at the news, for it would hurt the reputation of any "young man who depends on the estimation of the publick for a living." Yet, he continued, "I must confess that considering . . . the greatness of the insult . . . that he is not guilty of a great moral sin. . . . [T]hough perhaps the opinion of the most respectable part of the community in N. England is abhorrent to the practice of duelling—it is in vain to expect or presume that . . . the decisions of a court will wipe off the stain on a mans reputation—or that [a] man will ever obtain any consequence & respect who suffers himself to be trodden under foot."[18] Hamilton would struggle with this same ambivalence during his negotiations with Burr.

Northerners found insults to their honor even more difficult to ignore on the elevated national stage, particularly when offered by a southerner. Because of the ambiguous link between regional ties and partisan loyalties, battles between Federalists and Republicans were largely battles between northerners and southerners, placing new demands on New Englanders accustomed to a less belligerent dialect of honor culture. Protective of their comparative status as northerners and Federalists and worried about southern domination of the Union, New England congressmen were thus quick to note insults and often urged personal vindication. They had good reason to feel belligerent, for southern congressmen often "crowded" New Englanders—bullied and taunted them—because they knew that northerners would resist gunplay. So notorious was southern crowding that one newspaper edi-

tor satirically branded it a plot by southerners to "thin off the northern members [of Congress] so as to secure to themselves a decided majority."[19] In essence, the nationalization of politics led to a backlash of defensive regionalism, played out most dramatically in honor disputes on the floor of Congress.

Charges against rivals, ranging from accusations of official misconduct to character slurs, usually shared one underlying theme: politicians accused one another of behaving like politicians. They charged one another with the sins of self-interest and private ambition.[20] They cried out against corrupt dependencies grounded on the distribution of favors. All around them they saw what they most feared, the selfish motives and hidden intrigues of faction. Yet in struggling against these enemies of the republic, these same politicians created factions of their own. When a politician defended his honor, he was defending his ability to claim power, promoting himself and his "particular friends" in public-minded contests with political opponents. In essence, he was conducting partisan politics.

For politicians of the early republic, honor was thus much more than a vague sense of self-worth; it represented the ability to prove oneself a deserving political leader.[21] Hamilton was trying to do as much in his final statement. Burr was compelled by the same logic when he challenged Hamilton. Politicians were simultaneously asserting their concern for the common good and their partisan biases, their selflessness and their private ambitions. These conflicting urges joined to produce an ambiguous form of politics, fueled by public-minded personal disputes couched in the language of honor.

The strictures of honor controlled, channeled, and masked political combat by providing a shared code of conduct that enforced gentlemanly standards of behavior. Men who did not abide by these rules were neither gentlemen nor leaders. As Burr warned Hamilton during their negotiations, "Political opposition can never absolve Gentlemen from the necessity of a rigid adherence to the laws of honor and the rules of decorum." A true gentleman avoided crossing lines but knew how to behave if lines were crossed. As a congressional onlooker to a 1798 honor dispute commented, "In well-bred Society, when a man receives an affront, does he knock down the person giving it? No.

He represses his feelings; and takes another time and place to obtain justice."[22]

The laws of honor also indicated when insults could not be ignored, branding a man a coward if he let a serious affront go unanswered. Hamilton experienced this during the 1795 Jay Treaty melée, when James Nicholson dismissed him as a man of no importance because he had once shirked a duel. In 1803, Postmaster General Gideon Granger of Connecticut went into hiding when confronted with similar charges, condemned by even his allies as "a base coward." And in 1804, when the eccentric John Randolph of Roanoke threw a glass of wine in the face of Willis Alston, Jr., broke the glass over his head and threw the bottle at him, "Men of honor of both Federalists & Democrats" had but "one opinion on this subject—& say that they must fight—That Alston will be disgraced if he do not." Hoping to avoid such an outcome, President Jefferson was "anxious for a compromise"; even the president himself abided by the strictures of the honor code.[23]

For all these men, the "laws of honor" constituted a standard of conduct by which a man could gauge himself and his rivals. They enabled him, his peers, and the public at large to "judge of the correctness of the conduct of their representatives" and so distinguish those who were worthy of leadership from those who were not.[24] A means of empowering oneself while deposing one's foes, of asserting one's merit while remaining self-righteously defensive, the code of honor was a powerful political tool. But it was a curiously indirect form of combat, functionally adapted for a society that feared and condemned open ambition and factional politics.

"If Our Interview Is Conducted in the Usual Manner"

In planning his course of action on the dueling ground, Hamilton relied on the universal recognition of the language of honor. Like other politicians, he had a keen understanding of the honor code, enabling him to pick and choose strategies from a clearly defined spectrum of options, in response to a corresponding spectrum of insults. Duels represented one extreme in this grammar of combat. Most political

weapons were designed to refute or substantiate charges of official misconduct. They pitted words against words. Affronts that hit at a politician's "private character" demanded something more. They required a demonstration of honor, bravery, and self-sacrifice that would vindicate his character and justify his claim to leadership. In the same way that a pamphlet discredited accusations with signed correspondence and legal depositions, a duel enabled an aggrieved politician to refute character slurs by acting in accordance with the most exacting standards of behavior. A true gentleman was always gracious and calm, even in the face of imminent death.[25] Attitude was the key to proving oneself a man of honor.

Northerners and southerners, frequent duelists and those who never dueled, all understood the strictures and rituals of the code of honor. For example, everyone understood the implicit meaning of a caning—a sound beating about the head and shoulders with a cane. Because only equals were supposed to duel, canings displayed the victim's inferior status. A caning was no symbolic smack; gentlemen often purchased "stout hickory" walking sticks deliberately for this purpose. Busily writing a letter in the House in 1798, George Thatcher lurched in his seat at the heavy thwack of a cane making contact with a head.[26] Not surprisingly, many canings inflicted permanent damage. William Coleman, editor of the *New-York Evening Post,* ended his days paralyzed from the waist down because of a caning. As suggested by Coleman's fate, newspaper editors were frequent caning victims, for politicians considered them too low to merit a challenge.

A "nose-tweaking" was another slap at a man's status that sent a powerful message. Grabbing and twisting a man's nose was a grave insult that demanded a challenge. When Republican Brockholst Livingston insulted Federalist James Jones, Jones responded by first caning Livingston and then trying to "wring his nose"—so serious an affront that it prompted a discussion about precisely how much of Livingston's nose had been grabbed.[27] The tussle resulted in a challenge, a duel, and Jones's death. The implied insult of both canings and nose-tweakings was the same; not only were they profoundly humiliating public assaults, they were badges of inferiority as well.

Postings were yet another shared ritual of the honor code. When

someone proffered an insult but refused a challenge, the offended party was entitled to "post" his attacker in a broadside or newspaper denouncing him as a coward, a liar, a rascal, and a scoundrel. By slashing at his offender's reputation and discrediting his charges, the wounded party cleared his name. When Virginia Representative John Randolph refused a challenge from General James Wilkinson, for example—declaring that "*he would not reduce himself to his level*"—Wilkinson posted Randolph "in the newspapers in very opprobrious language."[28] Many such postings appear in early nineteenth-century newspapers under the heading "A Card."

Verbal assaults were equally obvious. Politicians were well aware of the key words and phrases that signaled the commencement of an honor dispute, and attuned to the subtleties of meaning in the wording and timing of a response. *Coward, liar, rascal, scoundrel,* and *puppy* all demanded an immediate challenge, for they struck at the core elements of manliness and gentility. Any man who uttered them in a dispute was declaring his intention to engage in an affair of honor. And onlookers who witnessed such affronts watched for the appropriate response. When Matthew Lyon and Roger Griswold exchanged harsh words on the House floor, a host of onlookers scrutinized each man's face as the other delivered his insult, watching for the proper expression of repressed outrage; several were surprised and concerned when Lyon appeared not to notice one barb. Aedanus Burke knew what he intended when he threw "the lie" at Hamilton on the floor of the House. As Maclay noted, "Men of the blade" said that this "Violent personal Attack" must produce a duel. And Hamilton responded as expected, saying that he would "at all times disregard any observations applied to his public station . . . but that *this* was not to be passed over."[29]

Such an attack could set off a wave of reaction that rippled throughout the political community. Often, transmitters of such news attached a clear judgment to their accounts, evaluating the participants' behavior and measuring them against shared standards of honor. James Madison never fought a duel, but when Lyon and Griswold broke into an open brawl on the floor of the House, he nonetheless had strong opinions about its etiquette.

The dispute was certainly noteworthy. In 1798, Matthew Lyon of Vermont insulted Connecticut's representatives in a private conversation off to the side of the House floor. Overhearing the remark, Roger Griswold of Connecticut responded by hinting at charges of cowardice that had haunted Lyon from Revolutionary War days; when Lyon didn't react to the insult, Griswold walked up to him, set his hand on Lyon's arm, and repeated the remark. Lyon responded by spitting in Griswold's face. When a House committee voted not to expel "Spitting Matt," Griswold took action.

Purchasing a strong hickory walking stick, he strode up to Lyon on the House floor and struck him full force more than twenty times, denouncing him as a "scoundrel," while Lyon tried in vain to extricate himself from his desk. Once free, Lyon ran behind the Speaker's chair and grabbed a set of fireplace tongs to defend himself, Griswold beating him all the while (fig. 25). Though several men yelled to the Speaker to call the House to order, he refused, allowing Griswold to clear his name until onlookers intervened and pulled the two apart; the same thing happened minutes later, when the two men again took arms, some crying out, "Part them, part them," others shouting, "Don't." To Madison, Griswold had dishonored himself by opening the affair to a congressional investigation; in his view, Griswold should have immediately responded to Lyon's affront with a beating or a challenge: "If Griswold be a man of the sword, he shd. not have permitted the step [of a congressional investigation] to be taken; if not he does not deserve to be avenged by the House. No man ought to reproach another with cowardice, who is not ready to give proof of his own courage"—a byword of the honor code.[30] Only a "man of the sword" could engage in such name-calling, for an insult offered by someone unwilling to fight was an insult without risk—a cowardly act. A confrontational man had to be willing to take responsibility for his words and thus had to be consistently ready to duel. Madison's comment implies what Lord Chesterfield asserted as an irrefutable truth: "There are but two alternatives for a gentleman; extreme politeness, or the sword."[31]

Alexander Hamilton and James Monroe were undeniably men of the sword. An eyewitness account of a dispute between them captures the precise moment when the two men—both clearly prepared

Fig. 25. *Congressional Pugilists,* unidentified artist, 1798. This is one of several cartoons satirizing the fracas between Roger Griswold and "Spitting Matt" Lyon on the House floor. Griswold waves a cane on the right; Lyon waves fireplace tongs on the left. An audience of congressmen whoops in the background—and in truth, many discouraged interference so Griswold could cane Lyon and clear his name. Smiling down from the chair is Jonathan Dayton, Speaker of the House, who resisted calling the House to order; Dayton initiated his own honor dispute on the Senate floor five years later. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

to fight—shifted abruptly from angry quarreling to the rigid and distinctive language of the duel. When newspaper editor James Callender charged Hamilton with misusing Treasury funds, Hamilton was sure that Monroe had provided Callender with incriminating information. On July 11, 1797, he paid Monroe a visit with his brother-in-law John Barker Church in tow. When Monroe denied involvement, Hamilton told him, "This as your representation is totally false," suggesting that Monroe was a liar. The insult brought both men to their feet. Monroe replied, "You say I represented falsely, you are a Scoundrel," topping

Hamilton's indirect charge with an explicit dare to fight. Hamilton responded as would any man of honor, declaring, "I will meet you like a Gentleman." Monroe's reply was also predictable. Declaring that he was ready to fight, he asked Hamilton to get his pistols. At this point Church and David Gelston, Monroe's friend, shoved between the two men and separated them, pleading for moderation.[32]

Although Monroe and Hamilton skipped a few steps in the heat of the moment, the rules for negotiating an affair of honor were relatively clear. Once an insult had been proffered, the insulted party was supposed to request an explanation from his offender, giving him the chance to clear up any misunderstanding or misrepresentation. Someone who omitted this vital step in a rush of emotion was usually scolded soundly. As Hamilton told a man who precipitously accused him of not behaving like a gentleman, "To take it for granted that you had received an injury from me, without first giving me an opportunity of an explanation, and to couch your sense of it in terms so offensive as some of those used in your letter, is an additional instance of precipitation and rudeness." Angry at his correspondent's presumption, Hamilton concluded by indirectly indicating his willingness to duel: "It will depend on yourself how far I shall be indifferent, or not, to your future sentiments of my character," he challenged.[33]

Hamilton himself received a scolding after his 1795 confrontation with Nicholson. Outraged at being called a coward, Hamilton demanded to duel Nicholson, naming the place and time. Nicholson accepted the invitation, expressing his own desire to duel the next morning, but reprimanded Hamilton for the "peremptory tenor" of his letter. Hamilton, in turn, used this as an opening to backpedal and allow Nicholson room for an explanation.[34] He had not requested one earlier, he explained, because of what Nicholson said "on a certain very delicate point." Accused of being a coward, Hamilton had felt unable to do anything other than extend a challenge.

Initial letters of inquiry were warnings that a line had been crossed. Following a set form and phrased in ritualistic words of cool formality, they were easily recognizable and unmistakably threatening. A typical letter began by repeating an offending remark—a means of discouraging unnecessary challenges by ensuring common agreement

on the meaning and form of an offense. The writer next demanded that the recipient "avow or disavow" the insult, ensuring the propriety of his challenge by allowing his recipient an opportunity to explain himself. Letters usually ended with a demand for an immediate response. Typically, the writer justified his demand by claiming the respect owed a gentleman. Any mention of a man's honor was a clear sign that his honor had been offended. If the letter mentioned a friend—as the bearer of the message or the recipient of a response—a correspondent could be sure that this friend was a second, the principal's sole representative throughout all negotiations and his assistant on the field of honor.

These key phrases reveal references to honor disputes that are invisible to modern eyes. To the uninitiated, Hamilton's three-sentence note to Monroe might seem like a simple courteous request for a meeting: "Mr. Hamilton requests an interview with Mr. Monroe at any hour tomorrow forenoon which may be convenient to him. Particular reasons will induce him to bring with him a friend to be present at what may pass. Mr. Monroe, if he pleases, may have another."[35] An understanding of the language of the duel reveals the letter's implicit threat. The note is a demand for a meeting of inquiry about an affair of honor; Hamilton is bringing a second and has alerted Monroe to bring one as well.

As implied by the code of honor's precautionary rituals, few men began an affair of honor with the explicit purpose of exchanging fire. Most conflicts waned during negotiations and concluded when each principal felt that his honor had been vindicated. Such was the role of a principal's second, who acted as a sort of legal representative, attempting to defend his client's honor without necessitating a duel. When his son Philip was involved in a duel in 1801, Hamilton assumed that the matter would end without gunplay; by that time, he himself had been involved in eight affairs of honor without fighting a single duel. Learning to his horror that negotiations had ended, he rushed to the home of their family doctor, David Hosack, knowing that Philip would choose Hosack as his attending physician. Philip had indeed requested the doctor's services, and the two had departed together early that morning; hearing the news, Hamilton fainted dead away at

the Hosacks' door. Awaking to discover that Philip had been fatally wounded, he rushed to his son's side and remained with him until Philip died the next day, in great agony.[36]

A skillful duelist could demonstrate his readiness to fight without touching a pistol. A fair duel was a game of chance that displayed the willingness of both principals to die for their honor, not their skill at inflicting pain or death. As one pamphleteer noted, the "polite" duelist fought "without any design to injure his adversary." Hamilton's dueling consultant Rufus King agreed. Duels motivated by "the thirst for blood or the malignant purpose of destroying the life of another" were "ferocious, barbarous and savage" and "repugnant to any code of honor," reducing "private combat to assassination."[37]

By provoking a duel, Burr was thus not necessarily proposing to kill Hamilton; he could redeem his honor without felling his rival. Indeed, fatalities in political duels were uncommon, for killing one's opponent was more of a liability than an advantage, leaving a duelist open to charges of bloodthirstiness and personal ambition.[38] By law, a politician who slew his opponent was also guilty of murder, though ironically these lawyers and lawgivers were seldom charged. Sometimes police officers simply refused to tangle with men of influence; on those rare occasions when legal authorities made the law known, politicians often persisted in their duel negotiations regardless. Remarkably, when Burr faced murder charges after killing Hamilton, eleven sympathetic Republican senators signed a petition to New Jersey governor Joseph Bloomfield, reminding him that political duels were *not* usually prosecuted. Pleading for Burr's prosecution to be discontinued, they argued that "most civilized nations" did not consider dueling fatalities "common murders" and reminded Bloomfield that previous political duelists at Weehawken had not only been spared judicial proceedings but had later received judicial appointments.[39]

Dueling fatalities were unfortunate facts of public life, acceptable if the duel had been fair and the duelists strict adherents to the honor code. What James Nicholson said of duelist Brockholst Livingston was true of any politician unfortunate enough to kill his adversary: after killing James Jones, Livingston seemed "conscious of having done nothing but what he was compel[l]ed to do & at the same time sorry

for the Necessity." Most duels that involved gunplay ended with minor injuries, suggesting a desire to avoid anything more serious. Leg injuries were frequent enough to cast doubt on the power and meaning of the practice; hinting that affairs of honor entailed more pretense than peril, a newspaper editor jeered that one combatant "was said to have received a wound in that fashionable part, *the leg*."[40]

Because a man of the sword was presumably always ready to fight, any principal who attempted to negotiate his way out of a duel dishonored himself. Combatants had to rely on their seconds—their "particular friends"—to settle an affair of honor. During Hamilton's 1797 dispute with Monroe, Monroe's second, David Gelston, made a serious mistake when he turned to Hamilton and suggested a means of settling matters. Gelston noted that Hamilton responded with only "a word or two which I understood as not disapproving the mode I proposed," a grunt of approval that was followed by a long, awkward silence. Realizing with a shock that he should not have attempted to negotiate with a principal, Gelston turned to John Barker Church, Hamilton's second, and observed that "perhaps my proposition . . . would have been made with more propriety to him than to Colo. H." He then repeated his suggestion to Church, start to finish, and the process of negotiation resumed.[41]

Highly offended principals sometimes insisted on dueling. In these cases, to draw negotiations to a quick but courteous close the offended party usually demanded an apology that was too humiliating for the offender to accept. Such was Hamilton's charge against Burr. As he stated in his apologia, "The disavowal required of me by Col Burr . . . was out of my power, if it had really been proper for me to submit to be so questionned." New York Senator DeWitt Clinton also felt compelled to reject a deliberately humiliating demand for a written apology. Forced to duel against his will, he exclaimed on the dueling ground, "I am compelled to shoot at one whom I do not wish to hurt, but I will sign no paper—I will not dishonor myself."[42]

A duel became inevitable when a challenge was accepted. From that point on, seconds and principals concentrated on orchestrating their "interview": a date had to be set, a location selected, and rules devised. The duel between Hamilton and Burr followed the conven-

tional script. In a heretofore overlooked account of the trial of Burr's second, William P. Van Ness, for his involvement in the duel, participants described the proceedings in great detail, including practices intended to evade laws against dueling.[43] For example, the guns were hidden in a "Portmanteau," enabling the boatmen who rowed the participants to the dueling ground to testify that they "saw no pistols."

Many rituals prevented participants from witnessing the actual moment of gunfire—the moment when both principals became guilty of fighting a duel. Under oath, the two boatmen stated at Van Ness's trial that they had stood with their backs to the duelists, enabling them to testify that they "did not see the firing." Likewise, attending physician David Hosack could attest only that he saw the two seconds and Hamilton disappear "into the wood" and "heard the report of 2 firearms soon after." Hearing his name called, he rushed onto the dueling ground and "saw Genl. H . . . and supposed him wounded by a ball through the body." Having rowed across with Hamilton, the doctor could also testify that he had never seen Burr on the field. When Hosack climbed up the embankment to tend to Hamilton's wounds, Van Ness skillfully whisked Burr off the dueling ground before he could be seen. Hosack testified that he "did not see Col. Burr" and did not learn "that Col. Burr was the other party" until a conversation with Burr's second after the duel.

The rituals of dueling reveal its paradoxical nature. As displayed in Van Ness's trial, politicians who engaged in mortal combat to defend their public reputations at the same time protected one another through a shared oath of secrecy. Of course, concealing a duel served everyone's interest, for indictment of one participant could implicate all. Yet these rituals did more than discourage legal prosecution. By enforcing a uniform code of behavior, ensuring equitable competition, and preventing social inferiors from fighting, the code of honor made all participants equal. When a failing politician provoked a duel, he salvaged his reputation by placing himself in an environment of mutual respect, a brotherhood of honor and fair competition—the exact opposite of a competitive political realm that encouraged conflict and rewarded aggressive self-promotion.

"Political Opposition, Which . . . Has Proceeded From Pure and Upright Motives"

When Hamilton received Burr's initial letter of inquiry, he sought the advice of Rufus King. Upset by Hamilton's intention to withhold his fire, King did as Hamilton had done. He turned to a friend, Matthew Clarkson, hoping to find a way to prevent the duel. Because Hamilton, by this point, had accepted Burr's challenge, Clarkson regretfully concluded that he and King were powerless to intercede. During the next two weeks, the distraught King mentioned the duel to two more friends, Egbert Benson and John Jay. Burr, likewise, discussed the imminent duel with close friends, consulting with Matthew Davis and John Swartwout.[44]

As it passed from friend to friend, news of the impending duel revealed and reinforced a network of political friendships and enmities. Hamilton, King, Clarkson, Benson, and Jay were Federalists. Burr, Davis, and Swartwout were Burrite Republicans. These two chains of friendship were part of a larger network of partisan alliances, made manifest by the selective secrecy of the code of honor; in a sense, news about an impending duel was the most socially bonding gossip of all. At one time or another, Republicans James Monroe, DeWitt Clinton, Aedanus Burke, and James Nicholson supported each other in an interrelated series of honor disputes. Through Monroe's involvement, even Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were duel consultants on occasion.[45] Federalist duelists had a similar network of political support, reinforced by a decade of duels. An individual duel had its own dynamic, but it was only one battle in an ongoing war of honor and makes sense only when examined in the context of a larger pattern of encounters.

Between 1795 and 1800, New York City Federalists fought Republicans on the field of honor. The latter had no single leader who served as a lightning rod; the Federalists had Hamilton, his party's "political thermometer," who was involved in four affairs.[46] With Jefferson's election as president, a new world of political opportunity opened for Republicans, who turned against one another in their

scramble for prestige and power. From 1800 until 1804, Clintonian Republicans competed against Burrite Republicans at the ballot box, in print, and on the dueling ground. The few disputes between Federalists and Republicans all involved Hamilton and were fought to preserve whatever slim chance his political fortunes had for revival. After his death and Burr's consequent fall in 1804, duels once again pitted Republicans against Federalists.

Hamilton, Burr, and DeWitt Clinton were leaders with widespread political connections, high ambition, and great promise. All three were political "chiefs"—men who could lead their followers to power, position, and prestige. All were supported by groups of "intimate friends." In exchange for the patronage of their chief, friends defended him in person, in print, and, when necessary, on the field of honor. For a group of supporters, a chief was a political "rallying point"—he was "the cause."[47]

Newspapers issued the call to arms. By 1802, each chief had a newspaper and an editor under his command, pledged to defend his name and "write down" his foes: William Coleman at the Federalist *New-York Evening Post,* James Cheetham at the Clintonian *American Citizen,* and Peter Irving at the Burrite *Morning Chronicle*. Newspapers were imperative in a "war of words." Burr learned this lesson when attempting to refute a Clintonian pamphlet without the support of a sympathetic newspaper. Frustrated that "there seems at present to be no medium of communication," he launched the *Morning Chronicle* three months later.[48]

Newspapers also demonstrated the strength and loyalty of a leader's following. When the *Chronicle* seemed ready to "expire" in 1805, Matthew Davis believed that "the instant the Chronicle ceased to exist, the Burrites would become 'uninfluential atoms,' there would be no rallying point; and they would certainly have been considered as abandoning their Chief; as incapable any longer of supporting a press, that could be supposed friendly to him; and of course that their attachment for their leader or their influence with the community had diminished."[49] Combat between these political fighting units consisted of attempts to dishonor an opposing chief, his intimate friends, or his editor. Damage to any one of these three essential elements hurt chief

and follower alike. Discredited followers or a failed newspaper dishonored a chief; and a dishonored leader could offer his followers neither influence nor status, making him an unfit rallying point.

Politicians considered their *own* fighting unit a band of friends, men of honor who promoted the common good. Their opponents saw them as a vicious, self-seeking political faction that threatened the republic. In the *Chronicle,* Burrites depicted Clintonians as greedy knights serving a feudal lord who ordered his defenders to "lie, fawn, flatter, promise, and betray." The *Citizen,* in turn, portrayed the Burrites as a "sect of new Lights," separated from the Republican fold, with a blind religious devotion to their leader and a formal "creed." In many ways, these satirical attacks were accurate. Clintonians and Burrites *were* groups of loyal followers supporting ambitious leaders. These followers *were* interested in reaping benefit from their support. New York City politicians were engaged in a battle of self-deception. They could not—or would not—recognize in themselves what they condemned in their rivals, the self-serving motives of the factional politician.[50]

The political duelist envisioned himself as striking a blow at factional politics in the person of his adversary. In 1803, when Senator Jonathan Dayton of New Jersey rose to his feet in the Senate and accused DeWitt Clinton of "impeaching in debate the motives of Members," he believed that he was reprimanding a reprehensible partisan politician. When Clinton responded by declaring "that Mr. Dayton's assertion was unfounded and untrue," he thought that he was defending his reputation and, like Dayton, assumed that he was assailing a dishonorable politician. Yet Dayton's attack was neither selfless nor indiscriminate. Clinton and Aaron Burr were locked in a bitter power struggle in New York City, and Dayton was a Burrite. He insulted Clinton on the day before Clinton left the Senate to become mayor of New York. Dayton's attack was thus a strategically timed political strike against Clinton's political standing and personal reputation. Clinton had won an important election, and the Burrites bolstered their ailing status and denounced their foe by instigating an affair of honor.[51]

Taken together, New York City's affairs of honor reveal distinct patterns of conflict. Most such disputes occurred in the weeks follow-

ing an election or a political controversy. Usually a member of the losing faction—the group dishonored by defeat—provoked a duel with a member of the winning faction. Always, the political community understood that when a supporter dueled, he represented both his faction and his chief. After exchanging five shots with John Swartwout in 1802, Clinton declared him a meager substitute for Burr, stating with an almost palpable sneer, "I dont want to hurt him [Swartwout], but I wish I had the *principal* here—I will meet him when he pleases" (fig. 26).[52] Most of New York City's political duels were not the result of an angry politician's slip of the tongue. They were intentionally provoked partisan battles, couched in the gentility of the code of honor.

To accommodate partisan goals, politicians modified the traditional affair of honor, most strikingly in their use of newspapers as publicity tools. When a duel was particularly controversial—when a duelist died or a chief was involved—politicians capitalized on widespread public interest with contending newspaper accounts, both sides attempting to win public approval while dishonoring their foes. Regardless of his behavior on the field, a duelist's reputation depended on the success or failure of these publicity campaigns. Political duels were won by the faction that best controlled public opinion.

Such publicity campaigns exposed the political motives for dueling. As a writer for the *Post* recognized, "When men take the liberty of appealing to the public about their private quarrels, it can be done with no other view than to influence public opinion in favor of themselves." A writer for *The Balance* attributed the duel's popularity to such appeals: "Among the further incentives to dueling *peculiar* to this country, I am constrained to mention with pointed disapprobation the recent practice of publishing, in news-papers, the various particulars of such bloody affrays. . . . There is not another country in christendom—probably not in the world—where the *seconds* in a duel . . . have the presumption, immediately after the contest, to publish with the signature of their names, a detailed relation of its commencement, progress and catastrophe, together with encomiums on the gallant behavior of their respective *principals*. Europeans must read such publications with astonishment."[53] These newspaper advertisements reveal the profound

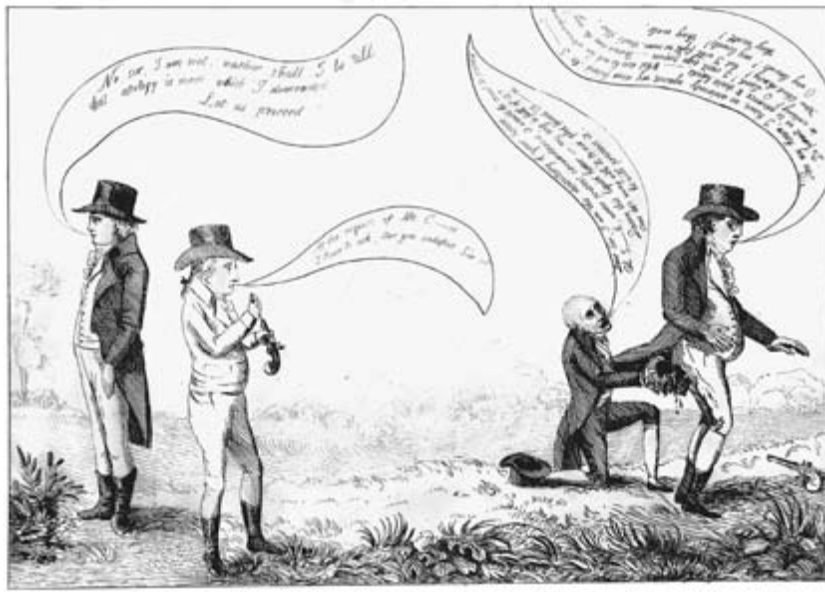

Fig. 26. *A Genuine View of the Parties in an Affair of Honor After the Fifth Shot, at Hobuken, 31st July, 1802,* unidentified artist, 1802. This cartoon satirizes the duel between Republican DeWitt Clinton and Burrite John Swartwout at Hoboken, New Jersey. The two seconds had made peculiar arrangements, directing the principals to spin and fire; in most duels, the principals simply stood face to face. After exchanging fire five times—Swartwout repeatedly asserting that he had not received "satisfaction"—Clinton declared the matter settled, ended the duel, and was thereafter denounced as a coward by Burrites. This cartoon clearly favors Swartwout. "O my bowels! my bowels! they melt, they melt!" Clinton howls while defecating in the wig of his second, Richard Riker, who states, "Dear Sir, I am the depository of your honor. . . . Damn this liquid honor—my wig is full of it!" (© Collection of The New-York Historical Society)

influence of a democratic politics. Proving their "gallant behavior" and strength of character on the field of honor, political duelists were proving their worth as leaders before people who could depose them with their votes. By parading their bravery in newspapers rather than pamphlets, they signaled their desire to reach a mass audience—not simply to appeal to a small group of equals.

To deny self-serving intentions to themselves and to the wider populace, politicians boasted of their nonpartisanship in these written duel accounts. They avoided declaring themselves victors; to do so would be to display self-interest and violate the people's right to draw their own conclusions. Instead, they began their reports by professing devotion to the public interest: the people demanded a complete and accurate account of all proceedings.[54] They augmented these professions of duty with angry attacks on their reprehensible, politically driven foes. Clinton's duel with Swartwout provoked an onslaught of these reproaches. In the *Citizen,* "An Old Soldier" wrote the following:

> MODERN BRAVERY. Write a bombastic account of a duel . . . threaten your antagonists with death if they [presume] to lisp any thing different from what your might[iness] has written. MODERN VIRTUE. When a citizen opposes your schemes of aggrandizement . . . when you find your defects too palpable to attempt vindic[ation], rid yourself of such an opposer and such a cit[izen by] pushing forward an humble tool.

In the *Post,* "A Young Soldier" responded by describing "Modern Humanity":

> If your friend differs from you in any political point, take an opportunity in his absence to call him lyar, rascal, villain, &c and should he hear of it and justly ask an acknowledgment of your error . . . refuse it in any way but that which you point out yourself, especially if you contemplate being a candidate for a high office. Should your mode of apologizing not prove acceptable, meet him with a pair of good pistols, at ten paces distance.

Clintonians claimed that the ambitious Burr had instigated and orchestrated the entire affair. Burrite William S. Smith, Swartwout's second, replied that "the infamy of attempting to attach to the sacred uphold of private honor, the mean spirit of party rancour, I flatter my self *my* breast will always be a stranger to."[55] His clever retort accused politi-

cians who hurled charges of "party rancour" of committing that very crime.

Partisan politics in the early republic transformed the traditional affair of honor into something distinctly American. Political duelists were not isolated aristocrats competing for glory and preferment at court. Instead, they constituted a novel hybrid: they were aristocratic democrats, popular politicians who used the traditional etiquette of honor to influence public opinion and win political power. Political duels testified to the blend of deference and equality, courtliness and sincerity that characterized politics in the early republic.

"I Shall Hazard Much, and Can Possibly Gain Nothing"

On June 18, 1804, roughly six weeks after he lost the gubernatorial election, Burr wrote to Hamilton regarding a letter that had appeared in the Republican *Albany Register* in the heat of the campaign several months earlier; a friend had just put it in Burr's hand. The writer, Charles D. Cooper, was responding to a broadside that contradicted one of Cooper's private letters; ironically, the person doing the contradicting in the broadside was none other than Hamilton's father-in-law, Philip Schuyler. Outraged at being posted as a liar *and* at the public knowledge of a personal letter ("that was EMBEZZLED and BROKEN OPEN," he complained), Cooper wrote to Schuyler insisting on the truth of his claims. Yes, Hamilton had denounced Burr as "a dangerous man . . . who ought not to be trusted with the reins of government." Cooper and many others had heard these words for themselves. In fact, Hamilton had offered "a still more despicable opinion" of Burr, but Cooper knew better than to commit it to paper.[56]

Cooper's letter is a study in the period's distinctive grammar of political combat. Outraged that one of his private letters was the subject of a broadside—a violation that almost landed Hamilton in a duel on one occasion—Cooper responded with a carefully worded letter of defense that touched on the honor and reputations of all involved. Yet though Cooper deliberately omitted Hamilton's most sensational accusations, even this mere reference to such gossip was a vulnerability when committed to paper, let alone published in a newspaper. Indeed,

the entire controversy was centered completely on hearsay and political gossip, the product of prevailing confusion about shifting political loyalties. No one knew whether Hamilton and some of his Federalist followers would support Burr or Republican Morgan Lewis for governor. Debating the issue in broadsides, letters, and newspapers, they sparked the most extreme honor ritual—a duel.

Vague as it was, Cooper's letter was Burr's first "authentic" evidence of Hamilton's attacks on his private character. Until this point, Burr had heard only secondhand accounts of ambiguous insults—gossip without proof.[57] In 1804, however, he gained Federalist support, which probably gave him access to Federalist gossip circles full of Hamilton's accusations. After years of such abuse, concrete evidence of an insult made it "impossible that I could consistently with respect again forbear," Burr later explained—particularly given that the slur had been broadcast in a newspaper. As William P. Van Ness, Burr's second, explained after the duel, Hamilton's abuse was "patiently borne, until resistance became a duty, and silence a crime."[58]

Burr was a man with a wounded reputation, a leader who had suffered personal abuse and the public humiliation of a lost election. A duel with Hamilton would redeem his honor and possibly dishonor Hamilton. Twice before, Hamilton's remarks about Burr had merited a challenge, and both times Hamilton had anticipated Burr by "coming forward voluntarily and making apologies and concessions." If Hamilton attempted a similar maneuver a third time, Burr could declare him a coward who "woud not fight." More important, if Burr did not receive some sign of respect from Hamilton—either an apology or the satisfaction of a duel—he would lose the support of his followers. As Van Ness explained, if Burr "tamely sat down in silence, and dropped the affair; what must have been the feelings of his friends?—they must have considered him as a man, not possessing sufficient firmness to defend his own character, and consequently unworthy of their support.—While his enemies, with malicious triumph, would, to all the other slanders propagated concerning him, have added the ignominious epithet of coward."[59] To remain a political chief, Burr had to defend his honor.

As with the other duels in New York City, the timing of Burr's

challenge was more important than the offense that prompted it. Because Cooper's letter contained no specific insult, Burr later received criticism for challenging a man for an unspecified affront. Hamilton himself objected that Burr's inquiry was too vague for "a direct avowal or disavowal"; as Hamilton would later explain, Burr was objecting to comments dropped during a dinner at least six months back. But Burr felt such a compelling need to prove himself a man of honor and a political leader that he responded to Hamilton's protests by broadening his demands: he demanded an apology for *any* "rumours derogatory to Col: Burr's honour . . . inferred from any thing he [Hamilton] has said."[60] In essence, he called on Hamilton to apologize for any personal abuse that Burr had suffered from throughout their fifteen-year political rivalry. Burr demanded this humiliating apology in order to force Hamilton to fight.

Modern writers love to speculate about Hamilton's "real" insult, the most popular suggestion being that Hamilton accused Burr of sleeping with his own daughter, Theodosia. Appealingly sensational as that claim might be, it is grounded on twentieth-century assumptions that only an insult of such severity could drive a man to duel. But if we understand duels as political weapons deliberately deployed by countless politicians, such theories make no sense—particularly given that this was not Burr's first duel but rather the *fourth* time he had engaged in an honor dispute and the second time he had taken the field. Five years earlier, he had dueled with Hamilton's brother-in-law John Barker Church, and twice before by Burr's count he had almost dueled with Hamilton. There is no deep, dark, mysterious insult at the heart of the Burr-Hamilton duel. Like any other politician, Burr was manipulating the code of honor to redeem his reputation after the humiliation of a lost election, seizing on this insult above others because it was in writing, vague as it might be.

Hamilton did not want to duel. His reluctance is apparent in his ambivalent and conflicted response to Burr's initial letter of inquiry—a response reflecting Hamilton's struggle to accommodate clashing values. To appease his moral and religious reservations about dueling, he attempted to placate Burr with an elaborate discussion of the "infinite shades" of meaning of the word *despicable*—a grammar lesson

that Burr found evasive, manipulative, and offensive. To defend his personal honor and political power, he countered Burr's insultingly vague inquiry by pronouncing it "inadmissible" and declaring himself willing to "abide the consequences" should Burr persist in his present course—a statement that Burr found insufferably arrogant. Ultimately, it was outrage at Hamilton's seeming lack of respect that drove Burr to broaden his demands and thereby force Hamilton to accept his challenge.[61]

With his acceptance, Hamilton gave the code of honor priority. Burr's second noted that "Gen. Hamilton, subsequent to his acceptance of the challenge, behaved in a proper and becoming manner." Confident that he had saved his reputation, Hamilton could now satisfy his religious and moral "scruples" with a compromise. He decided that he would observe all the expected dueling rituals on the field, but to avoid shedding Burr's blood, he would withhold his fire. As he explained to his wife, "the Scruples of a Christian have determined me to expose my own life . . . rather than subject my self to the guilt of taking the life of another. . . . But you had rather I should die innocent than live guilty." Hamilton's apologia, so often taken as evidence of a death wish, was an attempt to explain this decision. Burr, too, wrote a final statement the night before the duel, bidding farewell to his daughter and son-in-law.[62]

On the morning of July 11, Hamilton and Burr fought their duel (fig. 27). Critically wounded, Hamilton died the following afternoon. The only duel between two political chiefs fought in New York City between 1795 and 1807, the Burr-Hamilton "interview" would have been assured public notice by this singularity alone. But when one chief killed another, a duel became a subject of heated public controversy. The Burr-Hamilton duel was common knowledge just hours after it took place. Hamilton had been rowed back to New York and carried to a friend's house by 9:00 A.M.; by 10:00, "the rumour of the General's injury had created an alarm in the city."[63]

People stood on street corners discussing the affair. A bulletin was posted at the Tontine Coffee House, informing the public that "General Hamilton was shot by Colonel Burr this morning in a duel. The General is said to be mortally wounded." By the time Gouverneur

Fig. 27. Dueling pistols used in the Burr-Hamilton duel. Hamilton's brother-in-law John Barker Church lent this fine brace of pistols to Hamilton for his duel with Burr. During his own 1799 duel with Burr, Church shot a button off Burr's coat with these same pistols; they may also have been used by Hamilton's son Philip in his fatal 1801 duel. (Courtesy Chase Manhattan Bank Archives)

Morris gave Hamilton's eulogy, on July 14, the city was in a "frenzy." Hoping to discourage the public from committing some "outrage" against Burr, Morris avoided any mention of the cause of death. Later that day, he marveled, "How easy would it have been to make them, for a moment, absolutely mad!"[64]

Aware of public interest and anxious to protect their principals' reputations, Hamilton's and Burr's seconds began to draft an account of the duel almost immediately after Hamilton's death. By July 16, they had sketched out a statement of events on the dueling ground, though they did not "precisely agree" on which evidence to present or on the vital question of who fired first: Hamilton's second Pendleton claimed that his principal had involuntarily discharged his pistol in the air upon being shot, whereas Burr's second Van Ness asserted that Hamilton

had taken aim and fired first.[65] Eager to exploit the public uproar to exalt Hamilton at Burr's expense, Pendleton pressed for immediate publication, but Van Ness demurred; with the coroner's inquest yet undecided and outrage at Burr unabated, he well recognized the advantage of delay. Though Pendleton attempted to address Van Ness's concerns, he ultimately published his statement without Van Ness's final approval; it appeared in the *Evening Post* on July 16. Van Ness countered with an account more favorable to Burr, published in the *Morning Chronicle* the next day.

Taking advantage of the controversy, Clintonians and Hamiltonians capitalized on public interest to achieve a political victory over Burr, their common foe. The *American Citizen* and the *Evening Post* joined in high praise of Hamilton and condemnation of Burr as a murderer. Contentious Clintonian editor James Cheetham charged Burr with violating the code of honor: he had practiced with a target beforehand; he had worn a coat made of silk—a material that was "impenetrable to a ball"; he had killed Hamilton in cold blood, knowing that Hamilton would not shoot; he had laughed as he left the dueling ground; he had thrown a party upon his return to New York;[66] he was, in fine, a dishonorable man. Burr was outraged that "thousands of absurd falsehoods are circulated with industry." But he understood why: "All our intemperate and unprincipled Jacobins who have been for Years reviling H. as a disgrace to the Country and a pest to Society are now the most Vehement in his praise, and you will readily perceive that their Motive is, not respect to him but, Malice to me."[67]

Although public outrage forced Burr to flee the state, his supporters continued to defend his reputation. Rather than justifying Burr's actions, they attacked Clintonians and Hamiltonians for their hypocritical and self-interested newspaper campaign against Burr. Writing as "Vindix," Van Ness lashed out at "officious intermedlers, who have neither the feelings of gentlemen nor the hearts of men." He was outraged at the "mountain of the most detestable fals[e]hood" propagated by writers for the "scurrilous columns of the Evening Post" and the "disgusting pages of the American Citizen." Asserting that silence would prove Burr's friends "worthy of this monstrous and merciless

persecution," he pleaded with the public to hear his defense: "I demand it from their justice," he declared.[68]

After a month of controversy, rumors proved too powerful for a newspaper defense; the two seconds could not keep up with the constantly shifting stream of charges and countercharges, and the unfolding argument seemed to require a different forum, so the debate moved into warring defense pamphlets. On August 11, the *Morning Chronicle* noted that a pamphlet was "promised in further persecution of Mr. Burr and his friends, of which hint, I am disposed to avail myself. If therefore this task [defending Burr] is not undertaken by some gentleman of more leisure and superior talents, I will resume this subject in a pamphlet." Shortly thereafter, Van Ness anonymously published *A Correct Statement of the Late Melancholy Affair of Honor, Between General Hamilton and Col. Burr,* a pro-dueling defense of Burr's actions that scholars have entirely overlooked. *Evening Post* editor Coleman defended Hamilton in *A Collection of the Facts and Documents, relative to the Death of Major-General Alexander Hamilton;* unaware of Van Ness's publication, scholars have missed the political motives behind this compendium of documents as well.[69]

Because the two seconds had agreed publicly upon most of the duel's details, differences between the two defenses were subtle—implied by tone, word emphasis, or choice of evidence. For example, Van Ness and Pendleton had mismanaged the official delivery of Burr's challenge, leaving Hamilton unsure whether he had accepted it; Hamilton had attempted to offer Burr a final note of explanation, "if the state of the affair rendered it proper." Hamilton's defender Coleman stated that Van Ness had refused to receive the explanation because he considered Burr's challenge accepted, thereby blaming the duel on Van Ness for spurning an apology. In his defense of Burr, Van Ness claimed that he *had* offered to accept the note, but only if it contained "a specific proposition for an accommodation," thereby attributing blame to Hamilton for not offering an explicit apology.[70] As in other controversial duels, supporters manipulated the truth in the name of honor and reputation.

Hamiltonians had an easy task defending their chief. Presenting

Fig. 28. Alexander Hamilton memorial handkerchief, linen, 1804. This mourning handkerchief shows what Burr was up against after his duel with Hamilton. Washington's tomb stands in the background, suggesting that Hamilton is the second great leader to fall—and perhaps suggesting that he is second only to Washington. (Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York, Gift of Mrs. Frederick S. Fish, 33.318)

their leader as a martyred hero, they augmented their account of the duel with laudatory eulogies and sermons from around the nation (fig. 28). Burrites had a harder task; they had to justify Burr's actions and exonerate his motives for dueling. To accomplish this, Van Ness supplemented his description of the duel with a lengthy essay entitled "A Candid Examination of the Whole Affair in a Letter to a Friend." Contradictory and defensive, this rare written justification of dueling reveals the duelist's point of view in a period of great ambivalence toward the practice.

Van Ness attempted to grapple with the essay's fundamental con-

tradiction in his first few paragraphs. Proclaiming his opposition to the "evil" of dueling, he stated that the practice had unfortunately received "the sanction of the world," particularly of "the higher class of society." Because Burr was conforming to public opinion, he should not be blamed. Van Ness next signaled the limits of his investigation. He would answer only four questions: Did Burr have a right to question Hamilton about his comments, and did he do so correctly? Was Hamilton obliged to avow or disavow Burr's charge? Was Burr justified in bringing the dispute to the field of honor? By restricting himself to these four questions about the formalities of the code of honor, Van Ness clearly hoped to separate the duel from the duelist.[71]

Although Van Ness claimed that his essay would not defend the practice, he could hardly avoid doing so. In presenting Burr as an honorable man with a right to protect his reputation, Van Ness was validating the affair of honor. His essay contains many of the conventional arguments used to justify dueling. He claimed that the affair of honor prevented slander, malice, and vice from running rampant. He reminded readers that a man's reputation was his most valued possession and that political opposition never warranted an attack on another man's character. He maintained that any man who felt dishonored had "an unalienable right" to demand an explanation; the right to uphold one's honor was "a law of nature."[72] In the midst of fierce political strife, forced to justify the killing of a political rival, Van Ness could still argue that the code of honor ensured an honorable political world.

In spite of his supporters' efforts, Burr lost his battle for public approval. A duelist who killed his opponent could erase his crime only by proving himself a man of honor who had conformed with the rituals of the *code duello*. But in seizing on a vague offense and exhibiting uncompromising hostility in his correspondence, Burr left himself open to charges of dishonorable conduct. When Federalists and Clintonian Republicans branded him a murderer, he was left without effective defense.

Although he defeated his opponent on the field of honor, Burr thus became a failed duelist, for he was unable to sway public opinion in his favor. His fate demonstrates the power of public opinion. In challenging Hamilton, he had acknowledged his vulnerability to popu-

lar sentiment. In accepting his challenge, Hamilton had made the same admission. Hamilton fought, his second explained after the duel, because "his Sensibility to public opinion was extremely strong, especially in what related to his conduct in Public Office." As Hamilton himself said, *not* to defend one's honor was to "commit an act of political suicide."[73] Compelled by the mandates of politics and honor, dependent on an ill-defined public for political career and private sense of self, Burr and Hamilton dueled because they were afraid not to.

"I Hope the Grounds of His Proceeding Have Been Such as Ought to Satisfy His Own Conscience"

Gouverneur Morris and Matthew Clarkson understood why Hamilton had dueled with Burr. Several days after Hamilton died, Morris recorded Clarkson's explanation in his diary: "Clarkson . . . is extremely wounded. He said to me . . . just after our friend had expired: 'If we were truly brave we should not accept a challenge; but we are all cowards.' The tears rolling down his face gave strong effect to the voice and manner with which he pronounced this sentence. There is no braver man living, and yet I doubt whether he would so far brave the public opinion as to refuse a challenge."[74] Fear, not courage, had goaded Hamilton to duel. Morris assumed that Clarkson would have done the same thing for the same reason. Dueling was cowardly; Hamilton's honorable sacrifice to the public good was also a surrender to the power of public opinion. The shock of this realization brought tears to Clarkson's eyes. He had pierced the illusion of the duel.

An ambiguous blend of the selfless, the self-interested, the political, and the personal, the affair of honor was a peculiarly powerful yet elusive political tool. Its ambiguities often left politicians conflicted and guilt-ridden, unable to reconcile the competing demands of honor, politics, and morality. Hamilton was a virtual embodiment of this conflict. Recounting the confrontation of the duel, Burr later noted that Hamilton had "looked as if oppressed with the horrors of Conscious Guilt," assuming that Hamilton was ashamed of his political improprieties. But Hamilton's facial expression was his final testimony to the complexities of the affair of honor. Thinking of his status

and reputation—anxious to restrain a political rival—convinced that he was acting in the public good—feeling the twinges of religious faith, personal morality, and familial responsibility, Hamilton was a duelist who refused to fire.[75]

For Hamilton, as for others, the affair of honor was a public servant's ultimate self-sacrifice. Even on his deathbed, he attributed his duel with Burr to public-minded motives. Yet Burr insisted that Hamilton was the miscreant, an ambitious politician who had violated the laws of honor.[76] Like other duelists, he saw his behavior as obligatory and community-minded. The charges and countercharges of unworthy motives were not unusual, but the duel's ultimate outcome was. By themselves, the combined efforts of Clintonians, Hamiltonians, and otherwise hostile Federalists and Republicans might have proven strong enough to effect Burr's political demise. But ultimately, it was Hamilton's apologia that ensured Burr's downfall. Hamilton closed his life with an intimate, heartfelt statement that professed his willingness to die for the public good; he depicted himself as an exemplary man of honor, compelled to fight, unwilling to kill, gaining nothing, sacrificing all. There was no more effective way to prove oneself a martyr and one's foe, by necessity, a fiend.

Burr perceived the ugly political reality underlying Hamilton's statement. He assumed that Hamilton's attempt to portray himself as a selfless public servant was politically driven—a final, brazen attempt to quash a longstanding rival. To his friend Charles Biddle, Burr fumed, "The last hours of Genl. H. (I might include the day pre[ceding] the interview) appear to have been devoted to Malevolence and hypocricy. . . . The friends of Genl. H. and even his enemies who are still more my enemies, are but too faithful executors of his Malice." Burr relied on "all Men of honor" to recognize the truth, to "see with disgust the persecutions which are practised against me."[77]

Killing Hamilton drove Burr into physical exile, but condemning him thrust Burr into intellectual oblivion, for few men shared his opinion, or at least said so in public. In the end Burr's fate forced him to perceive the truth—to discern the self-interest and political pragmatism underlying the laws of honor. Assuming an attitude of "defiant affectation," he taunted public men by pricking at their convictions

about political honor. With "amazing nonchalance," his first biographer reported, Burr sometimes spoke of "my friend Hamilton—whom I shot," a blunt reminder of the duel's viciousness and the violent nature of American politics.[78]

In the long term, Hamilton's statement failed to accomplish what he intended. It did not prove his public-minded motives to posterity. It did not gain him eternal forgiveness for engaging in what he himself deemed an indefensible practice. Yet ultimately, his apologia succeeded in ways that he could not have foreseen. Superficially, it left to later generations the image of Burr the unprincipled politician, an image that retains its potency even today. On a deeper, less conscious level, it reveals much more, offering firsthand testimony to the significance of dueling among early national politicians. Convinced that Burr was a threat to the republic, personally invested in his public role to an extraordinary degree, Hamilton perceived the duel as both a public service and a personal sacrifice. It was also a self-serving attempt to preserve his political career and his private sense of self; ambitious, competitive, and suffering from the endemic insecurity of the self-made man, Hamilton could not risk dishonor. Yet in proving himself a man of honor, he violated his moral principles and afflicted his family, two things close to his heart. By not resolving these contradictions, by committing to paper a tangled mix of hopes and fears, Hamilton gave voice to the complexities of political leadership among men of honor. His apologia offers an insider's view of a ritualized, honor-bound, personal level of political interaction that persisted until the anonymity of formal national political parties altered the tone of politics forever.