

CHAPTER ONE

The Duel

here is a more comprehensive version, which attempts to include all the available and indisputable evidence that survives.¹

AARON BURR left his home on Richmond Hill near the southern end of Manhattan at first light on Wednesday, July 11, 1804. Although he slept that night on his couch and in his clothes, the vice president of the United States was a lifelong disciple of Lord Chesterfield's maxim that a gentleman was free to do anything he pleased as long as he did it with style. So Colonel Burr—the military title a proud emblem of his service in the American Revolution—was elegantly attired in a silklike suit (actually made of a fabric known as bombazine) and carried himself toward the barge on the bank of the Hudson River with the nonchalant air of a natural aristocrat strolling to an appointment with destiny.

His grandfather, the great theologian Jonathan Edwards, had once said that we were all depraved creatures, mere spiders hanging precariously over a never-ending fire. But Burr's entire life had been a sermon on the capacity of the sagacious spider to lift himself out of hellish difficulties and spin webs that trapped others. No one can be sure what was in Burr's mind as a single oarsman rowed him and William Van Ness, his devoted disciple and protégé, toward the New Jersey Palisades on the other side, but the judgment of posterity would be that Burr had finally trapped Hamilton in his diabolical web, and he was now moving in for the kill.²

Meanwhile, just north of Richmond Hill, near present-day Wall Street, Hamilton was boarding a small skiff with two oarsmen, his physician, Dr. David Hosack, and his own loyal associate Nathaniel Pendleton. Like Burr, Hamilton was properly attired and also carried himself with a similar air of gentlemanly diffidence. He also carried a military title, thus outranking Burr with his honorary designation as "General Hamilton," based on his last appointment, that of inspector general of the New Army in 1799. At forty-nine, he was a year older than Burr and, like him, was a relatively short man—an inch taller, at five feet seven inches—with similarly small hands and feet, a somewhat delicate bone structure, and a truly distinctive head and face. He was called "the little lion of Federalism" because he was, in truth, little.

THE MOST succinct version of the story might go like this:

On the morning of July 11, 1804, Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton were rowed across the Hudson River in separate boats to a secluded spot near Weehawken, New Jersey. There, in accord with the customs of the *code duello*, they exchanged pistol shots at ten paces. Hamilton was struck on his right side and died the following day. Though unhurt, Burr found that his reputation suffered an equally fatal wound. In this, the most famous duel in American history, both participants were casualties.

While all the information in this version of the story is accurate, its admirable brevity creates some unfortunate historical casualties of its own. After all, if the duel between Burr and Hamilton was the most famous encounter of its kind in American history, we should be able to conjure up a mental image of this dramatic moment, a more richly textured picture of "The Duel." Only a fuller rendering will allow what was called "the interview at Weehawken" to assume its rightful place of primacy among such touted competitors as *Gangfight at the O.K. Corral* or the film classic *High Noon*. In matters of this sort, succinct summaries will simply not do. And so, in an effort to give this episode its requisite density of detail, to recover the scene in its full coloration,

But the head was the place where God had seen fit to mark the two men as polar opposites. Burr had the dark and severe coloring of his Edwards ancestry, with black hair receding from the forehead and dark brown, almost black, eyes that suggested a cross between an eagle and a raven. Hamilton had a light peaches and cream complexion with violet-blue eyes and auburn-red hair, all of which came together to suggest an animated beam of light to Burr's somewhat stationary shadow. Whereas Burr's overall demeanor seemed subdued, as if the compressed energies of New England Puritanism were coiled up inside him, waiting for the opportunity to explode, Hamilton conveyed kinetic energy incessantly expressing itself in bursts of conspicuous brilliance.

Their respective genealogies also created temperamental and stylistic contrasts. Unlike Burr's distinguished bloodline, which gave his aristocratic bearing its roots and biological rationale, Hamilton's more dashing and consistently audacious style developed as a willful personal wager against the odds of his impoverished origins. John Adams, who despised Hamilton, once referred to him as "the bastard brat of a Scotch pedlar." While intended as a libelous description, Adams's choice of words was literally correct.

Hamilton had been born on the West Indian island of Nevis, the illegitimate son of a down-on-her-luck beauty of French extraction and a hard-drinking Scottish merchant with a flair for bankruptcy. In part because of his undistinguished origins, Hamilton always seemed compelled to be proving himself, he needed to impress his superiors with his own superiority. Whether he was leading an infantry assault against an entrenched British strong point at Yorktown—first over the parapet in a desperate bayonet charge—or imposing his own visionary fiscal program for the new nation on a reluctant federal government, Hamilton tended to regard worldly problems as personal challenges, and therefore as fixed objects against which he could perform his own isometric exercises, which usually took the form of ostentatious acts of gallantry. Though he had not sought out the impending duel with Burr, there was nothing in Hamilton's lifelong pattern that would permit a self-consciously bland and supremely triumphant refusal of the challenge. He was moving across the nearly calm waters of the Hudson toward Weehawken, then, because he did not believe he could afford to decline Burr's invitation.³

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We actually know a good deal more about the thoughts in Hamilton's mind at this propitious moment. The previous evening he had drafted a personal statement, which he enclosed with his last will and testament, declaring that he had sincerely hoped to avoid the interview. Moreover, he claimed to feel "no *ill-will* to Col. Burr, distinct from political opposition, which, as I trust, has proceeded from pure and upright motives." What's more, he had decided to expose himself to Burr's fire without retaliating: "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, and I have thoughts even of reserving my second fire—and thus giving a double opportunity to Col. Burr to pause and to reflect." He did not think of this course of action as suicidal, but as another gallant gamble of the sort he was accustomed to winning.⁴

The usual description of the duel's location—the plains of Weehawken—is misleading. Indeed, if one were to retrace the Burr-Hamilton route across the Hudson and land just upstream from the modern-day Lincoln Tunnel, one would come face-to-face with a sheer cliff 150 feet high. Anyone attempting to scale these heights would hardly be capable of fighting a duel upon arrival at the top. The actual site of the duel was a narrow ledge, about ten feet wide and forty feet long, located only twenty feet above the water. It was a popular spot for duels precisely because of its relative isolation and inaccessibility. By prearranged agreement, the Burr party arrived first, just before 7:00 a.m., and began clearing away the incidental brush and rocks on the ledge.⁵

Hamilton's party arrived shortly thereafter, and the two seconds, Van Ness for Burr and Pendleton for Hamilton, conferred to review the agreed-upon rules of the interview. It was called an "interview" because dueling was illegal in many states, including New York. Therefore, in addition to the established etiquette of the *code duello*, veteran duelists had developed an elaborately elusive vocabulary, what we would now call the "language of deniability," so that all participants could subsequently claim ignorance if ever brought to court. None of the oarsmen, for example, was permitted on the ledge to witness the exchange of fire. The physician, David Hosack, was also required to turn his back to the proceedings.⁶

Because Hamilton had been challenged, he had the choice of weapons. He had selected a custom-made pair of highly decorated pistols owned by his wealthy brother-in-law, John Church. Apart from their ornate appearance, the weapons were distinctive for two reasons. First, they had been used in two previous duels involving the participants: once, in 1799, when Church had shot a button off Burr's coat; then, in 1801, when Hamilton's eldest son, Philip, had been fatally wounded defending his father's honor only a few yards from the site at Weehawken. Second, they also contained a concealed device that set a hair-trigger. Without the hair-trigger, the weapon required twenty pounds of pressure to fire. With the hair-trigger, only one pound of pressure was needed. While Hamilton knew about the hair-triggers, Burr almost certainly did not.

After Pendleton and Van Ness loaded the pistols, which were smooth-bore and took a quite large .54-caliber ball, Pendleton whispered to Hamilton, "Should I set the hair-trigger?" Hamilton responded: "Not this time." As they prepared to take their designated places, then, both men were armed with extremely powerful but extremely erratic weapons. If struck in a vital spot by the oversized ball at such close range, the chances of a serious or mortal injury were high. But the inherent inaccuracy of a projectile emerging from a smoothbore barrel, plus the potent jerk required to release the cocked hammer, ignite the powder, and then send the ball toward its target, meant that in this duel, as in most duels of that time, neither party was likely to be hurt badly, if at all.⁷

Burr and Hamilton then met in the middle to receive their final instructions. Hamilton, again because he was the challenged party, had the choice of position. He selected the upstream, or north, side, a poor choice because the morning sun and its reflection off the river would be in his face. The required ten paces between contestants put them at the extreme ends of the ledge. It was agreed that when both principals were ready, Pendleton would say, "Present"; then each man would be free to raise and fire his weapon. If one man fired before the other, the non-firer's second would say, "One, two, three, fire." If he had not fired by the end of the count, he lost his turn. At that point, or if both parties had fired and missed, there would be a conference to decide if another round was required or if both sides agreed that the obligations of honor had been met.⁸

Upon reaching his designated location, just before the final command, Hamilton requested a brief delay. He pulled his eyeglasses out of his breast pocket, adjusted them, then squinted into the glare, raised his pistol, sighted down the barrel at several imaginary targets, then pronounced himself ready. Burr waited with patience and composure through this delay. Not only is there no evidence that he had any foreknowledge of Hamilton's declared intention to reserve or waste his first shot, but Hamilton's behavior at this penultimate moment certainly suggested more harmful intentions. Why he would don his eyeglasses if he did not plan to shoot at Burr remains a mystery.

What happened next is an even greater mystery. In fact, the contradictory versions of the next four to five seconds of the duel might serve as evidence for the postmodern contention that no such thing as objective truth exists, that historic reality is an inherently enigmatic and endlessly negotiable bundle of free-floating perceptions. For our story to proceed along the indisputable lines established at the start, we must skip over the most dramatic moment, then return to it later, after the final pieces of the narrative are in place.

Two shots had rung out and Hamilton had just been hit. The one-ounce ball had struck him on the right side, making a hole two inches in diameter about four inches above his hip. The projectile fractured his rib cage, ricocheted off the rib and up through his liver and diaphragm, then splintered the second lumbar vertebra, where it lodged. Even with all the benefits of modern medical science, the internal damage would have made Hamilton a likely fatality, most certainly a lifetime cripple. Given the limitations of medical science available then, there was no hope. Hamilton himself recognized his own condition almost immediately. When Dr. Hosack rushed forward to examine him, Hamilton calmly declared, "This is a mortal wound, Doctor," then lapsed into unconsciousness.⁹

Meanwhile, Burr seemed surprised and regretful at the outcome of his shot. He started toward the fallen Hamilton, but Van Ness stopped him and ushered him away from the scene and toward his boat, all the while shielding Burr behind an umbrella so that—the deniability motive again—the members of Hamilton's party could claim in some prospective court that they had never seen him. Halfway down the path toward the river, Burr stopped and insisted on going back. "I must go & speak to him," he pleaded. But Van Ness refused to comply

and headed Burr into his barge and back across the river to New York.¹⁰

Hosack half-expected Hamilton to die on the spot. After a few minutes of ministrations, however, it was clear that the unconscious Hamilton was breathing regularly, so they carried him down to the river. On the trip back, Hamilton recovered consciousness for a time and murmured to Hosack, "Pendleton knows I did not mean to fire at Colonel Burr the first time." When one of the oarsmen tried to move Hamilton's pistol, which lay on the seat, Hamilton warned him, "Take care of that pistol; it is undischarged and still cocked; it may go off and do harm," clearly indicating that Hamilton himself did not seem to realize the weapon had been fired. Upon arrival on the New York side, he was carried to the nearby home of James Bayard, a longtime friend and political disciple, where Hosack administered liberal doses of laudanum and waited for the end. Hamilton died at two o'clock on the afternoon of July 12, 1804, surrounded by the Episcopal bishop of New York, Benjamin Moore, as well as by David Hosack, Hamilton's wife, Elizabeth, and their seven surviving children.¹¹

The funeral two days later was an extravaganza of mourning. The mahogany coffin was trailed by Hamilton's gray horse, with his boots and spurs reversed astride the empty saddle. Behind it marched his widow and children, the political and legal leaders of the city, the students and faculty of Columbia College, bank presidents, army and navy officers, local clergy and foreign dignitaries, followed by several hundred ordinary citizens. Gouverneur Morris, an old family friend and Federalist colleague, delivered the funeral oration in an overflowing Trinity Church.¹²

The overwhelming popular consensus was that Burr had murdered Hamilton in cold blood. The anti-Burr character of the newspaper stories fed the popular frenzy with concocted claims (for example, Burr had worn a suit, specially prepared for the duel, made of material that could deflect bullets) and melodramatic fabrications (for example, while Hamilton's widow and children shed tears over his dead body, Burr and his followers drank toasts to Hamilton's death in the local tavern, Burr only expressing regret that he had not shot him in the heart). A wax replication of the duel depicted Hamilton being shot by Burr and several hidden accomplices from ambush. The sign beneath the wax version read:

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*O Burr, O Burr, what has thou done?
Thou has shooted dead great Hamilton.
You hid behind a bunch of thistle,
And shooted him dead with a great boss pistol.*

With indictments pending against him for both dueling and murder, with newspaper editors comparing him to Benedict Arnold as the new exemplar of treachery, with ministers making his behavior the centerpiece for sermons against dueling as a barbaric throwback to medieval notions of justice, Burr fled the city in disgrace, not stopping until he reached Georgia.¹³

So there you have it: Hamilton safely buried and assuming legendary proportions as a martyr; Burr slipping out of town, eventually headed toward bizarre adventures in the American West, but already consigned to political oblivion. This seems the most appropriate closing scene in our attempted recovery of "The Duel" as a famous and eminently visual story.

THE MISSING ingredient in the story, of course, is the four- or five-second interval when the shots were actually fired. Postponing the recovery of this most crucial moment was not only unavoidable—there is no agreed-upon version to recover—but also matches the historical timing of the debate that generated the only evidence on which any narrative must be based. Which is to say that, in the wake of the actual duel, there was another duel of words between witnesses to the event, chiefly Pendleton and Van Ness, and then the inevitable collection of pro-Hamilton and pro-Burr advocates who filled up the newspapers and pamphlets of the day with corroborating testimony for their own conflicting versions.

But before the after-action accounts of the duel degenerated into a duel of its own, the only two eyewitnesses, Pendleton and Van Ness, published a "Joint Statement." Its chief purpose was to claim that both principals had conducted themselves in accord with the *code duello*, so that even though the practice of dueling was illegal, Burr and Hamilton had behaved according to the higher law of honor appropriate for proper gentlemen. Along the way to that principled point, however, Pendleton and Van Ness agreed on several significant particulars wor-

thy of notice because of the light they shed on the looming disagreement over what, in fact, had happened.

First, Pendleton and Van Ness agreed that both principals fired their weapons. There were two shots, not one. This was an important fact to establish, because several published accounts of the duel by friends of Hamilton, undoubtedly influenced by various versions of his preduel pledge not to fire at Burr, had preemptively concluded that Hamilton had withheld his fire; that is, had not fired at all. Since the sound of the gunfire was audible to Hossack and the oarsmen, even though they did not see the exchange, no misrepresentation or falsification of this elemental point was feasible anyway, unless the two shots occurred simultaneously. And Pendleton and Van Ness agreed that they did not.

This led to the second and most intriguing agreement—namely, that an interval lasting “a few seconds” occurred between shots. Just how many seconds they could not agree on. They did concur, however, that a discernible gap of time separated the two shots. One of the two principals had fired first; the other had paused for a discreet and noticeable interval, and then he had fired. The two shots had not gone off simultaneously.¹⁴

It is not easy to square what was to become the Hamiltonian version of the duel with this agreed-upon point. The crucial ingredient in the Hamiltonian account was that Burr fired first. If one began with the assumption, as Pendleton’s and Hamilton’s disciples insisted one should, that Hamilton arrived at Weehawken with a firm resolve not to shoot, that Hamilton arrived at Weehawken with a firm resolve not to fire at Burr, then it followed logically that Hamilton could not have fired first. Instead, Burr fired while Hamilton’s pistol was still raised in the air. The impact of Burr’s round then allegedly produced an involuntary jerk on Hamilton’s trigger finger, which sent a round sailing harmlessly above Burr and into the trees. Van Ness claimed to have revisited the ledge the following day and found the severed branch of a cedar tree about twelve feet high and four feet to the side of where Burr had stood. This rendition of the story was also compatible with Hamilton’s remark in the boat afterward, when he seemed to think his pistol was still loaded. He obviously had not realized that Burr’s shot had caused an accidental firing of his own weapon. On the other hand, if one accepted the Hamiltonian version of the exchange, how could one explain the interval between the shots? In the Hamiltonian account, the exchange would have been nearly simultaneous.

Although the Burr version of what occurred presents some problems of its own, it is more compatible with the agreed-upon timing of the shots. According to Van Ness, Hamilton took aim at Burr and fired first, but missed. Burr then delayed his shot for “four or five seconds,” waiting for the smoke to clear from around Hamilton and also waiting for Pendleton to begin the count—“One, two, three, fire.” But Pendleton’s attention had been fixed on his own chief and he apparently had lacked the wherewithal to say anything in this drawn-out moment of the drama. Burr then took it upon himself to fire rather than lose his shot. Hamilton fell instantly. Van Ness was adamant about the sequence of events: “It is agreed I believe, by all who were within hearing, but particularly attested by Doctr. Hossack [*sic*], that several seconds intervened between the two discharges; and it is also agreed that Gen. H. fell *instantly* on Mr. B’s firing, which contradicts the idea that Mr. B. fired first.” Van Ness went on to provide additional detail about Burr’s behavior during the dramatic interval.

On the point of the first firing . . . I was never more confident of any matter subject to the examination of my senses. If any doubt had ever existed it would have been removed by the following circumstances: 1st When Genl. H fired I observed a jar or slight motion in Mr. B’s body, from which I supposed he was struck; but seeing him immediately afterwards standing firm at his station—I concluded the wound could not be serious. Under the impression still, however, that he was wounded, as soon as I had the opportunity I enquired where he was struck?—and after explaining to him the reason of my impression, he informed me that his foot had got upon a stone or piece of wood which gave him pain and had sprained his Ankle.

In other words, Burr’s instinctive reaction to Hamilton’s shot was a discernible flinch and an impulsive physical jerk that Burr, seeking afterward to emphasize his composure, blamed on a stone or piece of wood at his feet.¹⁵

While the palpable detail of this version has the ring of truth, and while the contours of the Burr story align themselves more comfortably with the timing of the shots, two pieces of evidence do not fit. First, how does one explain Hamilton’s obviously sincere conviction, deliv-

ered to Hosack and Pendleton in the boat afterward, that he had never fired his pistol? And second, if Hamilton did fire at Burr, how does one account for the severed branch so high above and off to the side of Burr's position?

There is a plausible and quite persuasive answer to the second question, which will then lead us to a plausible but more speculative answer to the first. The key insight, possessing the potential to unlock the mystery produced by the contradictory versions of what happened during the duel, is that both sides constructed their explanations around self-serving and misguided assumptions. The Hamilton side needed to claim that their fallen chief was a martyr who had arrived at Weehawken fully intending to expose himself to Burr's fire without shooting back. The Burr side needed to claim that their hero had behaved honorably, in accord with the principles of the *code duello*, and, after exposing his own life to Hamilton's pistol, had responded in kind but with better aim. The Hamiltonian story required a distortion in the sequence of the exchange in order to preserve Hamilton's posthumous reputation. The Burr story required a distortion of Hamilton's honorable intentions in order to justify Burr's fatal response. Both versions misrepresent what, in all likelihood, really happened.

Hamilton did fire his weapon intentionally, and he fired first. But he aimed to miss Burr, sending his ball into the tree above and behind Burr's location. In so doing, he did not withhold his shot, but he did waste it, thereby honoring his preduel pledge. Meanwhile, Burr, who did not know about the pledge, did know that a projectile from Hamilton's gun had whizzed past him and crashed into the tree to his rear. According to the principles of the *code duello*, Burr was perfectly justified in taking deadly aim at Hamilton and firing to kill.¹⁶

But did he? This is not a question we can resolve beyond a reasonable doubt. In that sense the secret is locked forever in the vast recesses of Burr's famously enigmatic mind at that most pregnant moment. But consider the following pieces of circumstantial evidence: By killing Hamilton, Burr had nothing to gain and everything to lose, as he almost certainly knew at the time and as subsequent events confirmed quite conclusively; Burr's initial reaction to Hamilton's collapse, as described by both Pendleton and Van Ness, was apparent surprise and regret, followed soon thereafter by an urge to speak with the wounded

Hamilton; moreover, in the latter stages of the preduel negotiations, when Hamilton's side proposed that David Hosack serve as physician for both parties, Burr had concurred that one doctor was sufficient, then added, "even that unnecessary"; finally, when duelists wished to graze or wound their antagonist superficially, the most popular targets were the hips and legs; Burr's ball missed being a mere flesh wound on the hip by only two or three inches, the damage to vital organs resulting from the ricochet off Hamilton's rib.¹⁷

In the end, we can never know for sure. And it is perfectly possible that Burr's smoldering hatred for Hamilton had reached such intensity that, once he had his tormentor standing helplessly in his sights, no rational calculation of his own best interests was operative at all. What is virtually certain, and most comparable with all the available evidence, is that Hamilton fired first and purposely missed. The only plausible explanation for his remark in the boat about the pistol still being loaded is that he was semiconscious, in shock, and did not know what he was saying. Or, less likely, that Pendleton and Hosack made it up to support their version of the story. What is possible, but beyond the reach of the available evidence, is that Burr really missed his target, too, that his own fatal shot, in fact, was accidental. Indeed, one of the most disarming features of the Burr version—a feature that enhances its overall credibility—is that it made Burr's shot a more deliberate and premeditated act. (Why emphasize the interval if one's intention was to diminish Burr's culpability?) In those few but fateful seconds, the thoughts racing through Burr's head would provide the ultimate answer to all questions about his character. But they are, like most of Burr's deepest thoughts, lost forever.

OUR INTENSE focus on what happened on that ledge beneath the plains of Weehawken makes eminent historical sense, for the elemental reason that the Hamilton version of the story has dominated the history books, and it is most probably wrong. Burr by straining to recover the factual ingredients in the story, we have inadvertently ignored the most obvious question—namely, what were these two prominent American statesmen doing on the ledge in the first place? Granted, they were there because Burr challenged Hamilton, and Hamilton con-

cluded he could not refuse the challenge without staining his honor. But what had Hamilton done to so enrage Burr? And what was at stake for both men that was worth risking so much?

The short answer is that, just as there was a duel of words after the actual duel—won by Hamilton's advocates—there was also a duel of words beforehand, which Burr won with equivalent decisiveness. The somewhat longer answer is that the exchange of words that preceded the exchange of shots was itself merely a culmination of long-standing personal animosity and political disagreement that emerged naturally, in retrospect almost inevitably, out of the supercharged political culture of the early republic.

In the verbal exchanges before the duel, there can be no question that Burr fired first. On June 18, 1804, he called Hamilton's attention to a letter published almost two months earlier in the *Albany Register* in which the author, Dr. Charles Cooper, recalled a harangue Hamilton had delivered against Burr the preceding February. Burr was then running for governor of New York and Hamilton had attacked his qualifications. Exactly what Hamilton said was not reported in Cooper's letter, but it concluded with the following statement: "I could detail to you a still more despicable opinion which General HAMILTON has expressed of Mr. BURR." The offensive word was *despicable*. Burr wanted Hamilton to explain or disavow the word: "You might perceive, Sir, the necessity of a prompt and unqualified acknowledgment or denial of the use of any expressions which could warrant the assertions of Dr. Cooper."¹⁸

Knowing as we do that Burr's request triggered a chain reaction that eventually produced the fatal explosion at Weehawken, it is instructive to note that neither Cooper's letter nor Burr's request mentioned any specific or clearly libelous statement by Hamilton. To be sure, *despicable* is hardly a compliment. But precisely what it referred to, or what Hamilton allegedly said about Burr, is unidentified. The core of the complaint was hollow. Therefore, all Hamilton had to do at this propitious moment was deny having said anything that could possibly fit that description, then express his personal regret that such slanderous insinuations had been attributed to him in the press. Burr would have had little choice but to accept his explanation.

Hamilton, however, chose to pursue another course. In effect, he used the inherent ambiguity of the offensive statement to evade any

direct response to Burr. He could not, he explained, "without manifest impropriety, make the avowal or disavowal you seem to think necessary." What's more, the crucial word "admits of infinite shades, from the very light to very dark. How am I to judge of the degree intended?" After delivering a brief lecture on the vagaries of grammar and syntax, calculated to irritate Burr, Hamilton went on the offensive. He felt obliged to object "on principle, to consent to be interrogated as to the justness of *inferences*, which may be drawn by *others*, from whatever I have said of a political opponent in the course of a fifteen year competition." Burr's own letter, therefore, was a gross insult in its arrogant insistence "upon a basis so vague as that which you have adopted." Hamilton was certain that, once Burr recovered his wits and sense, "you will see the matter in the same light as me." If not, then "I can only regret the circumstances, and must abide the consequences." If Burr's intention was to threaten him with the possibility of a duel, Hamilton was not disposed to submit passively to such threats. He would issue his own.¹⁹

Hamilton's fate was effectively sealed once he sent this letter. Not only did he miss the opportunity to disown the offensive characterization of Burr; he raised the rhetorical stakes with his dismissive tone and gratuitously defiant counterthreat. Burr's response was incisively curt: "having Considered it attentively," he wrote, "I regret to find in it nothing of that sincerity and delicacy which you profess to Value." Then he raised the verbal game to yet a higher level of insult: "I relieved with unsuspecting faith that from the frankness of a Soldier and the Candor of a gentleman I might expect an ingenuous declaration." But such expectations were obviously too much for such a duplicitous character as Hamilton, who lacked "the Spirit to Maintain or the Magnanimity to retract" his own words.²⁰

Moreover, Hamilton's complaint—that he could hardly be expected to remember everything he had said over "the course of a fifteen year competition"—inadvertently opened up a whole new and much larger field of conflict. In his instructions to Van Ness, who had become his designated representative in the exchange, Burr explained that the Cooper letter was merely the most recent libel against him by Hamilton. While Burr claimed that he had always restrained himself when criticized by his political enemies, "in regard of Mr. H there has been no reciprocity—for several years his name has been lent to the support

of Slanders." Two years earlier, in fact, Burr had claimed to have confronted Hamilton with a personal complaint about incessant vilifications of his character, and Hamilton had acknowledged his indiscretions. Despite the apology and apparent promise to stop, Hamilton had then resumed his back-stabbing campaign. According to Burr, the immediate incident only proved that Hamilton's libelous ways were incorrigible. Now, however, "these things must have an end."²¹

As a result, the form of satisfaction Burr now demanded expanded beyond one single utterance reported in an Albany newspaper: Van Ness relayed the new terms on June 25, 1804: "Col: Burr required a General disavowal of any intention on the part of Genl Hamilton in his various conversations to convey impressions derogatory to the honor of M. Burr." Burr was now demanding a general apology for all past indiscretions. He acknowledged that this represented an escalation, but given Hamilton's arrogant evasiveness, "more will now be required than would have been asked at first."²²

By now Pendleton had entered the negotiations as Hamilton's representative. He attempted to exercise his influence, as in fact the etiquette of the *code duello* required, to find a way out of the impasse. Under Pendleton's prodding, Hamilton agreed to a statement disclaiming any recollection of the conversation as recounted by Cooper. That conversation, as Hamilton now remembered it, "consisted of comments on the political principles and views of Col. Bur . . . without reference to any instance of past conduct, or to private character." Hamilton saw fit to repeat his main point, "that the conversation to which Doctr Cooper alluded turned wholly on political topics and did not attribute to Colo Burr, any instance of dishonorable conduct, nor relate to his private character."²³

Strictly speaking, Hamilton's concession should have been the end of it. Affairs of honor were supposed to involve only *personal* charges. Political or ideological disagreements, no matter how deep, lay outside the field of honor on which a gentleman could demand satisfaction. Hamilton's distinction between personal and political criticism was designed to change the dispute with Burr from an affair of honor to a political difference of opinion. Technically, given the rules of the *code duello*, Burr should have felt obliged to accept Hamilton's explanation as the equivalent of an apology.

Except that Burr's blood was now up. If Hamilton had presented his distinction between personal and political criticism earlier, the affair would most probably have ended before it began. Now, however, Burr would be satisfied with nothing less than a wholesale and unqualified apology for all previous remarks about his personal and political character: "No denial or declaration will be satisfactory," Van Ness explained, "unless it be general, so as to wholly exclude the idea that rumors derogatory to Col. Burr's honor have originated with Genl Hamilton or have been fairly inferred from anything he has said." There must be no room in which Hamilton could maneuver; it must be a blanket apology. "A retraction or denial therefore of all such declarations or a disavowal of any intention to impeach Col Burr without reference to time and place," Van Ness concluded, "is the only reparation that can be made." Later on, when this part of the correspondence between the two sides was published, that eccentric Virginia statesman and veteran of multiple duels, John Randolph, observed that Hamilton came off as "a sinking fox," while Burr was "a vigorous old hound" resolutely determined to hunt down his prey with "an undeviating pursuit . . . not to be eluded or baffled."²⁴

Just as most duels in this era did not end in death or serious injury, most negotiations over matters of honor did not end in duels. The Burr-Hamilton affair was destined to prove an exception on both counts. Once Burr extended his demands to cover their entire public careers, and then also refused to recognize the traditional distinction between personal and political criticism, Hamilton was truly trapped. Several more letters were exchanged, as Pendleton groped for an honorable exit. He protested that Burr's terms "have greatly changed and extended the original ground of inquiry," requiring Hamilton to assume responsibility for "any rumors which may be afloat . . . through the whole period of his acquaintance with Col Burr." Burr did not budge, repeating his accusation that "secret whispers traducing his fame and impeaching his honor" over more than a decade demanded an unqualified apology, and that Hamilton's insistence on distinctions and qualifications "are proofs that he has done the injury specified." On June 27, 1804, Burr's patience ran out: "The length to which this correspondence has extended only tending to prove that the satisfactory redress . . . cannot be obtained," Van Ness explained, "he

deems it useless to offer any proposition except the simple Message which I shall now have the honor to deliver." It was the invitation for "the interview at Weehawken."²⁵

Hamilton requested a brief delay so that he could complete some pending legal business and put his personal affairs in order. Both men prepared their wills and left sufficient evidence to piece together some, albeit hazy, picture of what was on their minds. Burr wrote his beloved daughter Theodosta and her husband, extracting a promise that she would be allowed to pursue her study of Latin, Greek, and the classics. Then, in a typically bizarre act of Burrish dash, he requested that, if anything unforeseen should befall him, his daughter and son-in-law convey his respects to one of his former paramours, now a married woman living in Cuba.²⁶

On July 4, at the annual Independence Day dinner held by the Society of the Cincinnati, Burr and Hamilton actually sat together at the same table. The artist John Trumbull, who was also present, recorded the scene: "The singularity of their manner was observed by all, but few had any suspicion of the cause. Burr contrary to his wont, was silent, gloomy, sour; while Hamilton entered with glee into the gaiety of a convivial party, and even sung an old military song." The tune that Hamilton sang, called "General Wolfe's Song," was supposedly written by the great British general on the eve of his glorious death on the Plains of Abraham outside Quebec in 1759. It was, therefore, an eerily prophetic song, especially the stanza that went:

*Why, soldiers, why
Should we be melancholy, boys?
Why, soldiers, why?
Whose business is to die!
What! Sighing? fie!
Damn fears, drink on, be jolly, boys!
'Tis he, you, or I?*

Hamilton's last days contained several other incidents of equivalent poignancy, though they were only recognizable when viewed through the knowledge of the looming duel. On July 3, the day before the Society of the Cincinnati dinner, he had a dinner party of his own at his new country house, the Grange. The list of guests included William

Short, formerly Thomas Jefferson's personal secretary in Paris and a lifelong Jefferson protégé. Also invited were Abigail Adams Smith and her husband, the daughter and son-in-law of John and Abigail Adams. Since Jefferson was Hamilton's primal political enemy, and since Adams was his bitterest opponent within the Federalist party, a man whom Hamilton had publicly described as mentally deranged and unfit for the presidency, the choice of guests suggests that Hamilton was making some kind of statement about separating political and personal differences. About this same time, he drafted a "Thesis on Discretion" for his eldest surviving son. It singled out discretion as "if not a splendid . . . at least a very useful virtue," then went on to offer an obviously autobiographical warning: "The greatest abilities are sometimes thrown into the shade by this defect or are prevented from obtaining the success to which they are entitled. The person on whom it is chargeable [is] also apt to make and have numerous enemies and is occasionally involved . . . in the most difficulties and dangers."²⁸

All of which suggests that the impending duel with Burr was prompting some second thoughts on Hamilton's part about the sheer intensity of his past political disagreements, as well as about his own periodic lack of discretion in these highly personalized debates. Those predisposed to detect hints of suicidal intentions during Hamilton's last days might wish to speculate at great length on such tidbits. The main outline of the visible and available evidence, however, reveals a man questioning his own characteristic excesses, which had somehow put him on a course that led to the current impasse. Hamilton did not believe that in going to Weehawken to meet Burr he was most probably going to meet his Maker. But the looming threat of possible injury and perhaps even death did tend to focus his mind on the downside of his swashbuckling style. He was less suicidal than regretful, less fatalistic than meditative.

The regrets and meditations, however, did not spread as far as Aaron Burr. The evidence here does not require inspired conjecture or nuanced analysis. Hamilton wrote out his "Statement on the Impending Duel" to answer those critics who wondered how a statesman of his maturity and distinction could allow himself to be goaded into a juvenile exchange of shots at ten paces. "There were intrinsic difficulties in the thing," Hamilton explained in his statement, rooted in the reality "not to be denied, that my animadversions on the political prin-

ciples, character and views of Col Burr" had been extremely severe, "to include very unfavourable criticisms on particular instances of the private conduct of the Gentleman." In other words, Burr's allegation that Hamilton had made a practice of vilifying him for many years was essentially correct. For that reason, "the disavowal required of me by Col Burr, in a general and indefinite form, was out of my power." He could not apologize without lying. What ultimately blocked any prospect of an apology or retraction was Hamilton's abiding conviction that his libels of Burr were all true: "I have not censured him on light grounds," Hamilton concluded, "or from unworthy inducements. I certainly have had strong reasons for what I may have said."²⁹

The answer, then, to the salient question—What were these two prominent American statesmen doing on that ledge beneath the plains of Weehawken?—is reasonably clear. Burr was there because Hamilton had been libeling him throughout their crisscrossing careers in public life. Despite earlier promises to cease this practice, Hamilton had persisted. Burr's patience had simply worn out.

Hamilton was there because he could not honestly deny Burr's charges, which he sincerely believed captured the essence of the man's character. What's more, Hamilton also believed, as he put it, that his own "ability to be in future useful, whether in resisting mischief or effecting good, in those crises of public affairs, which seem likely to happen, would probably be inseparable from a conformity with public prejudice in this particular." In other words, if he did not answer Burr's challenge, he would be repudiating his well-known convictions, and in so doing, he would lose the respect of those political colleagues on whom his reputation depended. This would be tantamount to retiring from public life. And he was not prepared to do that. If Burr went to Weehawken out of frustration, Hamilton went out of a combination of ambition and insecurity.³⁰

WHAT DID IT mean? For those at the time it meant that Hamilton became a martyr to the dying cause of Federalism and Burr became the most despised national leader since Benedict Arnold. Indeed, less than a year after the duel, Burr made secret contact with British officials for the purpose of seizing some substantial portion of the trans-Mississippi territory and placing it under British control, presumably with Burr

himself as governor. Perhaps Burr reasoned that, since he was being treated as a new Benedict Arnold, he might as well enjoy the fruits of a similar treason.³¹

Meanwhile, clergymen, college presidents, and other self-appointed spokesmen for communal standards of morality seized upon the Burr-Hamilton encounter to launch a crusade against dueling throughout most of the northern states. What had once seemed an honorable if illegal contest of wills, bathed in a mist of aristocratic glamour and clad in the armor of medieval chivalry, came to be regarded as a pathological ritual in which self-proclaimed gentlemen shot each other in juvenile displays of their mutual insecurity. Though the practice of dueling survived in the South, and in its more democratic blaze-away version on the frontier of the West, the stigma associated with the Burr-Hamilton duel put the *code duello* on the defensive as a national institution. Not that it would ever die out completely, drawing as it did on irrational urges whose potency defies civilized sanctions, always flourishing in border regions, criminal underworlds, and ghetto communities where the authority of the law lacks credibility. Nevertheless, the Burr-Hamilton duel helped turn the tide against the practice of dueling by providing a focal point for its critics and serving as a dramatic object lesson of its self-destructive character. One of the reasons the Burr-Hamilton duel became legendary as the most famous duel in American history is its cautionary role as the most memorable example of how not to do it.³²

The chief reason, however, for its legendary status, and the main reason why we can call it "The Duel" without much fear of being misunderstood, is the relative prominence of the two participants. Burr was the second-ranking official in the federal government. Hamilton was, after George Washington, the most powerful figure in the Federalist party and, his advocates would have added, the intellectual wellspring for all the political energy that Washington merely symbolized. Their fatal encounter represented a momentary breakdown in the dominant pattern of nonviolent conflict within the American revolutionary generation.

In the wake of other national movements—the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions, as well as the multiple movements for national independence in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—the leadership class of the successful revolution proceeded to decimate itself in

bloody reprisals that frequently assumed genocidal proportions. But the conflict within the American revolutionary generation remained a passionate yet bloodless affair in which the energies released by national independence did not devour its own children. The Burr-Hamilton duel represented the singular exception to this rule. Perhaps this is what Henry Adams had in mind when, in his inimitable style, he described the moment at Weehawken with its "accessories of summer-morning sunlight on rocky and wooded heights, tranquil river, and distant sky, and behind [it] all . . . moral gloom, double treason, and political despair," calling it "the most dramatic moment in the early politics of the Union."³³

What made it truly dramatic, in the Henry Adams sense, was not the sad consequences of a merely personal feud, but, rather, the underlying values of the political culture that made the encounter simultaneously so poignant and so symbolic. The full meaning of the duel, in other words, cannot be captured without recovering those long-lost values of the early American republic, which shaped the way Burr and Hamilton so mistrusted and even hated each other. More was at stake, much more, than the throbbing egos of two ambitious statesmen vying for personal honor. Hamilton believed—and he had a good deal of evidence to support his belief—that the very survival of the infant American nation was at stake. Understanding why he entertained such hyperbolic thoughts is the key to the core meaning of the duel.

When Burr first demanded an apology, Hamilton refused to comply, complaining that he could not possibly be expected to recall all his remarks about Burr over a fifteen-year period of interaction. Actually, Burr and Hamilton had known each other almost twice that long, from their youthful days as officers in the Continental Army. But Hamilton's reference to "fifteen years" turned out to be a precise estimate of their history as political antagonists. The hostility began in 1789, when Burr accepted the office of attorney general in New York from Governor George Clinton after campaigning for Hamilton's candidate, who lost. Burr's facile shift in his allegiance, the first in what would be several similarly agile switches during his career, captured Hamilton's attention and produced his first recorded anti-Burr remarks, questioning Burr's lack of political principle.

If the first crack appeared in 1789, the real break occurred two years later. In 1791 Burr defeated Philip Schuyler, Hamilton's wealthy father-

-in-law, in the race for the United States Senate, when several rival factions within the clanish, even quasi-feudal, politics of New York united to unseat the incumbent, who was generally perceived as a Hamilton supporter. It was all downhill from there. Burr used his perch in the Senate to oppose Hamilton's fiscal program, then to decide a disputed (and probably rigged) gubernatorial election in New York against Hamilton's candidate. Hamilton, in turn, opposed Burr's candidacy for the vice presidency in 1792 and two years later blocked his nomination as American minister to France. The most dramatic clash came in 1800, when Burr ran alongside Jefferson in the presidential election—his reward for delivering the bulk of New York's electoral votes, which made Jefferson's victory possible. The election was thrown into the House of Representatives because of the quirk in the electoral college—subsequently corrected by the Twelfth Amendment—which gave Burr and Jefferson the same number of votes without specifying which candidate headed the ticket. Hamilton lobbied his Federalist colleagues in the House to support Jefferson over Burr for the presidency, a decision that probably had a decisive effect on the eventual outcome. Finally, in 1804, in the campaign for governor of New York, which actually produced the remarks Burr cited in his challenge, Hamilton opposed Burr's candidacy for an office he was probably not going to win anyway.³⁴

This brief review of the Burr-Hamilton rivalry provides a helpful sense of context, but to fully appreciate Burr's eventual charges, and Hamilton's private acknowledgment that they were justified, one needs to know, specifically, what Hamilton said about Burr. Throughout this same period, Hamilton made a host of political enemies about whom he had extremely critical things to say (and vice versa). Indeed, Jefferson, rather than Burr, was Hamilton's chief political enemy, followed closely behind by Adams. This made logical as well as political sense, since Jefferson was the titular leader of the Republican opposition and Adams was the leader of the moderate wing of the Federalists, a group that found Hamilton's policies sometimes excessive and his flamboyant style always offensive. But within this Hamiltonian rogues' gallery, Burr was always the chief rogue, and what Hamilton said about him was truly distinctive.

Whereas Hamilton's central charge against Jefferson was that he was a utopian visionary with a misguided set of political principles, his

core criticism of Burr was that he was wholly devoid of any principles at all. Burr was "unprincipled, both as a public and private man," Hamilton claimed, "a man whose only political principle is, to mount at all events to the highest political honours of the Nation, and as much further as circumstances will carry him." Sporadic attacks on Burr's character along the same lines—"unprincipled in private life, desperate in his fortune," "despotic in his ordinary demeanor," "beyond redemption"—are littered throughout Hamilton's correspondence in the 1790s, and they probably reflect a mere fraction of his unrecorded comments to Federalist colleagues.³⁵

The full and better-recorded salvo came late in 1800 and early in 1801, during the debate in the House of Representatives over the presidential deadlock between Burr and Jefferson. Since everyone knew that Jefferson was Hamilton's implacable political enemy, the kind of elusive target who seemed to be put on earth by God to subvert Hamilton's visionary plans for a powerful federal government, Hamilton's strong endorsement of Jefferson as "by far not so dangerous a man," who possessed "solid pretensions to character," only served to underline his contempt for Burr. "As to Burr there is nothing in his favour," Hamilton observed, then went on: "His private character is not defended by his most partial friends. He is bankrupt beyond redemption except by the plunder of his country. His public principles have no other spring or aim than his own aggrandizement. . . . If he can he will certainly disturb our institutions to secure himself *permanent power* and with it *wealth*. He is truly the *Catiline of America*."³⁶

This mention of Catiline is worth a momentary pause, in part because the reference is so unfamiliar to modern ears as to seem meaningless, and also because it was so familiar to the leaders of the revolutionary generation as to require no further explanation. By accusing Burr of being Catiline, Hamilton was making the ultimate accusation, for Catiline was the treacherous and degenerate character whose scheming nearly destroyed the Roman Republic and whose licentious ways inspired, by their very profligacy, Cicero's eloquent oration on virtue, which was subsequently memorized by generations of American schoolboys. No one in the political leadership of the early American republic needed to be reminded who Catiline was. He was the talented but malevolent destroyer of republican government. If each member of the revolutionary generation harbored secret thoughts about being the

modern incarnation of a classical Greek or Roman hero—Washington was Cato or Cincinnatus, Adams was Solon or Cicero—no one aspired to be Catiline.

Did Burr fit the role? Put differently, were Hamilton's accusations of Burr true? It is an intriguing question, and given Burr's matchless skill at concealing his motives, covering his tracks, and destroying much of his private correspondence, unambiguous answers are not a realistic prospect. The recurrent pattern in Burr's political behavior that caught Hamilton's eye, however, made him eminently vulnerable to the Catiline charge. Whether in the labyrinthine politics of New York or the emerging party wars between Federalists and Republicans at the national level, Burr possessed an absolute genius at positioning himself amid competing factions so as to make himself readily available to the side most desperate for his services.

The presidential election of 1800 is the most politically significant and most illustrative example of the pattern: Burr allowed the voting between him and Jefferson to go on for thirty-six ballots in the House of Representatives without ever indicating his principled recognition that the mass of the electorate had clearly intended to designate Jefferson as president. In his own defense, Burr might have pointed out that he never actively sought Federalist support. But he never repudiated it either. His enigmatic silence, however, unquestionably had mischievous consequences, for it prolonged the scheming in the House and, somewhat ironically, convinced Jefferson that Burr could never be trusted.³⁷

His knack for injecting himself into the cracks between warring political factions might have been interpreted as a sign of his independence. Like Washington, so his defenders might have argued, Burr refused to place his own political convictions at the service of any party. But while Washington attempted to transcend the ideological wars of the 1790s, Burr seemed disposed to tunnel beneath the warring camps, then pop up on the side promising him the bigger tribute. If Washington was the epitome of the virtuous leader who subordinated personal interest to the public good, Burr was a kind of anti-Washington, who manipulated the public interest for his own inscurable purposes.³⁸

At least so it appeared to Hamilton. As if to demonstrate that his questionable behavior in the presidential crisis of 1801 was no aberration, Burr repeated the pattern in 1804 during the campaign for govern-

nor of New York. Although still serving as vice president under Jefferson, Burr realized that the Republicans intended to drop him from the ticket when Jefferson ran for his second term. And so when Federalist leaders from New York approached him as a prospective candidate for the gubernatorial race, he indicated a willingness to switch party affiliations and run in his home state as a Federalist. This was the decision that caused Hamilton to repeat his earlier characterizations of Burr as the unprincipled American Carline, which in turn generated the newspaper reports containing the offensive word "despicable."

Burr that was only half the story. For the Federalist leaders in New England were interested in recruiting Burr as part of a larger scheme that aimed at nothing less than the dismemberment of the American republic. (This was really what Henry Adams was referring to by the phrase "the most dramatic moment in the early politics of the Union.") Their plan envisioned the secession of New England in the wake of Jefferson's reelection and the simultaneous capture of New York, which would then join the secessionist movement to create a Federalist-controlled confederacy of northern states. Burr, true to form, refused to make any promises to deliver New York to the secessionists, but he also would not repudiate the conspiracy.³⁹

Hamilton was aware of the Federalist plot, which was no half-baked scheme hatched by marginal figures, involving as it did several Federalist senators from New England and Timothy Pickering, the former secretary of state. "I will here express but one sentiment," Hamilton warned his Federalist colleagues, "which is, the Dismemberment of our Empire will be a clear sacrifice . . . without any counterbalancing good." When apprised that the leading New England Federalists were waiting to hear that their old chief was committed to the secessionist plot, Hamilton made clear his opposition: "Tell them from ME, at MY request, for God's sake, to cease these conversations and threatenings about a separation of the Union. It must hang together as long as it can be made to." The last letter that Hamilton ever wrote, composed the night before the duel, was devoted to squelching the still-lingering Federalist fantasies of a separate northeastern confederation, a dream that refused to die until the moribund effort at the Hartford Convention in 1815 exposed it as a fiasco.⁴⁰

What Hamilton seemed to see in Burr, then, was a man very much like himself in several respects: ambitious, energetic, possessing an

instinctive strategic antenna and a willingness to take political risks. Hamilton understood the potency of Burr's influence because he felt those same personal qualities throbbing away inside himself. Both men also shared a keen sense of the highly fluid and still-fragile character of the recently launched American republic. The hyperbolic tone of Hamilton's anti-Burr comments derived not so much from intense personal dislike *per se* as from his intense fear that the precarious condition of the infant nation rendered it so vulnerable to Burr's considerable talents. Burr embodied Hamilton's daring and energy run amok in a political culture still groping for its stable shape.

The kernel of truth in Hamilton's distinction between personal and political criticism of Burr resides here. In a sense it was an accurate statement of Hamilton's assessment. Burr's reputation as a notorious womanizer or as a lavish spender who always managed to stay one step ahead of his creditors did not trouble Hamilton. What did worry him to no end was the ominous fit between Burr's political skills and the opportunities for mischief so clearly available in a nation whose laws and institutions were still congealing.⁴¹

The problem with Hamilton's distinction, however, was that the putative barrier between personal and political criticism, or private and public behavior, kept getting overwhelmed by real choices. Personal character was essential in order to resist public temptations. In Burr's case, for example, the decision to support or betray Jefferson in 1801; or to conspire with Federalists promoting a northern secession in 1804; or a few years later, to detach the American Southwest from the United States. Character counted in each of these choices, because the temptations being served up by the political conditions in this formative phase of the American republic put the moral fiber of national leadership to a true test.

It was Burr's unique distinction, at least as Hamilton saw it, to fail every such test. Whereas no one else in the revolutionary generation wanted the role of Carline, Burr seemed to be auditioning for the part at every opportunity. To put it somewhat differently, if the dispute between Burr and Hamilton had been settled in the courts rather than on the dueling grounds, and if one admitted the legal principle that truth constituted a legitimate defense against charges of libel (a principle, intriguingly, that Hamilton insisted on in the last case he ever argued), Hamilton would almost certainly have won.⁴²

It is difficult for us to fathom fully the threat that Burr represented to Hamilton because we know that the American experiment with republican government was destined to succeed. We know that a nation so conceived and so dedicated could and did endure, indeed flourish, to become the longest-lived republic in world history. Not only was such knowledge unavailable to Hamilton and his contemporaries, the political landscape they saw around themselves was a dangerously fluid place, where neither the national laws nor institutions had yet hardened into permanent fixtures. Or if one wished to think biologically rather than architecturally, the body politic had yet to develop its immunities to the political diseases afflicting all new nations. What seems extravagant and hyperbolic in Hamilton's critical description of Burr, then, was not a symptom of Hamilton's paranoia so much as a realistic response to the genuine vulnerability of the still-tender young plant called the United States. So much seemed to be at stake because, in truth, it was.⁴³

Our search for the full meaning of the duel has led us backward, past the purely personal jealousies, through the only partially resolvable mysteries of what happened beneath the plains of Weehawken on the fateful day, and beyond the history of dueling as a dying institution. It has become an excursion into the highly problematic political world of the newborn American republic, a place where real and not just imagined conspiracies were prevalent, where the endurance of the political entity called the United States was still very much up in the air. As is more or less true about any famous event that is deeply imbedded in the historical soil of a particularly fertile time and place, the real significance of the duel lies beyond the specific parameters of the event itself, beyond that narrow ledge above the Hudson River. It expands to encompass an entire but still-emerging world that Burr threatened and Hamilton believed himself to be defending.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once observed that "a great man represents a strategic point in the campaign of history, and part of his greatness consists of his being there." Both Burr and Hamilton thought of themselves as great men who happened to come of age at one of those strategic points in the campaign of history called the American revolutionary era. By the summer of 1804, history had pretty much passed them by. Burr had alienated Jefferson and the triumphant Republican party by his disloyalty as a vice president and had lost by a landslide in his bid to

become a Federalist governor of New York. Hamilton had not held national office for nine years and the Federalist cause he had championed was well on its way to oblivion. Even in his home state of New York, the Federalists were, as John Quincy Adams put it, "a minority, and of that minority, only a minority were admirers and partisans of Mr. Hamilton." Neither man had much of a political future.⁴⁴

But by being there beneath the plains of Weehawken for their interview, they managed to make a dramatic final statement about the time of their time. Honor mattered because character mattered. And character mattered because the fate of the American experiment with republican government still required virtuous leaders to survive. Eventually, the United States might develop into a nation of laws and established institutions capable of surviving corrupt or incompetent public officials. But it was not there yet. It still required honorable and virtuous leaders to endure. Both Burr and Hamilton came to the interview because they wished to be regarded as part of such company.