

Founding Rivalries

More like squabbling brothers than 'fathers,' how did they succeed?

By Jay Tolson

Intrigue, duplicity, back-stabbing, and character assassination. Think it sounds like American politics today?

Try the 1790s, a decade that saw Thomas Paine--famous pamphleteer for the revolutionary cause--denounce President George Washington as a "hypocrite in public life" for signing a treaty with England. And earlier in the same decade, you'll find the recently retired secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson, telling his crony James Madison to get busy destroying the good name of Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. Yes, the same Hamilton whom Madison had collaborated with only a few years before in writing the famous articles in support of the Constitution.

And back-stabbing? Well, there's the fine case of Ben Franklin penning a secret missive to Congress accusing fellow emissary John Adams of behavior "improper and unbecoming" for refusing to truckle to ally France's every whim. Not nasty enough? Try Vice President Jefferson telling a French diplomat that President Adams is "a vain, irritable, stubborn" man. If that's not quite treasonous, then what about the same vice president urging the French to drag their heels on signing a treaty that his president is earnestly trying to conclude? Given such a climate of slander and treachery, should we be surprised at the 1804 duel between the vice president of the United States and the former secretary of the Treasury, a duel in which the latter was killed? More is the mystery that Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton were the only two founders who came to such a deadly impasse.

Americans who think they live in politically divisive times might do well to look back at the first decades of their republic's history. And many are already doing just that. Benefiting from a surge of new writing and thinking about the founding generation, they are discovering that the period from 1776 through the early 1820s was racked by political disagreements and rivalries that make ours today look picayune. While denying that they were engaged in anything so divisive as partisan politics, leaders of what came to be the Federalist and Republican parties strained the bonds of the new union over a number of issues, including the role of the central government, states' rights, foreign policy, the handling of the debt, and slavery...We don't because earlier versions of the founding era presented a very different picture. Both the romantic histories of the 19th century and the more scientific, Progressive histories of the 20th century endowed the founding enterprise with an air of inevitability. According to the former, mysterious forces, even a divine hand, guided the Founding Fathers as they led the colonies to independence and, then, from a loose confederation of states, into a "more perfect Union," while the latter held that economic forces drove the founding down its inevitable course...There have been doubters of the formula, of course. For more than a century, historians have been pointing out the inconsistencies and veiled motives of the founders. ..Wood, for one, argues that America's leaders knew they were bringing about social as well political change when they broke loose from the English monarchy and created a republic... Committed to liberty and equality, the revolution's leaders hoped to root out hierarchical social rankings, hereditary privilege, patriarchy, paternalism, and patronage. But they also believed that a principled, disinterested leadership was essential to a true republic. Drawn from the aristocracy of talent, not birth, the republican leaders had to be free themselves, Wood writes, "from dependence and from the petty interests of the marketplace."

But the energies unleashed by the ideas of liberty and equality made it hard to hold fast to the ideal of the virtuous republic. Once people were free to pursue their own interests, they began to ignore the greater national good--and those leaders who claimed to stand for it. The competitiveness and individualism released by the Revolution began to produce something quite different from a genteel republic: a rough-and-tumble democracy with a vigorous capitalist economy.

The founders recognized the problem almost immediately after the Revolutionary War. Indeed, the drafting and ratification of the Constitution in 1787-88--the "second founding"--was partly an attempt to contain the excesses of narrow localism and interest-based politics. Hamilton and Madison, two vigorous champions of a new national charter to supplant the weaker Articles of Confederation, repeatedly made that point in their Federalist Papers. But the founders' dream that the national government might serve as a bulwark of disinterestedness against the powerful tide of interest-group factionalism was soon dashed by the realities of politics, including clashes among the founders' own interests. Having decried the factionalism that they saw rampant at the state level, they created it at the national level. Indeed, says historian Zagarri, "almost as soon as the Congress met, profound differences emerged." And by the mid-1790s, these differences were fueling a two-party struggle for power.

Not that anyone would admit it. For it was a peculiar politics of denial and indirectness that the founders practiced, in which politicians denied that they were interested in officeholding, denied that they belonged to a party, or even denied that their party was a party. These politicians were also skilled in disguising what was really at stake in the positions they took, particularly if it was their own interests or ambition. In her forthcoming book, *Affairs of Honor*, Freeman shows how politicians used assaults on their opponents' character, reputation, and honor as a backhanded means of pursuing their highly partisan goals. George Washington grew so fed up with character assassination, Freeman explains, that he begged his cabinet members and others to put an end to the "wounding suspicions, and irritating charges." Personal attacks in pamphlets, broadsides, and newspaper articles, political gossip, and duels (most of which did not end in shooting) were all ways in which, says Freeman, "the founders used the code of honor to regulate their political combat on the national stage."

Just as important as the political style, though, is the role of personality and character, because it was the human element that gave this peculiar politics its messy, improvised quality--and, in the end, made the founders' achievement all the more remarkable. "It was the way they collided and found characterological checks and balances," says Ellis. "Instead of killing each other off, they worked through their differences and constructed institutions."

George Washington's character made him something of an exception to the dominant political style. He held more truly to the ideal of disinterested, principled, and nonpartisan leadership than any other founding brother. (Maybe, in his case, the sobriquet of father is just.) This Virginian of little formal schooling made the formation of character the core of his self-education, having copied out the 110 "Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and in Conversations" at age 16. Although he could be stern, hot tempered, and unforgiving, as deserters from the Continental Army learned with their lives, he was unfailingly a man of principle. And though his own experiences and inclinations aligned him with the Federalist faction, the party championing strong central government, his adherence to nonpartisanship remained firm.

Before Washington sought a second term, Jefferson, his secretary of state, urged him on, saying, "North and South will hang together if they have you to hang on." But Jefferson was already doing more than his share to stoke the flames of partisanship that would singe even Washington. It was around this time, McCullough writes,

that Jefferson, Madison, and other allies provocatively began "calling themselves Republicans, thus implying that Federalists were not, but rather monarchists, or monocrats, as Jefferson preferred to say."

Jefferson has long been recognized as the great idealist among the founders, the man whose soaring republican rhetoric was ideally suited to crafting the Declaration of Independence. But the new historical reading of the Sage of Monticello emphasizes his dangerous and devious qualities. It reveals even a certain reckless disregard for the national good in his devotion to revolution and extreme liberty and in his increasingly strong stand on the principle of states' rights (a stand that protected his, and his home state's, dependence on the "peculiar institution" of slavery). Jefferson's rivalry with his nemesis, Hamilton, is well known. Washington's brilliant former aide-de-camp, the first secretary of the Treasury, and the highest of High Federalists, Hamilton stood for everything Jefferson despised, including a powerful central government and English sympathies...But what we now appreciate more clearly is how ruthlessly Jefferson advanced his own ambitions, even when that meant undercutting the two presidents, Washington and Adams, in whose administrations he served. Jefferson was a master of the politics of denial, planting gossip, writing anonymously in newspapers, or having others--Madison or the journalist Philip Freneau--engage in the dirty business of character assassination for him. To get at Hamilton, for instance, he ordered Madison to "take up your pen, select the most striking heresies, and cut him to pieces in the face of the public." He would orchestrate similar campaigns against Adams while serving as vice president.

Jefferson, in fact, did such a good job of depicting Adams as a monocrat and reactionary that historians have been slow to give Adams his due. Adams's accomplishments were legion: fearless advocate of independence in the Continental Congress; author of the Massachusetts Constitution; ambassador at large in Europe during the Revolutionary War; loyal vice president during both of Washington's terms. But what is underappreciated is how often he did the hard or unpopular thing when he thought it was for the good of the country. ... Adams made mistakes during his presidency, none worse than supporting the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which, among other things, made criticism of the government a crime. But perhaps his most self-destructive mistake was honorably intended: Trying to maintain the nonpartisanship that Washington had upheld, he lost the steady backing of many of his natural political allies in the Federalist faction. That would have made things hard enough, but Adams had to run an administration with Jefferson as his vice president. (With a vice president like that, one might say, who needed enemies?) Adams appreciated Jefferson's virtues and had long considered him a friend. But even during Washington's first administration, Adams came to see Jefferson's treachery, ambition, and fierce partisanship. Shortly after Jefferson resigned as secretary of state at the end of 1793, Adams wrote to Abigail, his wife and wisest political adviser, "Jefferson went off yesterday, and a good riddance of bad ware."

But the bad goods would return from Monticello in 1797, when Adams was elected president and Jefferson, as runner-up, the vice president. Instead of supporting the president, Jefferson fed the opposition press and even covertly counseled the French to draw out peace negotiations as long as possible, a delay that probably ended up costing Adams the next election. If that weren't mischief enough, after the Alien and Sedition Acts were passed, Jefferson secretly wrote the Kentucky Resolutions arguing that states had a right to nullify federal actions...the Constitution had not really settled the question of what the American Revolution had been intended to create. Instead, Ellis writes, "it only provided an orderly framework in which the argument could continue."

With rivalrous back-stabbing such as this, how *did* the nation hold together? That is the question that Ellis answers in the six essays of *Founding Brothers*. In one, for instance, he tells how in 1790 Jefferson brought Madison and Hamilton together to broker a deal over two issues that divided the nation: whether the federal government should assume all of the states' war debts, and where the nation's capital should be permanently

located. Ellis writes that the former nationalist Madison had become wary of Hamilton's argument for assumption even before Jefferson converted him into a Republican. Madison, as a representative from Virginia, believed that assumption would punish Virginia unduly, forcing it to pay in federal taxes more than it owed in debts. Then why did Jefferson nudge him in the direction of a compromise that both would later regret? Because Jefferson believed that locating the capital on the Potomac would give the Southern states greater influence over the national government and, at the same time, lessen the influence of Northern bankers and financiers in whose interests he thought Hamilton served.

Ellis who joins other recent historians in giving the Federalists a far more sympathetic hearing says that Hamilton engineered assumption and other federal initiatives not to "enrich the commercial elite" but to "channel their talent and resources into productive activities that served the public interest." But Ellis's more important point about the compromise of 1790 is that it showed that the Constitution had not really settled the question of what the American Revolution had been intended to create. Instead, Ellis writes, "it only provided an orderly framework in which the arguments could continue."

The one argument that got cut short, with tragic consequences, was that over slavery. Congress effectively removed itself from a constructive role in the debate in 1790. In that year, two Quaker delegations petitioned Congress to bring an end to the slave trade, petitions that prompted outrage among many legislators, who pointed out that the Constitution expressly forbade discussion of slave trade until 1808. The petitions would have been ignored, in fact, had they not come with the endorsement of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin, who himself had once owned slaves, in the last three years of his life became an ardent abolitionist, turning his eloquence and wit to the cause. Acknowledging the weight of his endorsement, a committee of the whole Congress argued the question for at least four hours. But their report helped set the nation on the way to civil strife. Masterminded by Madison, the report made it unconstitutional for Congress to attempt to manumit slaves at any time in the future, a precedent that would be invoked repeatedly in the years ahead. "What had begun as an initiative to put slavery on the road to extinction had been transformed," Ellis writes, "into a decision to extinguish all federal plans for emancipation."

Perhaps the final irony is that though slavery would eventually bring about a civil war, it never occasioned a duel among the founding brothers. Instead, the only duel that resulted in fired shots and a founder's death was a duel over honorability itself. Hamilton, as Freeman has discovered, made a minor career of dueling, having been involved in 10 other "affairs of honor" before the last one with Burr. But the last was the only one that concluded with what was euphemistically called an "interview," or actual shootout and a death. Hamilton was pushed to this drastic end because he could not in good faith take back what he believed: that Burr was a man without real principles. Many have tried to rehabilitate Burr, pointing out that he was an abolitionist and a proto-feminist, among other things. But what Hamilton (also an abolitionist) meant by unprincipled was that Burr was a creature of unveiled ambition who would do whatever suited him, including changing parties, to attain power. In other words, he behaved not like a politician of the founding era but a politician of the Jackson era and beyond a true democratic politician. That behavior inspired Hamilton to do everything in his power to block his ascent. In fact, when the election of 1800 was thrown into the House of Representatives because of a tie between Burr and Jefferson, who were both on the same Republican ticket, Hamilton got his Federalist allies to back Jefferson, despite his abhorrence of Jefferson's ideas. Supporting Burr was inconceivable.

Hamilton's death would destroy Burr's career, and so one could say that the famous duel of 1804 resolved in Hamilton's favor. But the duel would not stop the direction of American politics. Burr's time if not Burr himself, was arriving.