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“Political Ambition Can Drive Individuals to Extremes”

(Wilder-Robb and Burr-Hamilton enmities)

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S. Ray Granade

The East Coast breeds virulent political enmities. Perhaps they're no worse there than elsewhere, but their legacy there is certainly strong. The current Virginia brouhaha between Charles Robb and Douglas Wilder is reminiscent of one of the earliest, most virulent, and bloodiest political vendettas of American history--that between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton.

Both Presidential "wannabes," Governors Robb and Wilder have political strengths of their own and others' making. Wilder aims to hurt Robb politically on a variety of charges; Robb plans the same for Wilder. The feud boils down to who will control Virginia politics, and their weapon is an argument over who said what to whom privately, and how the information became public knowledge.

Burr and Hamilton also fought for political control of a state--New York. Both played on the national scene, using their state as a power base. Burr wanted to be President; Hamilton, who could not, simply wanted to play king maker--and to ensure that anyone other than Burr gained the post.

The two shared the cream of New York City law practice from 1783 until 1791. In that year, Burr sought and won a Senate seat at the expense of Hamilton's father-in-law. Defeated for reelection six years later, Burr returned to the state assembly and a career marked by conflicts of interest like the Holland Land Company bill (which aided a company in which he had financial interest) and the Manhattan Company charter (which he used to establish a bank, known since 1955 as the Chase Manhattan Bank, to further his political aims instead of the water company envisioned by other legislators).

In 1800, Burr helped defeat the Hamilton-led ticket in New York City while winning the Vice-Presidency for himself. He defeated Hamilton in part by widely distributing some of Hamilton's private correspondence to party leaders.

In his second run for the Vice-Presidency, the forty-four-year-old

Burr made constitutional history. The Electoral College deadlocked, casting an equal number of votes for Burr and Thomas Jefferson for President and throwing the election into the House of Representatives. After 36 ballots and only two weeks before inauguration, the House gave Jefferson the Presidency, Burr the Vice-Presidency, and made the first moves toward a constitutional amendment to avoid such problems in the future. Burr's loss of the Presidency was attributable in part to Hamilton, who urged his allies to vote for a man "with some pretensions to character" rather than "a man of irregular and insatiable ambition...who ought not to be trusted with the reins of government."

Knowing that he would not be renominated by his party in 1804, the bankrupt Vice-President chose to run for governor of New York to keep his hopes for the Presidency alive. Again Hamilton's private opinions (this time expressed at a dinner party) figured in an election--this time to Burr's disadvantage. One of the guests published letters quoting Hamilton as having called Burr dangerous and untrustworthy and alluding to "a still more despicable opinion" of Burr on Hamilton's part. Burr's independent candidacy failed after a particularly bitter campaign.

Depressed emotionally and financially after his defeat, Burr wrote Hamilton demanding "satisfaction" for Hamilton's opinions. "Political opposition," he noted, "can never absolve gentlemen from the necessity of a rigid adherence to the laws of honour and the rules of decorum." In the jargon of his day, the Vice-President was telling Hamilton to publicly retract his opinion and apologize or back up those opinions in a duel.

A week after Independence Day, 1804, they met under the Weehawken heights on the west bank of the Hudson, opposite Manhattan's Forty-second Street. They observed the amenities, stepped off the requisite paces, and fired. Hamilton fell, mortally wounded. Burr approached his fallen adversary, made a gesture as if expressing regret, then left.

Hamilton died the next day. Indicted in New York for sending a challenge and in New Jersey for murder, the Vice-President nonetheless resumed his duties presiding over the Senate until his tenure expired on March 2, 1805.

Burr went on to a scheme to unite the western states as a separate nation under his leadership and a resulting trial for treason presided over by

John Marshall in Richmond, Virginia, which found him not guilty. He then lived a life of poverty and schemes in Europe before returning to his New York City law practice in 1812. His three-year second marriage ended in divorce after his wife accused him of seeing another woman and named as respondent the adventurer Jane Maria McManus Storms Cazneau; the eighty-year-old Burr's divorce became final the day he died.

Although not absolute, enlightening parallels exist between the Burr-Hamilton and Robb-Wilder cases. In both instances political enmities were marked by the distribution and/or publication of private conversations. Both stories contain the struggle for ascendancy in a single state, but with national overtones. Both stories contain references to the use of public office for personal gain. Both stories hint at private indiscretions. But most of all, both stories demonstrate that ambition goads persons to unbounded lengths in their search of power. An opponent is an obstacle to be eradicated--by death if necessary. In short, the Kentuckian who observed that "no man who has ever gazed upon the purple has been completely sane again" knew whereof he spoke. Sadly, that remark is as true today as it was when first uttered in the 1850s--and it isn't confined to politics.