

# The Founders on Personal & National Integrity: George Washington & Aaron Burr



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# in·teg·ri·ty

- Adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty.
- Personal integrity is essential to resist public temptation.
- By contrasting two of the nation's early founders, George Washington and Aaron Burr, we can see how personal and national integrity are intertwined.
- “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 inscrutable purposes.” – Joseph Ellis, Pulitzer prize-winning author of *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (2000)

# George Washington: A Case Study in Integrity

. . . His integrity was pure, his justice the most inflexible I have ever known, no motives of interest or consanguinity [having a close relationship], of friendship or hatred, being able to bias his decision. . . . The whole, his character was, in its mass, perfect, in nothing bad, in a few points indifferent. —Thomas Jefferson on George Washington, 1814



# George Washington: A Case Study in Integrity



1. 1783 resignation as Commander of the Continental Army.
2. 1796 presidential farewell address.

# Resignation as Commander of the Continental Army (1783)



- Following the American victory during the revolutionary war, the military officers (unpaid and disgruntled) met in Newburgh, New York to discuss insurrection by marching on Congress and seizing land for themselves in the West, presumably with Washington as their leader.
- On March 15, 1783, he rejected their offer and denounced the scheme as treason. He then reached into his pocket and put on a pair of glasses: “Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in service to my country.”
- After hearing of Washington’s refusal to seize power, England’s King George III said: “If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world.”
- Nine months later, he formally bid farewell to his officers at Fraunces Tavern in New York City and then traveled to surrender his commission to Congress at Annapolis: “Having now finished the work assigned me, I now retire from the great theater of action.”

# Washington Bids Farewell to His Officers



Long Room, Fraunces Tavern, December 4, 1783

# Washington Resigns His Commission



Annapolis, Maryland, December 23, 1783

# Washington's Farewell Address (1796)



Henrietta Liston, wife of the British minister, described seeing him deliver his last annual presidential address before Congress on December 9, 1796: “The Hall was crowded and a prodigious Mob at the Door, about twelve o’clock Washington entered in full dress, as He always is on publick occasion, black velvet, sword, etc.”



# Washington's Farewell Address (1796)

- The speech is widely known for its warnings against political division at home and diplomatic involvement abroad.
- Its greatest significance, however, is in demonstrating once again how Washington chose to relinquish power when faced with an opportunity to keep if not expand it.

# Washington's Farewell Address (1796)

- “I did not seek the office with which you have honored me... [and now possess] the grey hairs of a man who has, excepting the interval between the close of the Revolutionary War, and the organization of the new government—either in a civil, or military character, spent five and forty years—All the prime of his life—in serving his country; [may he] be suffered to pass quietly to the grave—and that his errors, however, numerous; if they are not criminal, may be consigned to the Tomb of oblivion, as he himself will soon be to the Mansion of Retirement.”
- Note: Washington wrote this passage and wanted it to be near the beginning of his speech. Alexander Hamilton eliminated the references to “grey hairs,” “prime of his life,” and “errors, however numerous.” Hamilton also moved it to the end of the speech. Washington was pleased with the changes and praised his old friend for rendering him “with less egotism.”

THE ADDRESS OF  
To the People  
ON HIS DECLINING  
OF  
UNITED



GEN. WASHINGTON  
of America,  
THE PRESIDENCY  
OF  
THE  
STATES.

*Friends and Fellow-Citizens,*

THE period for the new election of a citizen to administer the Executive Government of the United States being not far distant, and the time already arrived when your thoughts must be employed in designating the person who is to be clothed with that important trust, it appears to me proper, especially as it may conduce to a more distinct expression of the public voice, that I should now appear you of the resolution I have formed, to decline being considered among the number of those out of whom a choice is to be made.

I beg you, at the same time, to do me the justice to be assured, that this resolution has not been taken without a strict regard to all the considerations appertaining to the relation which binds a faithful citizen to his country; and that, in withdrawing the tender of service, which absence in my situation might imply, I am influenced by no disposition of mind for your future interest; an eagerness of grateful respect for your past kindness; but an unfeigned and full conviction that the step is compatible with both.

The acceptance of, and continuance in the office to which your suffrages have twice called me, have been a uniform source of satisfaction to the opinion of duty, and to a deference for what appeared to be your desire. I constantly found that it would have been much easier in my power, consistently with motives which I was not at liberty to disregard, to retreat to that retirement from which I had been reluctantly driven. The strength of my inclination to do this, previous to the last election, had even led to the preparation of an address to declare it to you; but mature reflection on the then perplexed and critical posture of our affairs with foreign nations, and the unanimous advice of persons entitled to my confidence, impelled me to abandon the idea.

I rejoice that the state of your concerns, external as well as internal, no longer renders the pursuit of inclination incompatible with the exigencies of duty or propriety; and am persuaded, whatever gratification may be retained for my services, that, in the present circumstances of our country, you will not disapprove my determination to retire.

The impressions with which I first undertook the arduous trust were explained on the proper occasion. In the discharge of this trust I will only say, that I have, with good intentions, contributed towards the organization and administration of the government the best exertions of which a very fallible judgment was capable. Not unconscious, in the course of the infancy of my qualifications, experience in my own eyes, perhaps still more in the eyes of others, has strengthened the motives to decline of myself, and every day the increasing weight of years admonishes me more and more that the shade of retirement is as necessary to me as it will be welcome. Should that in any circumstances have been peculiarly valuable to my services, they were temporary; I have the consolation to believe, that while choice and Providence unite me to quit the political scene, partition does not forbid it.

In looking forward to the moment which is intended to terminate the career of my public life, my feelings do not permit me to suppress the deep acknowledgment of that debt of gratitude which I owe to my beloved country for the many honors it has conferred on me; still more for the steady confidence with which it has supported me; and for the opportunities I have thereby enjoyed of manifesting my affectionate attachment by services for her and preserving through an unblemished conduct to my country from these services. Let it always be remembered by your friends, and by an unfeigned and full conviction that the step is compatible with both.

It becomes here necessary to say a few words to you. It is always to be remembered by your friends, and by an unfeigned and full conviction that the step is compatible with both.

fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of Public Liberty.

Without looking forward to an extremity of this kind (which nevertheless ought not to be entirely out of sight), the common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it.

It serves always to distract the public councils, and enfeebles the public administration; it agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one party against another; foment occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which find a facilitated access to government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and the will of another.

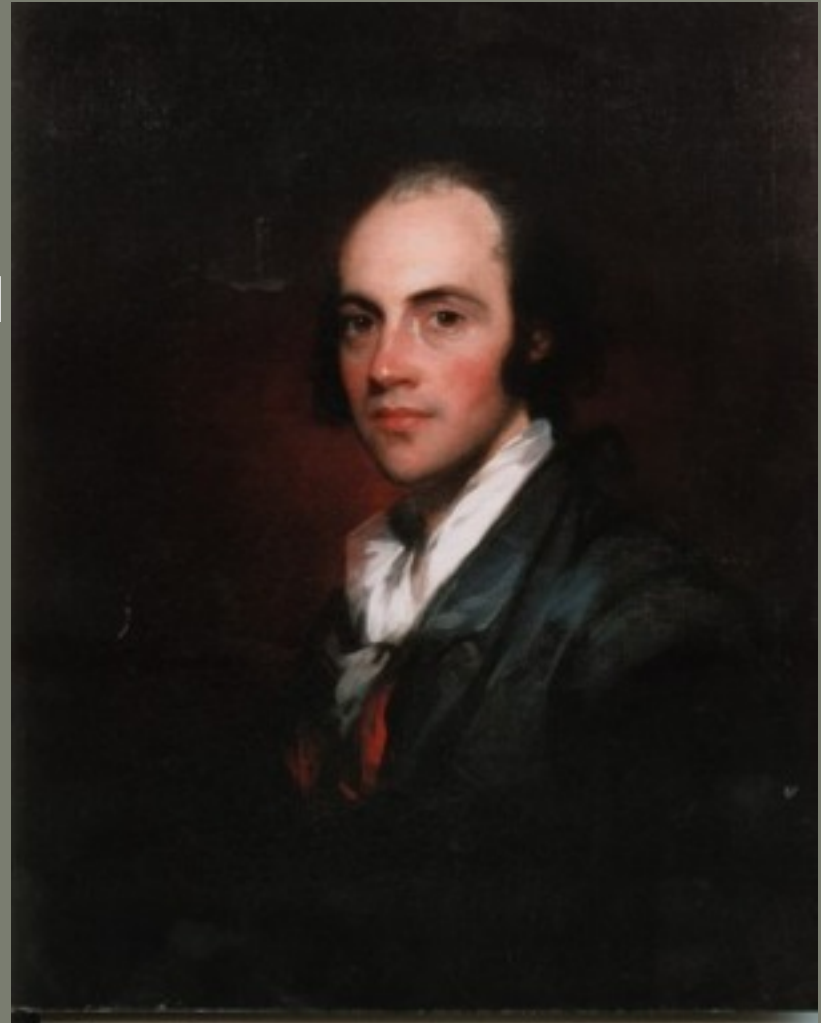
There is an opinion that parties in free countries are useful checks upon the administration of the government, and serve to keep alive the spirit of liberty. This, within certain limits, is probably true; and in governments of a monarchical and aristocratical complexion may look with indulgence, if not with favor, upon the spirit of party; but, in those of the popular character, in governments purely elective, it is a spirit not to be encouraged. From their natural tendency it is certain there will always be enough of that spirit for every salutary purpose. And there being constant danger of excess, the effect ought to be, by force of public opinion, to moderate and restrain it. A fire not to be quenched, it demands a uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into a flame, lest, instead of warming, it should consume.

It is important, likewise, that the habits of thinking in a free country should inspire caution in those entrusted with its administration, to confine themselves within their respective constitutional spheres, avoiding the exercise of the powers of one department to encroach upon another. The spirit of encroachment tends to consolidate the powers of all the departments in one, and thus to create, whatever the form of government, a real despotism. A just estimate of that love of power, and possession to abuse it, which lurks in the human heart, is sufficient to satisfy us of the truth of this position. The necessity of restraining it in the exercise of political power, by dividing and distributing it into different depositories, and constituting each the guardian of the public weal against invasions by the others, has been evinced by experience in almost all nations; some of them in our own country, and under our own eyes. To preserve them must be as necessary as to restrain them. If, in the opinion of the people, the distribution or modification of the constitutional powers be in any particular wrong, let it be corrected by an amendment in the way which the constitution designates. But let there be no change by usurpation; for though this, in one instance, may be the instrument of good, it is the customary weapon by which free governments are destroyed. The precedent must always greatly overbalance, in permanent evil, any partial or transient benefit which the use can at any time yield.

If all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism who should labour to subvert these good pillars of civil society. Hence, these sacred principles of the Declaration of Independence—The more polition, results with the power, ought to be ever and to the, if there, a virtuous and not their at their management with virtue and

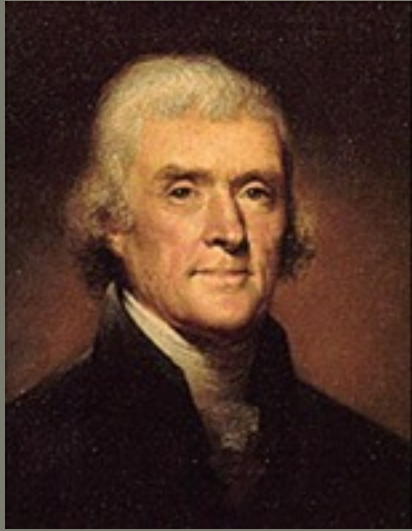
# Aaron Burr

- The decision as a vice presidential candidate to support or betray his running mate Thomas Jefferson in the disputed election of 1800.
- Whether to conspire with Federalists promoting a northern secession in 1804.
- The challenge, shooting, and killing of Alexander Hamilton.
- To detach the American southwest from the United States, leading to his trial for treason.

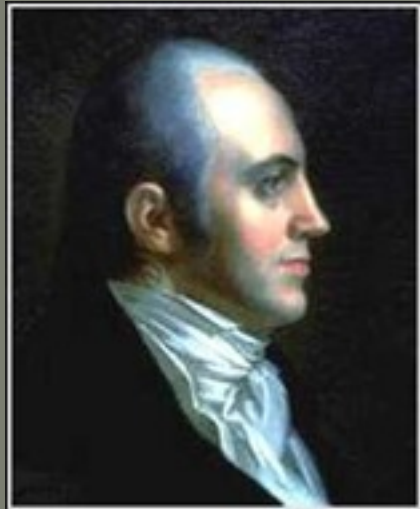


# Aaron Burr:

## The Disputed Election of 1800

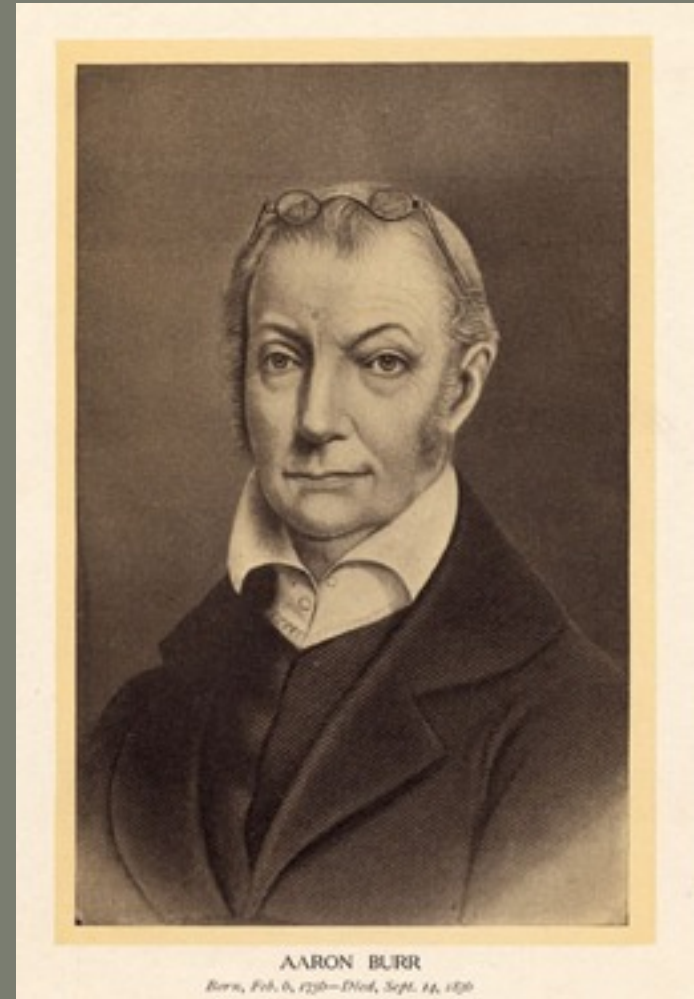


- Through a quirk in the electoral process (later corrected by the 12<sup>th</sup> Amendment) Jefferson and his running mate Burr received the same number of electoral votes.
- While he never actively tried to secure the presidency, Burr allowed the voting between him and Jefferson to go on for 36 ballots in the House without ever indicating that the electorate had clearly wanted Jefferson to be president. Burr's silence not only prolonged the process and encouraged behind-the-scenes scheming by House members, it ultimately convinced Jefferson that Burr could never be trusted.
- Hamilton threw the election to Jefferson and remarked that Jefferson was "by far not so dangerous a man" who possessed "solid pretensions to character." "As to Burr there is nothing in his favour. 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."
- Note: Catiline was the treacherous and degenerate character whose scheming nearly destroyed the Roman Republic.



# Aaron Burr: Northern Secession of 1804

- New York Federalist leaders recruited Vice President Burr to run for Governor as part of a larger scheme to join New England in seceding from the union upon Jefferson's reelection.
- While Burr refused to promise anything, he did not repudiate the conspiracy.
- When Hamilton heard of the secessionist plans, he made his opposition plain: "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."
- Burr was dropped from the 1804 presidential ticket and lost the New York Governor's race (after being bitterly attacked by Hamilton and others in the press).



# Aaron Burr: The Killing of Alexander Hamilton



- Burr was so upset at Hamilton calling him “despicable” at a dinner party that Burr challenged him to a duel. Hamilton denied using the word. Burr demanded he retract all criticisms Hamilton had made of him in the past 15 years. Hamilton said that he could not and stood by his critiques which he felt were true.
- Hamilton fired first, missing on purpose. Burr was startled and then fired back, hitting Hamilton who later died from the wound.
- Burr was vilified in the press, indicted for murder, and fled for Georgia.

# The Treason Trial of Aaron Burr (1807)



The trial took place in the House of Delegates, Richmond, VA.

- Less than a year after the duel, Burr made a secret contract with British officials for the purpose of seizing a substantial portion of the Louisiana purchase and placing it under British control, presumably with Burr as Governor.
- He ventured to the West perhaps to break up his own country or at least to dismember the Spanish Empire.
- He allied himself in this venture with James Wilkinson, who was both the commanding general of the U.S. Army and at the same time a paid agent of the Spanish.
- President Jefferson ordered Burr's arrest. Burr was chased, captured, and brought back to the East to stand trial for treason.
- He was acquitted largely because of the narrow constitutional interpretation of treason set forth by Chief Justice John Marshall during the trial.
- Burr fled the country in disgrace, returning years later only to live out his life in obscurity.



# Conclusion

- Character and integrity were particularly crucial in the early years of the nation.
- Washington's ability to display humility and relinquish power made him universally respected.
- Burr's seeming arrogance and thirst for power made it difficult for him to attain and ultimately led to his downfall.

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