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Infamous V-POTUS

Roots & Disputes of a Deadly Rivalry

By [Hendrik Meijer](#)

Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr had been political adversaries for years in New York politics. Of course Hamilton had famously sided with Thomas Jefferson when the U.S. Electoral College was tied between Jefferson and Burr. This was in the early days when the parties were still in formation -- the top vote-getter became president and the number two vote-getter became vice president. Hamilton swung votes to the support of Jefferson so that Jefferson was chosen president over Burr.

Burr always blamed Hamilton for sabotaging his political career. Hamilton never trusted Burr. They were in many respects rivals for power in the Federalist Party in New York State. New York was really pivotal in the power-struggle between the New England states and the southern states. New York had population and ideology, so that whatever way it went would influence how the country would stand.

Hamilton supported his arch-enemy Jefferson -- Hamilton and Jefferson were huge foes of each other, they wrote the most scurrilous propaganda about each other, they just savaged each other. Yet when push came to shove, Hamilton said 'I can't stand what Jefferson stands for, but I'd rather vote for someone whose principles I disagree with than someone who doesn't have any principles.' And that is how he looked at Burr. That was political hostility.

The sequence of events in 1804 was really bizarre. There was a dinner party in Albany among some Federalist leaders where Hamilton was very critical of Burr. After Burr had failed to win the presidency, he was trying to win the governorship of New York. Hamilton had said, 'I can't stand this guy, I know things about him that make me not trust him.' Word leaked out to the press. One of Hamilton's friends said something to Burr -- that Mr. Hamilton was critical of him and had even worse things to say about him than what's been reported. Another of Hamilton's friends denied that it had been said, and then yet another of Hamilton's friends published a fuller account that said, 'oh yes, we heard him say all kinds of awful things about Burr!' Burr demanded to know 'what was Hamilton saying about me,' and Burr and Hamilton started exchanging letters.

Hamilton, instead of saying, 'hey, I didn't mean anything by it, this is just political stuff,' he asked 'well what did you hear? If you can prove it, maybe I'll apologize, but I'm not just going to apologize over rumors that I said something bad to you.' The tone of these letters kept elevating. Burr finally said 'if I can't get any satisfaction from you any other way, we have to settle this honorably between gentlemen.' It was, in effect, a call for a duel.

Hamilton's friends swear that Hamilton was going to fire his first shot in the air -- he was not going to fire at Burr. There was no such presumption on Burr's part. When they met, they faced off on a rocky ledge below a bluff on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River. They were in New Jersey because dueling was outlawed in New York and they would have been subject to criminal prosecution, but in New Jersey the law was not as strictly enforced. So they rode across the Hudson.

They were ready for their first shots, and as Hamilton was about to fire -- his pistol did discharge -- Burr fired at the same time and wounded Hamilton. Hamilton died a few hours later. They rowed him back across the river, but he died in lower Manhattan at a friend's house the next day.

Ultimately, it went from a very nasty history of political confrontation to a kind of pettiness that got out of hand. They were both adhering to this dueling code that was on its way out. Hamilton's son had been killed in a duel. Hamilton himself didn't believe in dueling. Yet he had this big ego that wasn't just going to apologize for no good reason, for something Aaron Burr thought somebody might have said. So he boxed himself into a corner and then went out and got shot.

This passage was excerpted from a speech Hendrik Meijer delivered at Grand Valley State University. It was part of an Alexander Hamilton lecture series co-sponsored by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies and the Spring Lake District Library.