



# Duel: Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, And The Future Of America

*By Thomas Fleming*

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**Duel: Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, And The Future Of America** By Thomas Fleming

All school children know the story of the fatal duel between Hamilton and Burr - but do they really? In this remarkable retelling, Thomas Fleming takes the reader into the post-revolutionary world of 1804, a chaotic and fragile time in the young country as well as a time of tremendous global instability. The success of the French Revolution and the proclamation of Napoleon as First Consul for Life had enormous impact on men like Hamilton and Burr, feeding their own political fantasies at a time of perceived Federal government weakness and corrosion. Their hunger for fame spawned antagonisms that wreaked havoc on themselves and their families and threatened to destabilize the fragile young American republic. From that poisonous brew came the tangle of regret and anger and ambition that drove the two to their murderous confrontation in Weehawken, New Jersey. Readers will find this is popular narrative history at its most authoritative, and authoritative history at its most readable.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

To judge by many standard histories, the revolutionary founders of the United States came equipped with wings and haloes. They were anything but saintly, however; their behavior, public and private, was often scandalous. One of the most outrageous men of the day was Alexander Hamilton, the Federalist leader and architect of the American banking and judiciary systems, whose amorous exploits and political maneuverings alike were the stuff of legend. Tangled in a succession of failed business ventures and personal intrigues, and convinced that the might of the United States should not be hampered by such inconveniences as checks and balances, Hamilton fell afoul of just about everyone he encountered in his quest for influence and wealth.

To his eventual misfortune, one of those he crossed was Thomas Jefferson's vice president, Aaron Burr. Many histories of their tangled relationship personalize their differences, and, to be sure, they disliked each other with splendid fervor. Thomas Fleming's contribution to the often-told tale is to ground the Hamilton-Burr rivalry in the politics of the day--a politics complicated by many contending ideological factions, powerful interest groups, and lobbyists. Writing with vigor and clarity, Fleming points to the clay feet on which Hamilton and Burr marched to their sad destiny, and he crafts an exceptionally interesting portrait of the early Republic. --*Gregory McNamee*

#### From Publishers Weekly

A hero of the Revolution, Aaron Burr served as vice-president under Jefferson and is rumored to have been the biological father of Martin Van Buren. Nevertheless, Burr remains best known as the slayer of Alexander Hamilton in 1804, and for afterwards conspiring to create his own empire in the Southern United States and Mexico. He is by far the darkest character in the generation of American founders and has been the object of complex portraits in such novels as Gore Vidal's *Burr* and Anya Seton's *My Theodosia*. Fleming (*Liberty! The American Revolution*) dives deep into the causes and aftermath of Burr's duel with Hamilton on the banks of the Hudson at Weehawken, showing that, while not an innocent, Burr was no more guilty than Hamilton in provoking the exchange. Fleming's account is most useful when he scrutinizes the correspondence that passed between the two as their quarrel came to a head, an argument that erupted when dinner-table criticisms of Burr, which Hamilton thought private, wound up being published. Where Hamilton could on several occasions have easily extricated himself from the disagreement, he instead chose to escalate the rhetoric and thereby sealed his fate. Burr remains guilty of being the quicker shot. Fleming adds no new material to the conflict but does a good job of telling a good story. The subtitle, however, is misleading, for Fleming never clarifies how the duel affected the future of America, other than expressing the obvious: that it ensured that neither man would ever be president. (Oct.)

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#### From Kirkus Reviews

Readers could be forgiven for mistaking this study for a historical novel not because the account is embellished with fictional characters or details, but because Fleming brings his novelistic flair to this portrait of power and politics in early America. *Duel* is not thesis-driven; instead it offers a sweeping overview of the lives and careers of Hamilton and Burr, the duel itself, and the political context out of which it arose. Fleming (*The Wages of Fame*, 1998; *Over Here*, 1992; etc.) situates the duel, which resulted in Hamilton's death, in the larger context of Burr's political fortunes: although once assumed to be Thomas Jefferson's successor to the presidency, Burr, whom Fleming tags as America's first professional politician, had lost

favor within his own party by 1804. But Fleming also shows that the duel was the culmination of years of political infighting involving not only the two principle protagonists, but also Jefferson, DeWitt Clinton, and other prominent politicians of the day. To his credit, Fleming remains impartial, depicting both Hamilton and Burr sympathetically. If anyone looks less than admirable in this tale, it's Jefferson, who appears at times disloyal, churlish, and conniving. Though set in the early 1800s, this is clearly a story for our day; gossipy and irrelevant asides about the characters' sexual dalliances recall nothing so much as recent newspaper accounts of current leaders. Details such as these, along with observations that New York Federalists' favorite watering hole was the Tontine Coffee House and descriptions of ladies' fashion, make this an entertaining read but they also render the book more antiquarian than historical. No innovative historical analysis here. But history buffs who have decried professional historians' move away from both narrative and Great Man history will relish *Duel*. (20 illustrations) -- Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

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