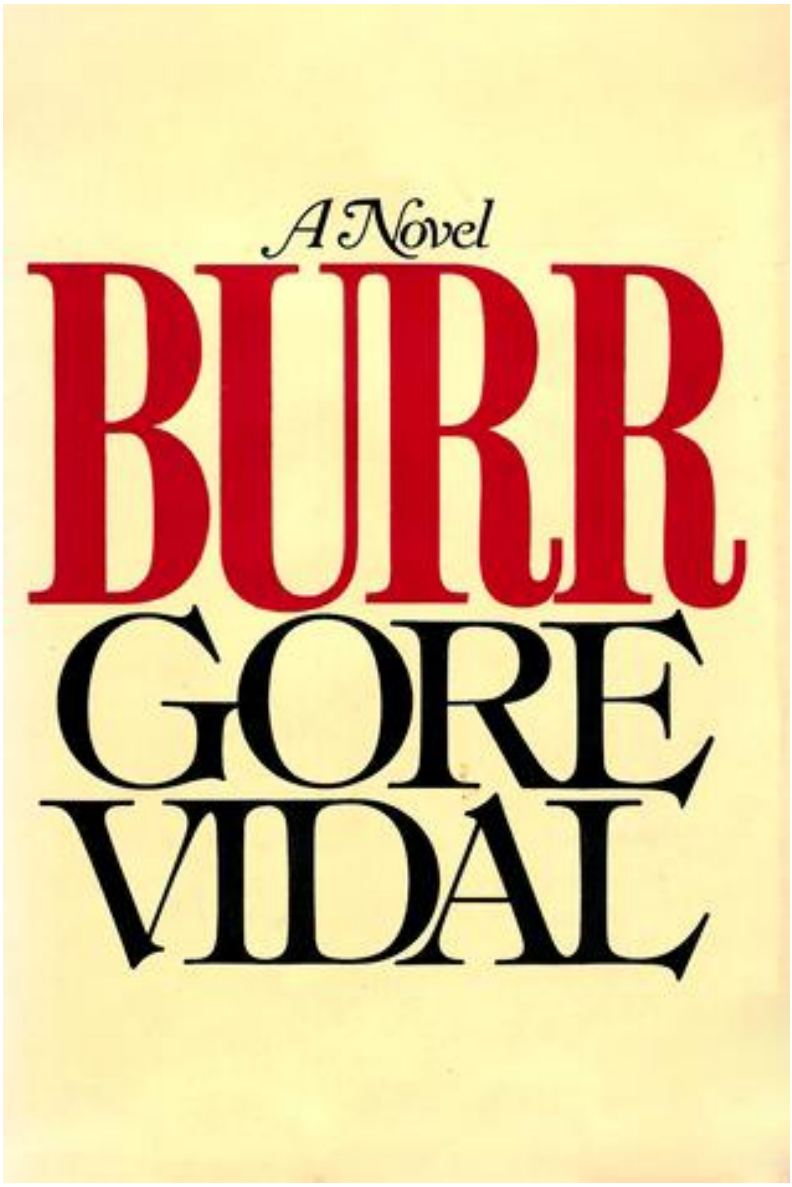
# Gore Vidal's *Burr*



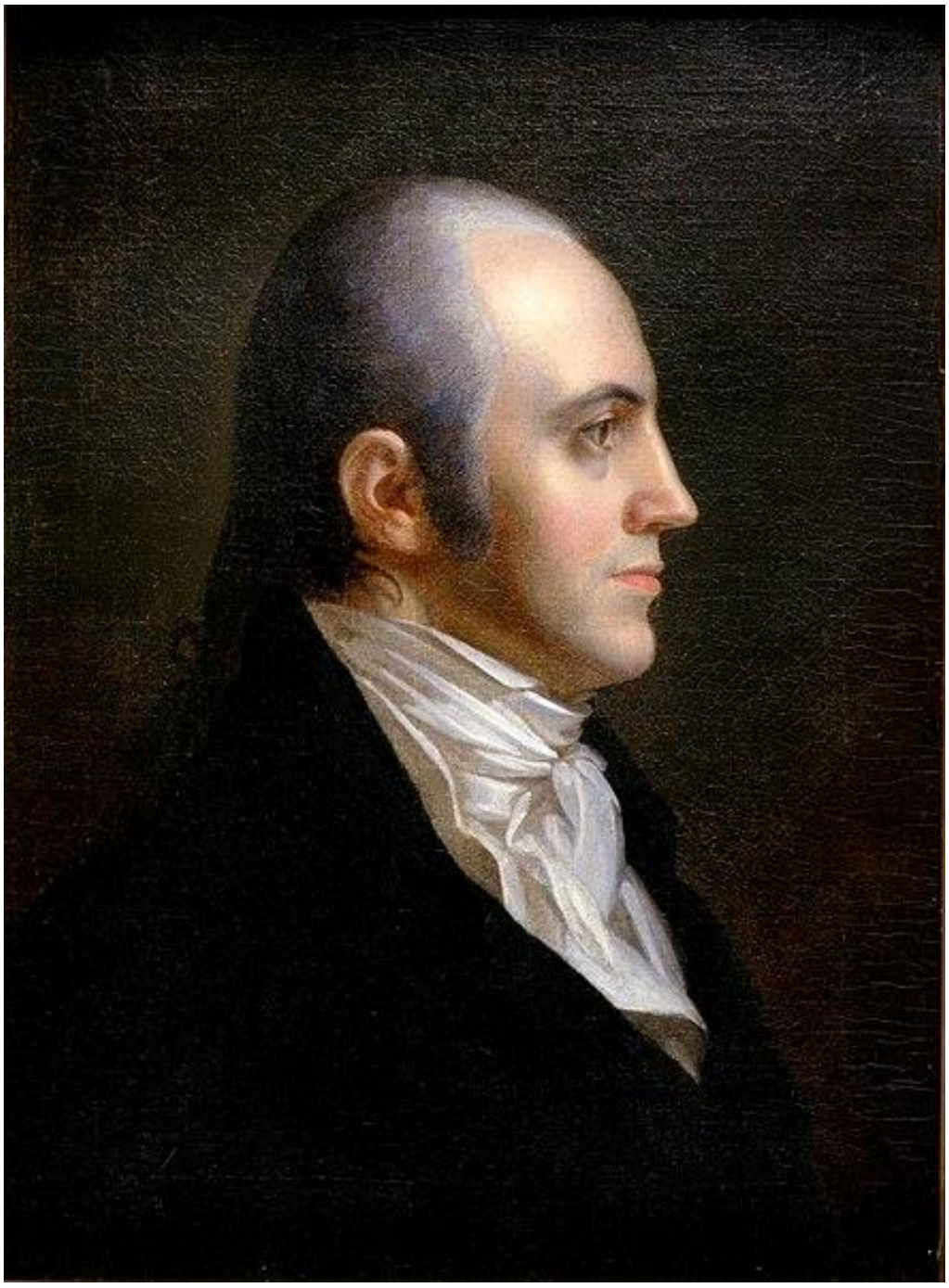

*Book cover original edition Courtesy Wikipedia*

*A Review by Garry Victor Hill*

# Introduction

*Burr* is a vivid work of fiction with rounded characters, a strong sense of place and period, shrewd, frequently witty observations, and an interesting plot. It is even a fascinating plot for those interested in or curious about America's origins. To use a clichéd phrase "therein lies the danger" - for what it appears in this work seems to be is a revealed truth, but Aaron Burr's account is not, Instead the biased recollections of Aaron Burr presented here are not even a faction. Despite Vidal's insistent afterward about used sources and realities, despite using real characters, incidents and historic quotes, the work definitely remains fiction. Vidal leaves out too much relevant history which does not fit the novel's themes or his view of Aaron Burr.

Novelists have frequently exposed the traditional hero as a myth used by manipulators for their purposes. However combining history with a close reading of *Burr* reveals that an exposé can also be an inaccurate and like the hagiographers, create images which serve their purposes. To the reader who knows that and sees the novel as a depiction of a biased, charismatic and complex character who has some truth on his side, this novel works well as a great read.



*John Vanderlyn. A portrait of Aaron Burr, dated 1802. Vanderlyn was one of Burr's young protégés; he paid for Vanderlyn's artistic training.*

*Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*

The turbulence of the 1960s and the early 1970s led many Americans to reconsider their past, particularly their wars, from the revolution to Vietnam. Questioning the concept of the hero had gone on for decades before this, but by the 1960s not only the hero, but also the ideals the hero fights for and the idealistic and patriotic view of history had evaporated: essentially hobbesian views of society had replaced idealism. Gore Vidal wrote *Burr* as the Pentagon Papers revealed how some politicians and defence personnel's lies and machinations concerning involvement in Vietnam, media coverage revealed the Mai Lai horror and the Watergate scandal started unfolding. These were blows to simple, trusting patriotism but at this time the idealistic revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s was also waning. This was due to exhaustion with endless politics, uncertainty over direction after some successes and the commercialisation of those successes. With Nixon's re-election the idealistic attempts to change the system were replaced by a widespread cynicism. The themes of political corruption and why a seemingly idealistic revolution failed, despite seeming to win its aims, permeate Vidal's novel, *Burr*, With his novel being published in 1973, that theme was prescient, and popular with many critics and the public.

At other times this novel would not have been so popular. In 1940 Kenneth Roberts, another highly skilled popular novelist, also tried to debunk the American revolutionaries by making his narrating hero a Tory soldier. In 1940 America preparations for war were underway with conscription, rearmament and revelations about Nazism's horrors. This meant that his novel *Oliver Wiswell* got little praise or purchases, then: now it gets both. Several editions have gone into print since the 1980s and

opinions of the internet are generally favourable. Vidal wrote his similar in some ways novel in a more cynical and therefore receptive era, Even so, he does not apply his cynical theme to his time here, but goes back nearly two hundred years to examine the themes of failed idealism, the durable hagiography about America's founding fathers and the supposed reality of those idealized politics. Vidal depicted the American Revolution and its aftermath in new ways, both reflecting the new 1970s cynicism and appealing to that mentality.

Is this cynicism overdone? Even Fred Cook's *The Golden Book of The American Revolution* (1959) which is "an adaption for young readers of *The American Heritage Book of the Revolution*" a work where anyone would expect hagiography and storybook heroics, gives a warning against such attitudes. In the introduction historian Bruce Catton describes how the statues in the park, the great body of tradition and legends remain, There are also the familiar images which have at least some reality, but they are like scenes in pageants or perceived through a romantic, blurring haze.[1] Catton goes on to describe how as late as 1780 only one in sixteen American men were in the revolutionary army and estimates that only a third of the entire American population supported the War of Independence, about the same proportion opposed it, while another third remained uninvolved.[2] Catton's statement here might originate with John Adams, a major revolutionary leader and the second American president. He said this many years after the

[1] Bruce Catton, Introduction to *The Golden Book of The American Revolution*.. Adapted By Fred Cook. New York; Golden Press, 1959. p. 6.

[2] Ibid.,

revolution.[3] Stating this goes against glorifying the new nation and its citizens and would not have gained Adams any advantage; Catton's enlistment figures and demographics bears this estimate out. Catton also mentions the war's brutality, drudgery and discouragements, but like Vidal, concludes that hagiographic heroes did not win it, but ordinary fallible humans did so. He concludes that if *The Golden Book of The American Revolution* breathes some life into the legend of these men it serves a worthwhile purpose.[4]

Breathing some life into the legend is precisely what Vidal does into his novel, but for him (or Burr) life is a Hobbesian struggle deserving cynicism. There are very few good people. So to ask again; is this cynicism overdone?

After the wide and extreme adulation of the founding fathers, still so evident up to the late 1960s, many consider Vidal's counter image the truth, but is it? Evidence and relevant omissions reveals that frequently doubts and some cynicism about his cynical exposé are also justified.

On the jacket blurb and the afterword an insistence on using facts appears. Despite admitting to some small creative developments Vidal states that much of the dialogue comes from historic personages and the story is not an invention, but history. I disagree: despite many accurate facts and statements by real people, the novel's basis is the highly biased viewpoint of a fictional Aaron Burr. The real Aaron Burr was involved in real memoirs, which are still published in book form, but Vidal does not mention that.

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[3] Richard Ketchum, *The Winter Soldiers: George Washington and the Way to Independennce*.. London; Macdonald, 1973. p. 183.

[4] Ibid., p.7

Just as hagiography about America's revolutionary days was once accepted, now exposés are: neither should be and *Burr* should be viewed as a fiction where its eponymous heroic villain recounts a narrative cleverly biased in his favour and against his many enemies, even if he has some truth on his side. However few see this novel that way. Like hagiography, exposés have their uncritical admirers who believe they are seeing reality depicted.

In *Burr* the American Revolution, the subsequent moves westwards which led to war with Mexico and several of the heroes of this long period, are examined iconoclastically from the viewpoint of the two narrators living in 1830s New York. Charlie Schuyler, is a young, ambitious and unscrupulous, but rather passive journalist and law clerk. Aaron Burr appears as his dynamic, charismatic employer in a law firm. As the story starts Schulyer becomes Burr's biographer, but in surreptitious ways. He knowingly works for Burr's oldest friend and ally Mathew Davis, who starts betraying Burr by producing a scandalous biography for political purposes. Before the next presidential election in 1836 Davis wants to discredit the current Vice President and potential presidential candidate, Martin Van Buren, by proving that he is Burr's son. Charlie narrates to the reader, gets Burr recalling and reproducing his documents, which he supplements with commentaries, explanations and musings, not only from himself, but from those who know or knew Burr.

Once Burr was a revolutionary war hero, an almost successful presidential candidate and a Vice President under Jefferson. He seemed to have the heroic, almost mythic status that Americans gave to their great political leaders. This rapidly evaporated after he killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel (another rather similar revolutionary hero) feuded with Jefferson and his many allies and tried to start a war with Spain so as to take over that

kingdom's Mexican Empire. He was imprisoned, charged with treason, acquitted and went into European exile for several years.

As Burr and others in this novel note, such a history of a fall from grace into pride and treachery resembles the mythic framework for Lucifer in Christian belief. In American history and legend Aaron Burr holds a similar position. Widely believed to be the betrayer of democracy, - and the murderer of Alexander Hamilton, one of its heroes, he did this all to make himself king. He comes a close second to Benedict Arnold as being not just a traitor, but an almost satanic figure in American history.

*Burr* however, presents this demon's viewpoint. This makes the novel another example of seeing characters in depth as real, creditable people means that there are no longer any pure villains or heroes. In turn this makes unsustainable myths about a purely good side, that being how the American revolutionaries usually appear in American history. In Vidal's novel Burr rapidly emerges as a man who despite his reputation, has many heroic qualities. At the age of seventy-seven (when the novel begins) he has vitality, optimism, good humour and with many, esteem and popularity. He seems free from pomposity, envy, greed, cant and self-pity, common characteristics among his critics, enemies and the revolutionary heroes and their admirers. Like most heroes he is an adventurer with visions, and dreaming of opening up the Texan wilderness to settlement. Like many traditional heroes he eventually marries an old flame. All these characteristics make him seem wonderful to Charlie Schuyler, who in the generally puritanical world of 1830s New York endures aged moralists such as William Cullen Bryant.

Burr, was born into the highest echelons of America's wealthy and powerful puritan establishment with illustrious academics and theologians

amongst his ancestors. His father was a famous divine and his maternal grandfather was the even more famous Jonathan Edwards, widely considered the greatest of the early American religious figures. Burr becomes all-too familiar with religion and familiarity as the cliché goes, breeds contempt. This leads to developing a cynical, witty disdain full of sharp observations. He uses that ability first against his grandfather and his religion and then against Revolutionary and early American authority figures. With only a few exceptions, notably James Madison, their beliefs, motivations and actions are all duplicitous, and self-serving.

This should make readers suspicious of Burr's viewpoint. Is he seeing the world through his family's falsity, through his teenage rebellion against religion as part of his arrested development? The text reveals evidence for this. Vidal's creation, when assessing his university years for Charlie, refers to studying law, but does not mention the historic reality. He began his university studies as a theology student as he considered becoming a minister, Such an omission makes one wary from early in the narrative about what he leaves out.[5] He compounds this omission when referring to James Madison's addiction to studying theology at this college, but states that for him theology was something which he wanted nothing to do with. Not giving the full story about issues he raises frequently emerges as a pattern which damaged his credibility

Burr frequently shows his dislike of cant, extremism and the vanity and grandiose ideas of the supposedly great. However he soon shows that in his reactions to this, in his escape from his grandfather's posthumous

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[5] Fawn M. Brodie,, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*. New York& London; W.H. Norton & Company, 1998. p. 398; 'Aaron Burr" *Wikipedia*. Accessed September 20th 2021.

chilling dominance. (p. 22) he hungers to have his grandfather's dominance and eminence. This dominance of a hero-god has a lifetime effect: Burr also took on some of the grandiose characteristics he mocks. He admits to becoming his own hero-god, albeit one with the saving virtue of self-mockery. After reading Voltaire he realises that glory can be real for those who unafraid of risk can seize what they want. (p. 22) Although he castigates others for being revolutionaries for self-gain and self- glorification he goes on to develop this idea further. Seeing himself as motivated by such things, seeing nothing wrong with this, at least for himself, he does more than dream. He recounts that the revolution made him a hero. (p. 22). He not only applies this to himself, but to his future idol, Napoleon.

The way Napoleon devastated much of Europe, started conflicts which left tens of thousands dead and more impoverished, crippled or jailed, while setting set up a police state under his dictatorship remains unmentioned by Burr or the other admirers of Napoleon who appear in this novel. Like Napoleon, Burr sees nothing wrong or even unusual in this use of heroism, for such methods led several others and himself into their self-advancing, self-glorifying political and military careers. (p. 23) While dismissing the ordinary people who supposedly enlisted as ruffians solely for soldier's pays, he implies why he and others sided with the revolution in 1775. This was at least courageous as backing the revolution was facing death in battle or execution if they failed – and until 1777 and the victory at Saratoga it looked like they would fail, as England sent massive armies and navies to conquer a minority of Americans and around two thirds of Americans stayed loyal to England or stayed neutral.

Despite their obvious courage and stoicism in adversity Vidal-Burr gives one of the most cynical and acerbic attacks on the concept of heroism

– by making several of the revolution's heroes so very self-aware and sharply and cynically observant. This attitude permeates the novel. Burr implicitly compares the path of such heroes to a horserace: just as there can only be one race winner there can be only one founder-leader hero: General George Washington. Burr makes cruel fun of this sterile man becoming the father of his country and this is only the start of Burr's mockery of Washington, who from Weems biographical efforts in the early nineteenth century till Vidal's iconoclastic attack, was an almost sacrosanct figure in American history. Burr considers Washington to be unjustifiably vain. He depicts Washington as also being an extremely bad field general and judge of character and a man who often appears as personally unimpressive. He waddles about in his old uniforms which are now too small for his corpulent build, so they rip and tear when he moves. He tries to get underlings to refer to him as his mightiness. Supposedly motivated to have people worship him like a god, he does this because at his core his motivation is self-love.

Despite his apparently diffident, even obsequious ways, Washington is really an intensely ambitious intriguer, a cold reptilian back stabber. (p. 91) who risks defeat to get rid of competent rivals. Who were these men who were removed in this way? Burr gives no evidence for this statement, nor does he name those individuals whom Washington supposedly suddenly and figuratively knifed in the back. Vidal/Burr mentions the group of intriguers known as the Conway Cabal, but does not go into detail: to do so would cause strong doubts about his favourable images of Generals Lee and Gates and of Washington as a two-faced ruthless intriguer. Washington did not even know of this cabal until by accident, he found one of their misplaced

communications enclosed in a letter for him.[6] He responded with a curt note to some of the intriguers, explaining how he had found their letter. *They* were the intriguers. This was part of the process of trying to replace Washington with either Charles Lee or Horatio Gates. After the Conway cabal were exposed he did write and say some caustic things and worked for their removal, but this group were not trusting saints, but conniving self-promoters.[7] Concerning intrigues for removal Washington was definitely a victim.[8] Was this justified because better generals could have won the war much sooner? The historic evidence goes against this, although according to Burr, Lee successfully defended Charleston: according to eyewitness General William Moultrie, Lee, his superior, and in command, only appeared during the battle long enough to reposition two or three guns and to complement him on his actions, then Lee left the besieged fort while it was under fire.[9] It was Moultrie who prepared and commanded the successful defence.[10] Gates was in charge of the American forces which took the surrender of the British Army at Saratoga, but this great victory was the

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[6] George F. Scheer and Hugh F. Rankin. *Rebels and Redcoats: The Living Story of the American Revolution*.The World Publishing Company; 1957. This work contains a narrative from 1775 to 1783 told by the writers, but expanded and explained by introduced segments which are written by all types of eyewitnesses, troopers, junior officers and generals on both sides, editors, civilians and Tories and rebels..

[7] Scheer & Rankin,.'They have a whole chapter about this cabal, heavily based on reproduced primary source documents, these being their communications and those who opposed them, particularly Washngton. Chapter 23 'Fi Cake and Water, Sir." (sic) pp.288-302.

[8] Noemie Emery, *Washingtom: A Biography*. London; Cassell, 1977. pp. 221-222; James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensible Man*. Boston; Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company; c.1974. pp. 111-116.

[9] Scheer & Rankin, pp.137-138 Their text and Moultrie quoted.

[10] Ibid.,

culmination of a campaign to which many Americans contributed. Burr insists that because of their victories at Charleston and Saratoga these two were better generals than Washington and should have replaced him. Because supposedly incompetent Washington stayed on in command, the war dragged on. This is Burr's opinion. Washington had the strength of character and the military astuteness not to publicly destroy these revealed intriguers, as to do so would have revealed a divided command and the miserable condition of the Continental Army.[11] In contrast, Lee publicly described the Army's miserable condition until Washington told him to keep such comments only for discussions at headquarters.[12] So does this incident alone reveal Lee's behaviour, to be that of a superior general, as Burr suggests? Or does it show the opposite? Although acclaimed by as a military genius, mainly on his writings and criticisms, other examples of his behaviour cause more doubts, not only about abilities, but about loyalties. In the 1776 New Jersey campaign Lee intended to place his contingent on the flank of the vastly superior British force with enemy contingents behind him and a river blocking his advance: Washington stopped that obviously stupid plan.[13]

Lee and a dozen of his staff were captured because he took other officers and their escort to a tavern miles outside his lines, although as one contemporary then said, Washington was greatly surprised that Lee was captured where he was as he must have known that he was heading into

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[11] Emery, pp. 226-227. Washington is quoted; Flexner, p.115.

[12] Flexner, pp. 119-120.

[13]. Ketchum, pp. 253-254.

territory where the enemy were.[14] Washington believed Lee was attracted to the tavern's lodgings, these being better than those with the army.[15] While his troops marched without him Lee dallied over a leisurely breakfast and a letter to Gates about what a bad general Washington was.[16] During his captivity he was kept in confined luxury and discussed military matters with his captors.[17] Years later it was revealed that during this time he sent instructions to British General Howe on how to win the war.[18] Vidal has Burr refer to this, saying that during his exile while in London in the 1802 he found documents linking Lee to British efforts. This is historically dubious as Paul Barrow describes these documents as being first found in 1860. [19] It may be that Lee worked as a double agent as his advice to Howe to focus on Philadelphia and Burgoyne to win the Saratoga campaign alone was a crucial factor that led to that crucial failure.

Gates was even more erratic as a commander than Lee. During the Saratoga campaign Gates left many decisions and organised attacks to very able subordinates. Early in the Saratoga campaign, his predecessor General

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[14] Ibid., Washington's staffer Samuel Webb, expressed such in conversation with the artist John Trumbull, after considering soldier's opinions. Trumbull was frequently with the army.

[15] Ibid., pp-254-260 Washington is quoted. p .256

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[16] Ibid., Ketchum gives and account of Lee's capture reproducing statements and opinions quoting from several primary pp-254-260.

[17] Ketchum, p. 259.n.

[18] Barrow, Paul. 'The Treachery of Charles Lee.' *TWU*. Spring 2015. https://twu.edu/media/documents/history-government/The-Treachery-of-Charles-Lee-Ibid.-Volume-8-Spring-2015.pdf. accessed September 2021.

[19] Ibid.,

Schuyler while not a brilliant or popular commander, successfully delayed Burgoyne's advance with sniping, road blocks and damaged bridges.[20] By instituting a scorched earth policy so the British could not live off the land he contributed substantially to the victory.[21] So did John Stark, commander of the independent forces which inflicted a loss of over 10 % of Burgoyne's forces at the battle of Bennington: they were not even under Gates's command.[22] Gates had nothing to do with that victory. Extremely able commander Dan Morgan and his specialist riflemen seem ubiquitous, wherever Americans either forced the British to retreat or when Gates needed a strong defence or a wearing down of enemy defences. Benedict Arnold had to argue against Gates for offensives he organised and led, these battered the British.[23] Although estimates differ and muster rolls do not give a full story, in this campaign Gates's army substantially outnumbered the British and in the last battle the odds were at least almost two to one in the Americans favour, just over thirteen thousand of them were definitely known to be at Saratoga as the campaign ended, There may have been twenty thousand there then while Burgoyne surrendered 7,183 British and German mercenaries.[24] In the aftermath British commander Burgoyne stated

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[20] Scheer & Rankin, p. 259. Quotes are from Burgoyne and an anonymous American eyewitness. Scheer & Rankin credit Schuyler's achievements, p.259

[21] Ibid.,

[22] Scheer & Rankin, pp. 261-269. The accounts of several participants. American,British and Hessian soldiers and an anonymous American civilian are quoted.

[23]Scheer & Rankin, Eyewitnesses American officers James Wilkinson and John Brooks are quoted. pp.280-282

[24] John Luzader, *Saratoga: A Military History of the Decisive Campaign of the American Revolution.* New York; Savas Beatie, 2008. Luzader reproduces muster rolls for both sides. These give totals of just over twelve thousand two hundred Americans and just

that the enemy numbered sixteen thousand, while eyewitness Baroness von Riedesel, wife of one of Burgoyne's generals, stated that the Americans told her after the surrender that they had over twenty thousand, while the British had not more than "four or five thousand strong."[25] That last adjective probably means armed effective fighting soldiers. Depending on which figures are matched Burgoyne was facing a force at least nearly twice his size to possibly one five times his size. One reason for this imbalance is that Washington sent Gates reinforcements, recruits and supplies.[26] Was Gates a good general? The quality of his general officers and troops especially in their expertise in wilderness fighting. Gates' army had access to supplies and fresh recruits, which Burgoyne's forces lacked

Apart from the Saratoga campaign flaws quickly emerge with the idea that Gates was a superior general to Washington. He did not even bother to inform Washington of his victory, although this was vital news for strategic planning and morale.[27] His successful intrigues against his predecessor and then his insults, ingratitude and intrigues directed to his superior Washington and sometimes to underlings, would only weaken their cause. Nearly two

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under nine thousand British and their allies. Appendices B through to E Orders of Battle pp. 362-375. These appendices are based on muster rolls and as Luzader writes, in Appendice E, the American records are often missing and what exists are basic and incomplete as many volunteers rushed into service. (p. 373) With the British, they do not seem count.Indians and civilians; William Semour in his *Yours to Reason Why: Decision in Battle*. London; Book Club Associates, 1982. gives figures for one of the last battles in this campaign. British forces totaled 7,183 fighting men while the Americans had just over thirteen thousand. 'Order of Battle' (pp.290-292) These figures are also based on primary source documents.

[25] James Lunt, *John Burgoyne of Saratoga*. London; MacDonald and Jane's, 1976. p. 276 p. 267. Burgoyne and the Baroness are both quoted.

[26] Luzader, p. 193.

[27] Lunt, Washington quoted. p. .271.

years after his great victory supposedly superior General Gates lost at least six hundred men, perhaps around two thousand out of three thousand to a numerically inferior force of about two thousand at the battle of Camden.[28] After making crucial mistakes from early in the campaign to just before the battle, he was so badly defeated there that he abandoned the shattered remnants of his army, galloping away as fast as his horse could go, being the news bearer of his own defeat.[29] This resulted in Congress wanted a Court of Enquiry into Gates. Before the war ended Conway, Gates and Lee would all be manoeuvred out of command or retired by Congress.[30] The battle of Camden, the large number of negative eyewitness reports on Lee by other officers at his court martial and the way Lee, Gates and Conway were removed or retired remain unused by Vidal: his images of these men are definitely not reality.

In a novel that goes against hagiography and even admiration for the American heroes and replaces these attitudes with cynical exposés, Gates and Lee are made into heroes, despite being much worse than those criticised. So ultimately is Burr. Whatever Washington's faults, he stayed with his army, often in dire circumstances, holding battered, dwindling forces together by example, personality and organizational ability.

Was he a bad general? On taking command of the revolutionary volunteers he welded this motley collection of farmers, farmhands, labourers, shopkeepers, tradesmen, forest denizens, backwoodsmen, clerks,

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[28] Gerald M. Carbone *Nathanael Greene. A Biography of the American Revolution*. New York; Palgrave/Macmillan, 2008. pp. 134-135; Flexner, p. 137. Flexner gives the higher casualty figure, Carbone the lower.

[29] Carbone, pp.134-135 Greene is quoted

[30] Flexner, p.137.

students, hunters, lawyers and unemployed ruffians into an army. Despite defeats, having whole regiments on time limited enlistments with delayed or missing pays, frequently enduring starvation, and freezing winters with grossly inadequate clothing, footwear and accommodation, he was able to keep together a fighting force for over eight years. Generals do more than fight battles; he started these essential tasks. By extravagantly paying a spy from his own pocket, he gained knowledge of British movements and designs.[31] During the siege of Boston he started naval forces; one of his privateers captured a British ship full of vitally needed military supplies of very diverse kinds; apart from practicalities, this was great morale booster. [32] The prowling privateers combined with bad weather played a major role in starving and demoralising Boston by blocking seaboard supplies.[33] Another of his achievements was realising that amongst his officers two who without previous military experience Henry Knox, a bookseller and businessman Nathanael Greene, had high organizational and leadership abilities, so he promoted them. Overall their loyalty to him, high levels of energy, stoicism and organisational ability served the Continental Army well.[34] Burr depicts Knox as a foolish, blind leader, the opposite of historic depictions. He does have a scene where the historic Burr moved the historic Knox out of a weakly fortified position, this was one of Knox' few mistakes in a service

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[31] David McCullough, *1776: America and Britain at War*. Allen Lane/ Penguin Books, 2005. p. 28. Washington is quoted.

[32] James L. Nelson, *George Washington's Secret Navy: How the American Revolution went to Sea.* New York; McGraw-Hill; 2008.

[33] McCullough, p.64.

[34] Ibid., p.111 pp. 129-130 p.293.

record full of achievements, not one of which Burr mentions. Washington organised the removal of captured artillery from Ticonderoga to the heights over Boston. Knox successfully carried out the extremely arduous task without the loss of a single cannon.[35] Washington's first success was in combining diversions with rapidly placing this artillery over Boston and within a deadly range for the enemy positions. He reassembled the captured artillery from Fort Ticonderoga on Dorchester Heights overlooking Boston before the British knew the artillery was even being unlimbered, which demoralised them greatly.[36] After a cancelled attack due to sudden and extremely strong storm the British immediately knew they had to leave or their garrison would be destroyed by bombardment.[37] Washington had easily captured Boston, one of America's largest and most important cities with few casualties and booty he estimated at forty to fifty thousand pounds.[38] In the 1776 battles for New York, Brooklyn and surrounding areas his rarely trained, not well equipped force were vastly outnumbered. He did lose

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[35] Scheer & Rankin. The concerning the guns from Ticonderoga includes a quote from Washington and a segment from a report by Knox. pp. 103-105; Secondary source: McCullough, pp.. 82-85

[36] Scheer and Rankin, pp. 106-108. American officers General Heath and Major John Trumbull, and British commander William Howe are quoted. Washington and an English deserter are indirectly quoted by Washington's dinner guest Reverend John Murray. p.107; Secondary sources: McCullough, pp 90-96. British eyewitnesses quoted, including General Howe, the commander; Flexner, pp.75-76.

[37] Scheer and Rankin, pp. 107-109 Major John Trumbull, Eywitnesses Reverend John Murray, Newspaperman S. Patrick's (sic) Day and an unnamed Englishmen are all quoted. Murray quotes a deserter's anecdotes; Secondary sources: Keetchum, pp.38-39; Flexner, pp.75-76.

[38] McCullough, pp.106-107. Quoting Washington about the value of booty. He also quotes Howe about destroying anything of value and gives examples of this process; Ketchum, Quoting Knox about the state of Boston when his troops entered it. pp.38-39

battles, against well-equipped, well-trained infantry, At the start of the campaign he faced thirty-two thousand British troops with around twenty thousand to twenty-three thousand and the British also had two large fleets with naval artillery and around ten thousand sailors.[39] Even with these odds, his errors of judgement were a factor in his defeats. His army's survival was often due to a combination of weather, terrain and the cautious nature of the British commander, William Howe. In 1776 Washington lost the battles of Brooklyn Heights, Kip's Bay, White Plains, Fort Washington and Fort Lee and only won a small engagement at the Heights of Abraham. At that later fight numbers involved swiftly increased, from several hundred to over three to five thousand troops were actively involved: this was more than a skirmish, but less than a full battle. What was important about it was that under Washington's command the rag-tag Americans forced the Black Watch, one of the most highly regarded British regiments, to retreat and then pursued them for miles.[40] The army needed and got a morale booster as they abandoned New York to British occupation and retreated to Valley Forge, where they endured freezing and starvation on levels that became legendary. Amazingly Burr-Vidal do not use any of this information to prove that Washington was a bad general, he merely restates that opinion, several times. Surprisingly he also fails to deal with Washington's worst battlefield defeat at Brandywine Creek in 1777. This defeat led to the British occupation of Philadelphia, then the largest city within the America's largest

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[39] Ketchum, pp.106-107. Flexner, p.79. The slightly larger figures are given here.

[40] Scheer and Rankin, Their text and the following primary sources, Washington, his secretary Joseph Reed, his aide Tench Tilghman and a rebel participant, Captain John Chilton pp.184-186. Secondary sources: Stephen Tanner, *Epic Retreats: From 1776 to the Evacuation of Saigon*. Rockville Centre,; NY; Saredon, 2000. pp. 26-27; Carbone, pp. 39-40..'The Battle of Harlem Heights' *Wikipedia*'. accessed 28th September 2021.

city and the former former capital. Losing the two largest cities, one of the war's biggest battles at Brandywine Creek and then another soon after at Germantown and five out of six of the first battles in the New York campaign is a disastrous record. Until the end of 1776 these losses were only partially redeemed by his virtually bloodless taking of Boston and the small victory at the Heights of Abraham..

At Christmas 1776 Washington led his battered remnants to victory in a surprise attack on a Hessian garrison at Trenton. Burr mentions this dismissively, but not that for a cost of four troops wounded and five frozen to death, two before the battle and three after, he captured a fort, a town, cannon, supplies and inflicted nearly a thousand casualties. They included the surrendered, fatally wounded commander. Amongst Washington's four wounded were his relative William Washington and the future president James Munroe. Although Munroe frequently appears in the novel, Burr does not mention this, barely mentions this obvious victory or Washington's next victory, days later at Princeton. At that battle he was again able to surprise the enemy before they could concentrate their numerically superior forces and he bravely rallied his faltering troops, leading them in a charge. These victories led the British to abandon much of New Jersey.

Vidal's Burr does not refer to that historic reality, although he does describe the Battle of Monmouth Courthouse in June 1779 at length, to show that it was a disaster caused by Washington, not the great American victory described that way by assorted rebels at that time. He blames Washington for a badly planned attack. It was Lee who insisted on commanding the botched, desultory attack: Washington was not initially on the battlefield. Seeing Lees forces retreating and hearing from officers that Lee had ordered the retreat, Washington rode up enraged, (not with his

supposedly cold serpentine nature evident) questioned Lee, then dismissed him. He then rallied retreating troops as he usually did, Washington had fresh troops form a defensive line so that fleeing or disordered troops could rally behind that line. As at Harlem Heights and Princeton, before the day ended he was launching attacks which forced the British to retreat. The Americans, although outnumbered, had inflicted more casualties than they lost. Although this was a great opportunity for the British to destroy the Continental Army, the core of rebel resistance, the British were apparently too exhausted and battered to use it, so they soon continued their retreat.[41] Burr-Vidal do not mention these aspects, insisting it was a costly bungle by Washington. The Americans had lost heavy casualties at Monmouth, including Burr. He was injured in a horse fall, suffered heat exhaustion or sunstroke and came down with a recurring fevers and diarrhoea. His abysmal health led to his military discharge.

In the 1781 campaign Washington outfoxed the British by bringing his army past British held New York, convincing them that he would besiege the city, so to strengthen their defence of New York by removing 3,000 troops from Cornwallis in Virginia. Washington then rushed his troops south to besiege his true target, Cornwallis's now depleted army. While many (including Vidal's Burr) credit the French with the decisive victory at Yorktown, which lead to ending the war in an American victory, One last time after a day of calm and moderate weather, Washington's ubiquitous

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[41] This account of the preparations for the battle, the fight itself and the immediate aftermath are based on the comments of Scheer and Rankin and their quoted eyewitness accounts by Alexander Hamilton, Private Joseph Martin, Washington's aide Tench Tilghman, General Charles Scott, James McHenry, Brigadier Charles Lee and Private Elijah Fisher. pp. 329-336; Several of these eyewitnesses and others would recount what they saw and heard under oath. Secondary Sources are Flexner, pp. 120-124; Emory, 236-240; Carbone, 93-96; 'Battle of Monmouth" *Wikipedia*. accessed 2nd October 2021.

friend in the clouds "a most violent storm of wind and rain" hit "at the critical moment"; according to Cornwallis.[42] This storm aided Washington, as they wrecked attempt to retreat to a stronger position.[43]

This is a track record for a bad general?

While not history's greatest general, Washington has a strong case for being history's luckiest, surprisingly a point that despite being obvious, Burr-Vidal do not make anything of, although this could explain why the Americans won the war. In Vidal's favour is that historic reality reads like bad fiction; the weather in particular seems a deus ex machina; both in the historic and literary senses.

At Dorchester Heights he prepared for a strong enemy frontal attack, with perfect night weather for his quick assembling of fortifications and unlimbering artillery. The next day in initially fine weather, a large British force flanked him, readying their surprise attack, when suddenly the worst storm eyewitnesses claim they had ever seen caused havoc and so wrecked the possibility of a British attack.[44] With no advantage of surprise and with the Bunker Hill experience of charging enemy redoubts as a warning, the British soon retreated – and as mentioned, withdrew from Boston.

During the August 1776 battles for New York at Brooklyn Heights, three times in two days the British nearly entrapped the badly defeated

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[42] Earl Cornwallis, A Letter to Sir Henry Clinton, October 20th 1781 Modern retiling 'American Victory at Yorktown,' in *Colonies to Nation 1763-1789: A Documentary History of the American Revolution.* New York; W.W. Norton & Company, 1975. Edited by Jack P. Greene. p. 417.

[43] Ibid.,

[44] The role of weather is development in has already been mentioned in the several source notes referring to Washington's battle record, starting with the siege of Boston.

remnants of Washington's army. Several British vessels sailed nearby and would have at the least, entrapped the rebels or even more decisively, gave a barrage to eliminate them. "Miraculously" the wind changed, stopping these vessels, just as Washington saw them approaching.[45] The rebels were only able to slip away due to Howe's order for his infantry to halt the chase and then a heavy storm caused confusion and concealment of both American moves and the flimsiness of their redoubts. Howe later stated that a full frontal attack on American redoubts could have led to high and unnecessary casualties, as at Bunker Hill. That pyrrhic victory for the British in 1775 would continue to give Americans such advantages. If Howe had attacked the Americans' frequently undermanned, flimsy, sometimes flooded redoubts he would have almost certainly captured the largest American army existent then.[46] The torrential storm meant that the East River, the only escape route, was too whipped up by the storm to be crossed. The first Americans on the shore in their small boats came to the same conclusion. Howe was waiting for a wind change so that the awaiting navy would block Washington's escape route. Low visibility and probably no messengers venturing out in the storm almost certainly combined to keep Howe deluded. This was while he had his infantry digging entrenchments to entrap the rebels from the land side. Then the storm abated and was replaced by a very heavy fog that ensured the British did not know of the evacuation. The fog

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[45] McCullough. p. 175. His term "Miraculously" appears appropriate. Much of this account concerning the battle of Brooklyn Heights is taken from McCullough, pages 168-197 201-202. Other sources include Tanner, pp. 19-25; Emery, pp.193-196; Ketchum, p.110; Carbone, pp.32-37; Flexner, pp.80-83 and "The Battle of Long Island.' *Wikipedia.* accessed 29th September 2021.

[46] Scheer and Rankin pp. 170. Their text and they quote eyewitness Colonel John Chester about the weakness of the American army after the defeat at Brooklyn Heights.

did not start to lift until seven the next morning, just as Washington boarded the last (or one of the last) evacuating vessel. Eyewitness American Major Tallmadge considered that in the history of warfare their had never been a more fortunate retreat and the fog was providential.[47] It would take Dunkirk 1940 to prove him wrong.

While that escape reads perfectly for a Hollywood scene, would any screenwriter dare to include the weather as the miraculous saviour on three different occasions in one battle? To make it even more far-fetched this was after two weather saving events at Dorchester Heights and more to come at other subsequent 1776 battles. Vidal was a sometime Hollywood script doctor: he would have cut those miracles out. He certainly knew to exclude them from his novel and so keep his readers' credibility. In doing so he also virtually omitted writing of these 1776 battles in detail; his best evidence for Washington being a bad general. The British did have the advantages of superior numbers, quality troops, equipment and supplies and had a very substantial navy, but even so, Washington made mistakes. He had divided his force before an enemy at least twice his size, misjudged where the attack would be and had not placed troops on a pass where the enemy unexpectedly emerged to attack his rear. He lost over a thousand men as prisoners, suffered over three hundred known dead and lost a large number as drowned, missing or. deserted, Around six thousand volunteers soon went home when their enlistments expired, while others turned to becoming vandals and thieves, roaming New York City in gangs.[48]

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[47] Scheer and Rankin, Their text and they quote eyewitness Major Tallmadge, pp. 172.

[48] Scheer and Rankin, Their text and they quote eyewitness Lewis Morris Junior, concerning plunder. p. 176; Secondary source McCullough, pp.201-202. This refers to plunder in New York City.

Soon after this retreat and after the defeats at Forts Washington and Lee the British had nearly caught Washington and a large contingent of the rebel army when carrying cannon up a steep rocky path slowed their advance.[49] Subsequently the Battle of White Plains in October was almost a smaller scale duplicate of the Battle Brooklyn Heights. Once again the Americans retreated in disorder after a numerically superior British advance on the retreating units stalled, This time that was caused by the British commander at the front of the advancing column carefully taking his time to reload, giving the Americans a few minutes to snipe at the waiting column, who soon fled.[50] Even so, other British forces gave the Americans such a battering that they retreated, albeit in good order. Howe had inflicted three times the casualties he had taken, but slow as ever, he took a day to assess the situation and decided to launch an attack on the morrow. Once again weather saved Washington. Cold and a gigantic rainstorm delayed on that morrow, albeit only for a day, but Washington knew one thing Howe did not, how to use a day. When the next day dawned and the attack began, Howe found that once again his troops were attacking nothing: the Americans had successfully fled their redoubts, again. From Dorchester to White Plains the main American army and the miraculous bad weather had saved Washington's reputation. If ever anything deserved Burr-Vidal's scathing wit, these brilliant retreats after dismal defeats were it.

Two unusual factors may have decided the course of Washington's great victory at Trenton, the first big battlefield victory in the war for the

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[49] Ketchum, In discussing the weather, this writer attributes the army's survival to "sheer luck" p. 365.

[50] Tanner, p. 32-33.

rebels, and desperately needed, as they had just evacuated their capitol at Philadelphia and most of what remained of Washington's battered, hungry, demoralised army would probably go home, as their enlistments expired on New Year's Eve. Once again, yes again weather favoured Washington. His enemies usually sent out daily scouting patrols, but the day of his surprise attack was so cold and severe that officers cancelled the patrols.[51] Days before Trenton's garrison commander Colonel Rall, got warning notes about rebels being active in his area, but after hearing an account from an apparent loyalist that Washington's forces were too weak to do anything he became complacent. That loyalist was really a rebel spy, personally coached by Washington into lulling Rall into a false sense of security. A few hours before the surprise attack a genuine Loyalist sent a note to Colonel Rall, probably warning that Washington's army were nearby or were advancing on the town. The colonel put the warning note in his pocket to read later as he was playing cards.[52] What if the cards had fallen in an annoying or even just less pleasing pattern? Washington's attack may not have left Rall and many of his officers dead a few hours later. The rebels won at Trenton by their sudden. Quick, surprise attack. Washington may have been shot by alerted Hessian sentries and after another defeat the Continental Army may have disintegrated. Although Vidal's characters frequently muse on such what ifs, they do not muse on this one.

At the battle of Princeton while rallying troops Washington faced a strong British volley and an eyewitness, an aide, pulled his hat over his eyes

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[51] Ketchum, p. 306

[52] Ibid., p.. 286

so that he would not see his leader killed. He was amazed that calm Washington was alive after this, let alone untouched.[53]

A similar lucky break was when Washington was riding around after the battle of Brandywine Creek with one other companion when he came within range of British Major Ferguson, who while not recognising him instinctively felt that this was an important enemy. Washington's luck held yet again: Ferguson was loathe to shoot an unarmed man in the back.[54]

Washington's successes were not all luck. Even Burr gives Washington moments when the heroic image fits; despite his faults and failures, a reality unconnected to luck exists to build on. He can also be impressive and decisive in crucial situations. Burr describes Washington physically breaking up a savage fight between two of his soldiers. Here Washington not only acts the heroic role of the energetic restorer of order, but becomes one .(pp. 39-40) Yet Burr, standing next to the apparently calm Washington, notes that he briefly resembled one of his later ubiquitous equestrian monuments (p. 40). This recollection places Washington in the nearly mythic mode, a man possessed of almost supernatural vocal and physical strength, unheeding of danger, able to win a fight against odds and already resembling his own monument. However as this incident closes, Burr quickly reveals the human side to Washington and therefore the false side to the heroic image. Burr notes that from a distance his general seems serene, but close up Burr can see Washington's trembling hands and concludes that from his close position, he looked terrified. This incident

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[53] Scheer and Rankin, They mention that Washington survived because he was enveloped in the smoke of battle, p.218. Other secondary sources leave this as an unexplained miracle. Ketchum, p.142; Emery, p.210.

[54] Scheer and Rankin, They reproduce Ferguson's account, p.414.

works as a literal example of how an observer's placing can make or expose a hero.

Burr claims self-promoting publicity and friendly sources going along with this and Washington's impressive physical appearance count for a good deal in creating the hero. Washington also has other advantages, both those of a genuine hero and those of a fabrication. In this fiction he has a nose for intrigue, possesses luck and although Burr does not explicitly say it, has the stamina necessary to defeat the British. Burr does say that while Gates or Lee would be better commanders, nobody else but Washington had the authority to keep together the army and that while he was a bad general ,without Washington the British would have won. (p. 88) Vidal/ Burr do not explain this statement, either with facts or how it contradicts the many pages taken up in this novel with criticisms of Washington. By making him commander in chief Congress has placed Washington where a hero should be and the Americans desperately needed heroes in the revolution's desperate times. Amid the confusion of the republic's early days Washington and his underlings are made into heroes because the public need such figures to boost their confidence. The image of the hero feeds desires within the minds of the would-be heroes and as Burr notes, such men were common in the revolution.

Vidal presents not only Washington, but many other revolutionary heroes through Burr's cynical, iconoclastic recollections. In 1835, he considers William Henry Harrison's way of building up a a successful political career. His victorious skirmish with Indians at Tippecanoe becomes a glorious and great victory. This image ensures his heroic reputation: Burr sees such confabulating about battles and heroes as a continuing pattern in American history and as a cover for their numerous defeats. He does

overstate this and brings in his biases, crediting those he likes (Jackson, Lee and Gates) as the winners of America's three great military successes which he credits and ignoring those battles won by those he dislikes, such as Washington.

Although Burr understates clearly won victories, leaving out Lexington- Concord, Princeton, Bennington, Cowpens and King's Mountain, he does (with more accuracy) hit on the American love of the military hero, which stretches from Robert Rogers and Washington to Colin Powell. He impishly attacks not only false heroes, but even the supposed unity and love of liberty which motivated the American Revolution and its ordinary defenders: He says that only a handful of true patriots existed in 1775 and few of these survived the long war of Independence, even those that did grew weary. (pp. 42-43)

Much to dispute emerges with this idea and will be dealt with towards the end of this essay.

When Burr recalls its early days when he first volunteered he presents a different picture to the hagiographic images of the common people as noble, selfless heroes. To him they are there for pay given in advance and few cared about the causes of the conflict with England. (pp. 40-41) For Burr the revolution and for that matter existence, is not so much about ideals, but about wealth and power. This becomes evident when he first enters the Continental encampment and encounters a tanner selling moccasins which he guarantees are made from Indian skin. This is based on an actual incident described by eyewitnesses.[55] Later he describes other revolutionary heroes making fortunes out of pilfering and contracts He depicts the sufferings of the Continental Army in the freezing conditions at

[55] Scheer and Rankin , p. 353. Lieutenant William Barton describes himself and his patrol doing this

Valley Forge as being caused by greedy merchants who wanted the army nearby, so as to provision them.

True as these examples may or may not be, are they typical or exceptional? What must be more certain is that the minutemen at Lexington and Concord, numbering about three thousand, fought against the British spontaneously with no talk of pay. Within days about twenty thousand such were around Boston, in arms against the British and this was before Congress even declared that such soldiers would be paid.[56] Virtually every detailed major account, primary or secondary, concerning the Continental Army describes how once it was known that pays were coming, sometimes complaints, even conflicts emerged over late pays. This however, cannot be the same thing as being motivated by money to fight. Those same accounts frequently refer to starving, barefoot rebels in underwear, blankets or skimpy summer clothes trudging through snow to fight on. This is a miserable way to earn small pays, especially when they could have been well-fed, clothed and warm at their farms, shops, ships, and hunting lodges. Instead most stayed or voluntarily reenlisted. And the leaders? On accepting his command Washington refused any pay, but said he would eventually claim expenses, which he did at the war's end.[57] His wealthy aide, Tench Tilghman also refused pay.[58] Others, like Jefferson, either lost property to British occupiers or came close to it. When General Nathanael Greene clothed his army at his own expense he became a near pauper, only saved from that fate by a

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[56] Scheer and Rankin ,p. 52.

[57] Scheer and Rankin , pp. 71-72. Washington's acceptance speech quoted. The authors mention the expenses claim, p.505.

[58] Scheer and Rankin ,p. 185.

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donated plantation.[59] In the cruel winter of 1779-1780 the Continental Army was saved from starvation and freezing by the generous donations of nearby New Jersey magistrates and civilians.[60] When Nathan Hale was about to be hanged by the British and was asked did he have any regrets, he did not try to make a deal for mercy and money, but responded with that he had only one life to give for his country.

Despite his cynicism about the motivations of most others, Burr remained a serving officer, being a major by early 1777 and a colonel soon after. According to his own account Washington quotes another general's opinion of Burr being an excellent disciplinarian, so Washington gives a regiment causing him great trouble to weld into shape. (p. 88) This is odd. Burr previously described Washington as a cruel disciplinarian, who frequently has troops tied onto some contraption for whippings, but many pages later Burr states that he seldom does this. Burr works so strictly with this troublesome regiment that by his own account he provokes mutiny and almost severs the arm of one among his would-be assassins. His tasks as a commander are also very different to those of his presented persona of an impish satirist of the military life. He effectively suppresses bandits in territory held by the Continental forces and leads guerrilla forces behind enemy lines. He commands a brigade at the battle of Monmouth Court House, of which the reader is allowed only glimpses –which are unfavourable to Washington while nothing is written about Charles Lee.

This same pattern of being a truth-teller and an impish satirist who understated his role within the system he criticises applies to post revolutionary politics. As with the officers, Burr criticises the politicians so

[59] Carbone, pp. 217-218,
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shrewdly and with inside knowledge because he is one of them. After attacking so many others for being vainglorious, ruthless, intensely ambitious, elitist, hypocritical intriguers he describes his attempts to covertly provoke a war with Spain so as to seize their American empire, where he will rule as king.

This obviously raises the question of Burr's credibility. Charlie did consider that Burr's version of history is just that, an alternative to the orthodox view rather than a revealed truth. At the start of his recollections Burr says, that his side of the story may not be accurate. (p. 22) Concerning his treason trial Burr admits he has condensed issues so that they are favourable to himself. (p. 370) He also states that he seldom tries to correct legends because doing that is impossible. (p. 109) This seems contradictory, for much of his account appears to be a correction of legend. Charlie finds going through his notes that much reads as self-serving, with some isolated truths. (p. 34) Burr does reject the idea of himself as a maligned hero. In old age he describes the cost of trying to be a hero when he muses on killing Alexander Hamilton in a duel, for he realises one of the essentially repressive realities of the heroic image – society usually worships only one great hero at a time. Someone who has great qualities must lose and often lose their life for another's empty glory:  he should have been friends with Hamilton, but they became enemies in a competition for that one place and the conflict destroyed them both. (p. 54)

Even during the revolution he seems to have rapidly outgrown the appeal of the heroic ideal. His experiences of war are dreary and inflict suffering as the freezing, starving, dwindling little army drudge through the New England wilderness in autumn and winter during the, blundering

‘The Death of General Montgomery at Quebec ’*By John Trumbull. 1786. Wikipedia Public Domain. This grandiose, sanitised, stagey and even melodramatic depiction certainly conveys a sense of traditional heroism, but how much could be accurate? The clouds and the uniforms, perhaps.*

Quebec campaign. This miserable journey culminates in the failed attack on Quebec. This failure occurs because as their commander General Montgomery leads the advance and the Canadians and British retreat, but one man fires a cannon, the ball kills Montgomery, his troops confer instead of advancing, so when they retreat Burr finds himself alone, tending to Montgomery’s splattered corpse, before the weary retreat to New England begins. Burr finds that glory to be childish and delusional. He contrasts art

depicting a sanitised and therefore false reality of Montgomery's death with his acerbic descriptions of what he witnessed. (p. 51)

As with this example, throughout his recollections Burr does seem fascinated by the reality behind the heroic image. He focuses in particular on ridiculing his one time ally turned arch-rival Thomas Jefferson. Frequently he has a fitting target with Jefferson, whom he depicts as an intensely ambitious, foxy, erratic, intriguing politician. Jefferson both suffers from, and profits by, a selective blindness which can suck the unknowing in to his simplistic viewpoint. Burr cleverly and continually exposes Jefferson's hypocrisies over his being a slave owner while issuing clarion calls to liberty and equality. This reads convincingly - until Burr's career as a slave owner becomes known – not by Vidal's revelations but by extraneous sources.[61] When he married he gained dominion over his wife's property, which included her inherited slaves. [62] Although they were well treated and educated, they were apparently not freed until New York State abolished slavery in 1799, a move Burr officially supported.[63] Like Jefferson, Burr was secretive about his coloured mistress and their children.[64] Unlike the widower Jefferson, Burr maintained this relationship during his marriage. These aspects of Burr's life do not become known by reading this novel . Also missing is that Jefferson did free some of his slaves, tried to abolish the

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[61] Sherri Burr,. "Aaron Burr Jr. and John Pierre Burr: A Founding Father and his Abolitionist Son." https://slavery.princeton.edu/stories/john-pierre-burr accessed 24th September 2012

[62] Sherri Burr,

[63] Ibid.,

[64] Sherri Burr; Brodie, Her history, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* deals with his attitude to slavery,his relationship with Sally Hemmings, their children at length,

slave trade within Virginia as early as 1779, damned George III in the initial draft of the Declaration of Independence for refusing to abolish the slave trade from Africa and finally abolished it himself in 1808.[65] Through this process Jefferson frequently describes the slave trade as cruel and praises others who worked to end it. While some of his statements about race, equality and intelligence would be considered racist now, others were much closer to progressive modern thinking.

Burr also attacks Jefferson as acting as an unconstitutional dictator while decrying tyranny. At this time restraints on authorities for the new constitution were frequently unclear and precedents were only starting. Even so, some of Jefferson's acts and statements are very high handed.

Yet how different is Burr from those he criticises? Like Jefferson, he strives to be president and both men claim they want to keep alive the spirit of the revolution and to have a small egalitarian government opposed to foreign tyranny. Even so, despite never having visited any part of the Mexican Empire  Burr ends up intriguing with America's rivals England and Spain, to make himself king of the  Mexican Empire by conquest. This latter fact emerges from his own blatant statements after he has spent much time denouncing Jefferson for his illegal expansion westwards and his intrigues and before he flees to the court of his admired Napoleon – perhaps the ultimate selfish, hypocritical, political intriguer, who even Jefferson, initially an admirer, ended up opposing.

Burr does show that in 1805 many powerful people such as Jackson and Benjamin Harrison supported his attempts to do take over the West. Many citizens thought him a hero for his attempt. He appears as an example

[65] Brodie, As with Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemmings, Brodie deals with Jefferson's ideas, attitudes and acts concerning slavery and Blacks at length.

of the adage that if a military man conquers he is a hero, but if he fails he is a villain. As proof of that adage coming from the opposite angle is the way that in the 1830s and 1840s public opinion and most American politicians would be consider Jackson, Houston, Bowie, Crockett, President Polk, Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott as heroes, not traitors, for trying to establish American rule on Mexican soil.

When Charlie Schuyler asks him what was the purpose in being a king Burr responds with an answer that apart from wanting to be royalty, places him amongst so many American heroes before the pioneering era ended. He uses war to bring civilisation to the continent. He was reinvigorating the community and eradicating the influence of villainy to establish the rule of the supposedly good people. These aims are those of the traditional hero from European ancient stories onward, but Burr's efforts to be a king are part of a European royalist tradition that has become outdated in fanatically republican America. To try to be a king there signifies villainy while as Burr recalls, some went beyond even this, seeing his attempt to be royalty as a synonym for being satanic. While Burr's other mentioned aims are easily absorbed into republican America's images of a traditional hero, failure without martyrdom rarely achieves this and Burr's failure definitely does not. Burr also failed in more worthy intentions; in New York State he tried to immediately abolish slavery and enfranchise women.[66]

Charlie also fails badly, and not just for his treacherous treatment of Burr, his benefactor. He does not even heroically reveal the truth about charlatans, hypocrites and the repressive nature of government when Burr

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[66] *Wikipedia* 'Aaron Burr' accessed 20th September 2021 This entry mentions both slavery and female enfranchisement; Sherri Burr, "Aaron Burr Jr. and John Pierre Burr: A Founding Father and his Abolitionist Son."

has given him the relevant information. When a sadistic pervert murders the prostitute he intended to marry, he sits passively at the killer's trial, although he can observe that the prosecution's case is weak, he does not tell the police what he knows for three reasons. The first, which he narrates, is that if his involvement becomes known the scandal will ruin his career. The second, which he does not explicitly narrate, is that like many writers, he is habitually a passive observer. The third is that his narrating his surreptitious ways, habitual obedience to authority and supercilious attitudes (which he wisely keeps as thoughts to himself) reveal to the reader that he is a caitiff.

Unlike Charlie, who will never change because he has so many ingrained flaws, Burr does change. Disillusioned with the revolution and then unable to realise his great dreams of freeing Texas and being King of Mexico, he finds another. This development does not give him glory and is not in the traditional heroic mould, but some genuine heroism remains because it brings order and goodness to the people. These aims are more realistic and therefore more successful. Burr succeeds at a localised personal level in education amongst his protégés, both with encouraging women and boys, not just in the academic sense, but in a personal sense so that they are stoic and avoid dishonour (p. 347).

Charlie does not perceive that Burr's barely concealed fury and contempt applies to him, and despite this, Burr tries to communicate something vitally important to him as there is more to his statement than initially appears. Apparently Burr knows what Charlie does with the biography behind the scenes. His talk of avoiding dishonour and developing stoicism is also a warning. Charlie is one such protégé who has benefited from Burr's help and Burr implies he should act honourably, but he is not, Charlie is a protégé because he is Burr's son and Burr has been trying

unsuccessfully to protect him from the corrupting influence of politics. The greedy intriguers and ambitious candidates are not only in the past; they surround Burr and Charlie. The biography Charlie works on  really serves as a weapon intended for use against another of Burr's unacknowledged sons, Martin Van Buren. Concerning Van Buren's parentage, Charlie recounts that he has the facts, but he has not yet developed the slanderous style. (p. 301). While Charlie does not know the full story behind the political machinations against Van Buren, he does state that one of Burr's oldest and most stalwart friends encourages him to reveal the scandal of Van Buren's real parentage. Charlie states that while he remains fond of the colonel, he needs the money from scandal for survival.

Burr's recollections are also an ironic commentary on 1830s politics, for as Burr once was, Van Buren is a now a Vice President and a presidential candidate facing sanctimonious intriguers. The political issues Burr faced during his years in power between 1801 and 1805 remain vitally important in the 1830s, as once again Americans try to conquer Mexico to take over Texas.

Charlie however, with Burr's ample evidence and his own observations before him of how politics, greed, envy and chasing grandiose dreams all destroy character, opts to sell the biographical information to Van Buren's rivals, so as to destroy his upcoming campaign. Charlie dreams of living in Europe on their five thousand dollars payment.

The scene where Charlie sells out only demonstrates the probable reality of what Burr has recounted, for it fits the earlier pattern of Burr's many accounts of political intrigue and betrayal. Here Charlie will sell his researched secrets to another gutter biographer involved in harming Van Buren. The go-between is Sam Swarthout, another of Burr's treacherous

friends. The front man for the slanderous campaign biography is another manufactured American hero who proves distasteful in actuality. This time it is Davy Crockett. He briefly resides in New York as a professional frontiersman and a political star in the service the Whig party. Away from audiences in a hotel room, he appears as a malevolent, boring, roaring, dirty drunken buffoon. This aged case of arrested development intends to destroy his rival Van Buren not in a fair fight, but with gossip about his parentage. Although Crocket rages against Van Buren, when meeting him twice Charlie reveals the vice president to be Crocket's opposite: courteous, cautious, neat and generous. In the hotel room, with Crockett are the publisher and the ghost-writer, all of them aiming for political advantage and money. Sadly, Charlie cannot see beyond the potential immediate financial advantage when he sells what information he has gained from Burr, who had trusted him. After the sordid secret deal, even the drunken, moronic Crockett can see that Charlie, the publisher and the ghost writer are three of a kind, scum, Charlie enthuses that the night has turned out to be the most wonderful in his life because hit has made him rich. (p. 368) He tries to minimise the loss of his integrity by saying that Colonel Burr will never know and that publishing Crockett's account attacking Van Buren's parentage it will not matter because nobody takes Crockett seriously

Charlie has not only betrayed his benefactors Burr and Van Buren, and sold out his own integrity, he has betrayed a chance of doing something great. He had the probable truth about the American nation's origins in his hands and he guts it for gossip.

Only at the novel's end, when Sam Swarthout reveals that Burr was his father and was protecting and promoting him, does he realise that there was another discourse unfolding, one he did not understand. The question

Charlie once asked himself, about who Aaron Burr is and how their lived mattered to each other, becomes devastatingly ironic. Many of the little things in the text, his mother's gratification at Burr's interest in him, some shared mannerisms between Burr and Charlie, the deference and help of Burr's friends, and the hostility of his supposed father, suddenly take on a new meaning. Charlie started writing scurrilous political propaganda, found the reality behind the American Revolution and the early days of the Republic and ended up unknowingly describing and knowing his own father – which gives him a new identity.

*Burr* reflects not only Charles Schuyler's failure, but also the failure of American idealism at its first great clearly articulated expression. Both much of American society and Charles Schuyler have gained wealth, respectability and prestige, but in the process both have lost their integrity. Aaron Burr can only recount his qualities to Charlie, not install them, If he has none of Burr'sgrandiose, self-advancing political dreams he has also failed to inherit his father's good points beyond the ability for sharp, quick observations. Ironically this young narrator from a different world, reveals himself as so distinctly unheroic he can only be preserve heroic traditions in the world of letters. not take part in revitalising it.

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*Gore Vidal 1925-2012*

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