

## Reflective words from *Affairs of Honor* by Joanne B. Freeman

*"The founding generation was rushing headlong into a historical discussion; given the personal and violently partisan events it described, it rapidly became more of an argument than a conversation. There was not single narrative, no absolute truth. So, Marshall could depict Republicans of the 1790s as small-minded provincials and Jefferson could insist that they were liberal defenders of the Revolutionary flame. Adams could present himself as an independent-minded hero, and Hamilton could declare Adams a loose cannon guided by his lust for high office. Burr could accuse Jefferson of scheming for the presidency and Jefferson could accuse Burr of the same sin. Self-consciously constructing an American history to shape future generations, public-minded national politicians could not help but present it from a personal point of view."* (Freeman, Joanne. *Affairs of Honor*, Epilogue, p. 275)

### The Burr Conspiracy

The soldiers from Ft. Stoddert, Louisiana Territory, captured the fugitive Aaron Burr on a February morning in 1807, on a muddy road near the hamlet of Wakefield. Burr's fall from grace seemed total. The former vice president, who had dressed as magnificently as any head of state, wore a battered beaver hat and ragged wool coat. The dandy who had charmed women by the score sported a scruffy crop of whiskers. Aaron Burr had traveled West just six months before to carve out his own empire. Now, he would return East to stand trial for treason.

Nearly 200 years later, the exact details of what became known as the Burr Conspiracy -- Aaron Burr's attempt to detach the Western states and the Louisiana Territory from the Union -- remain unknown. But the conspiracy probably began sometime in early 1804, just months before Burr killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. Vice President Burr's political hopes in the East were fading by then. And after he killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel on July 11, they would die completely. But Burr saw a chance to revive his fortunes. If the East wouldn't crown him, the West just might.

Burr cast his eyes on the newly acquired Territory of Louisiana. The land was mostly unsettled. Its borders were disputed by Spain. And many of its residents talked openly of secession. Burr believed that with a relatively small and well-armed military force, he could pry territory from Louisiana and build his own empire. Perhaps he might even take Mexico.

Burr would need manpower to accomplish his objectives. His foremost co-conspirator was General James Wilkinson, Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Army. Arrogant, unscrupulous, and overly fond of liquor, Wilkinson had befriended Burr during the Revolution. Burr had convinced President Thomas Jefferson to name Wilkinson as governor of Northern Louisiana.

Despite his faults, Wilkinson represented a logical choice for Burr. As commander-in chief, Wilkinson controlled the military and could move about the West without suspicion to cultivate alliances. But Burr also trolled the waters for supporters with even more power.

In August 1804 the vice president contacted Anthony Merry, Britain's Minister to the United States. Burr offered to help Britain take Western territory from the United States. Merry immediately sent a dispatch to Britain, detailing Burr's offer to "effect a separation of the western part of the United States" from the rest of the country. In return, Burr wanted money and ships to carry out his conquest.

In April, 1805, shortly after his term as vice president ended, Burr journeyed West on a reconnaissance mission. In town after town, he dropped hints of the expedition to come. And in town after town, he met men that he believed would support him in his enterprise. One of these men, Harman Blennerhassett, would prove a loyal follower....

Still, problems remained. Support from the British had not yet arrived. In fact, it never would -- nor would

assistance from Spain. Perhaps worse, rumors about Burr's plans had begun to circulate and had even been published in Eastern newspapers. Unshaken, Burr continued his quest for support.

Meanwhile, the border conflict with Spain had begun to heat up. This fit perfectly into Burr's plan. Jefferson would order Wilkinson to Louisiana with U.S. troops. In the name of U.S. sovereignty, Wilkinson and Burr could attack Texas or even Mexico. Burr could then declare himself ruler of the conquered lands.

At last ready to move forward, Burr sent a coded letter to Wilkinson outlining his plans. The document would become known as the Cipher Letter, and would figure prominently at Burr's treason trial. Burr set out from Pittsburgh in August, 1806. His first stop was Blennerhassett's, where he ordered the Irishman to outfit his island as a military encampment.

As Burr hobnobbed around Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee, the trickle of rumors about him became a torrent. Particularly problematic for Burr was the U.S. Court in Frankfort, Kentucky. Burr was called by the court three times to answer charges of treason. Each time he was acquitted.

By the beginning of December, 1806, Burr's plan was in total collapse, although he didn't know it. Wilkinson, who by now believed Burr's plan would fail, opted to save his own hide. On October 9, he had sent a letter to President Thomas Jefferson outlining the conspiracy, but without naming Burr. Jefferson responded with a cease-and-desist order. Burr was not named specifically, but he didn't need to be. The newspapers were full of treason talk, and Burr's name was prominently featured.

On December 9, 1806, authorities struck the first blow against Burr. Ohio militiamen captured most of his boats and supplies at a Marietta boatyard. On December 11, the militia raided Blennerhassett's Island, but most of the men had already fled downriver. Blennerhassett's mansion was ransacked.

When Burr rendezvoused with Blennerhassett on the Ohio River near the end of December, he expected to meet a small army. Instead, he met a force of less than 100 men. A less ambitious (or wiser) leader would have quit. But Burr proceeded, picking up what new recruits he could as they drifted down the Mississippi.

At Bayou Pierre, just 30 miles above New Orleans, the final blow came. A friend handed Burr a New Orleans newspaper. It announced a reward for the capture of Aaron Burr and reproduced in full a translation of the coded letter Burr had sent to Wilkinson.

Burr surrendered to authorities at Bayou Pierre and was arraigned before a grand jury. Burr and his men insisted that they had no intention of attacking U.S. territory, and the jury failed to return an indictment. Still, one of the two judges involved in the case ordered Burr returned to the courtroom. Convinced he would be railroaded, Burr fled into the wilderness. On February 13, 1807, a soaking wet and bedraggled Burr was captured and carried back to the federal court at Richmond, Virginia, to face trial for treason.

This was truly the trial of the century, and Aaron Burr battled for his life. Both the prosecution and the defense used the Cipher Letter to try and prove their case. But in the end, the Cipher Letter took a back seat to another, even more renowned document: the Constitution, which defines treason very specifically. Supreme Court Justice John Marshall insisted on absolute adherence to this strict definition -- which Burr's actions did not meet. And so, he was acquitted.

But if Burr was victorious in court, he lost in the court of public opinion. Across America he was burned in effigy. Several states filed additional charges against him, and he lived in fear for his life. Wisely, Burr fled again -- this time to Europe, where he tried without success to convince Britain and France to support other North American invasion plots.

After four years in exile, Aaron Burr returned to America again. In mid-1812, the country was on the brink of war with Britain, and the Burr Conspiracy seemed ancient history. Aaron Burr put up his shingle in New York as an

attorney and found ready business. He would live the rest of his life in relative obscurity, his dreams of empire forever undone. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/duel-burr-conspiracy/>

## History of Violent Attacks on the U.S. Capitol

### Fire Damages the US Capitol During War of 1812



The ruins of the U.S. Capitol following British attempts to burn the building; includes fire damage to the Senate and House wings, damaged colonnade in the House of Representatives shored up with firewood to prevent its collapse, and the shell of the rotunda with the facade and roof missing.

The fire didn't completely destroy the Capitol, but it damaged enough of it that some members of Congress suggested relocating the federal government back to Philadelphia or find another city. Instead, workers rebuilt the Capitol and continued to expand it as the number of states—and their representatives in Congress—grew (today, it covers over 1.5 million square feet and has more than 600 rooms). Over the next few decades, interactions between these congressmen became increasingly strained and violent.

### Congressional Violence Erupts During Lead-Up to Civil War



Preston Smith Brooks, a fervent advocate of slavery, assaulting Senator Charles Sumner, an abolitionist, with a cane on the floor of the United States Senate, on May 22, 1856. Brooks attacked Sumner following an anti-slavery speech by Sumner. Universal History Archive/Getty Images

One of the most famous incidents of congressional violence is the [caning of Charles Sumner](#). In 1856, pro-slavery Representative Preston Brooks beat anti-slavery Senator [Charles Sumner](#) nearly unconscious with a cane on the Senate floor. Brooks said he chose to attack Sumner this way because he didn't want to break an 1839 law against congressional dueling, passed a year after a congressman had killed another in a duel in [Maryland](#).

The caning of Sumner was not an isolated incident. Historian Joanne B. Freeman identified more than 70 violent occurrences between congressmen while researching her book, [\*The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to the Civil War\*](#). In 1858, a fistfight between about 30 congressmen broke out in the House of Representatives at 2:00 a.m. when a southerner grabbed a northerner by the throat. In 1860, pro-slavery congressmen threatened an anti-slavery congressman with pistols and canes while he spoke against slavery on the House floor.

## Shootings and Bombings at the Capitol



US Capitol police officers salute the caskets of Special Agent John Gibson (L-front) and Officer Jacob Chestnut as they lie in state in the Rotunda at the US Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. on July 28, 1998. Gibson and Chestnut were killed on July 24 when *Russell E. Weston Jr.* opened fire inside the building after running through metal detectors at the door. Joyce Naltchayan/AFP/Getty Images

On [July 2, 1915](#), a former German professor at Harvard, Erich Muentzer, planted a package containing three sticks of dynamite in the Capitol near the Senate Reception room. The explosive detonated around midnight and during a time when the Senate had been on recess. An on-duty Capitol Police officer was nearly knocked out of his chair during the blast, but fortunately no one was injured. The German-born man later wrote a letter to a Washington, D.C. newspaper saying he had planted the explosives to protest U.S. wartime aid to Britain and said he hoped the detonation would "make enough noise to be heard above the voices that clamor for war." He then traveled to the home of [J.P. Morgan](#) in Long Island, New York and shot the financier. Morgan's wounds proved superficial and he survived. Muentzer was soon captured and detained in jail where, several days later, he committed suicide.

On [March 1, 1954](#), four Puerto Rican Americans [fired guns](#) in the House of Representatives, injuring five congressmen. The attackers said they acted to demand independence for the U.S. territory of [Puerto Rico](#). (Puerto Ricans have [U.S. citizenship](#) but can't vote for president and have no voting representatives in Congress.) The injured congressmen survived, and the four shooters received prison sentences. President [Jimmy Carter](#) commuted one of their sentences in 1977, and granted clemency to the other three in 1979.

On March 1, 1971, a [bomb exploded](#) in the Capitol building. While the explosion did not injure anyone, it caused some \$300,000 in damage. A group calling itself the Weather Underground claimed to be behind the bombing and said it was in protest of the ongoing U.S.-supported [bombing of Laos](#).

Thirteen years later, on November 7, 1983, a [bomb tore](#) through the second floor of the Senate wing of the Capitol. The device detonated late in the evening and no one was harmed, but it caused an estimated \$250,000 in damage. A group calling itself the Armed Resistance Unit later claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it was in retaliation for military actions in Grenada and Lebanon. Seven people were eventually arrested in connection with the attack.

Political causes aside, individuals have committed acts of violence on Capitol grounds through the decades. These incidents include an [1890 fatal shooting](#) sparked by a feud between a reporter and a former congressman and

a [1998 fatal shooting](#) of two Capitol Police officers in 1998 by a man who claimed the U.S. was plagued by [cannibalism and a fictional disease](#).

On January 6, 2021, on a day when representatives met to formalize the presidential election results, [hundreds of rioters](#) supporting President [Donald Trump](#) and seeking to overthrow President-Elect [Joe Biden](#)'s electoral victory pushed through police barricades and stormed the Capitol, some smashing windows to enter its halls. One woman was fatally struck by police gunfire inside the Capitol during the mayhem and a Capitol Police officer [died](#) a day later from injuries he sustained while confronting the rioters. Three other people died in the Capitol area after experiencing medical emergencies during the riot. <https://www.history.com/news/us-capitol-building-violence-fires>

## Active Hate Groups in the United States



<https://cbs4indy.com/news/complete-list-of-all-active-hate-groups-in-the-u-s/> (CBS News Indianapolis)

### Resources from ASCD & NCSS

[Resources for talking to students about politics, civic engagement, and uncertainty](#)

[Democracy Is Not a Spectator Sport: The Role of Social Studies in Safeguarding the Republic.](#)