Aaron Burr and Hubris

Estimated Time: 90 minutes

**Hubris:** To have excessive pride, vanity, and arrogance that usually leads to a tragic fall.

**Essential Question**

How do you know when ambition is self-sacrificing and when it is self-serving?

**Guiding Questions**

Why is noble ambition directed toward self-sacrifice and public service a civic virtue, whereas self-serving ambition is a vice?

What are the differences between a healthy ambition to serve the public as a leader and an unhealthy ambition to serve only one’s own interests?

**Objectives**

Students will differentiate between self-sacrificing and self-serving ambition by naming examples of each and supporting their claims with evidence.

Students will use the story of Aaron Burr to understand the dangers of hubris and how serving the republic is a noble virtue, while pursuing one’s self-interest is a lowly vice.

Students will reflect on using their talents and ambition to serve others while avoiding hubris.

**Procedures**

The following lesson asks students to consider the vice of hubris to understand the differences between self-sacrificing and self-serving ambition. A self-sacrificing, or noble, ambition, can drive one to serve the public as a lawgiver, a military hero, a builder of art and culture, an inventor, or a business leader. On the other hand, hubris and self-serving ambition for power and glory can lead one to put their ambitions above those of the public and can sometimes lead to destruction and a tragic fall.

Students will engage with the story of Aaron Burr as a warning against self-serving ambition and hubris as they consider the question: **How do you know when ambition is self-sacrificing and when it is self-serving?**
The main activity in this lesson requires students to read and analyze a narrative that explores how Aaron Burr chose self-serving ambition over self-sacrificing ambition. Students may work individually, in pairs, or in small groups as best fits your classroom. The analysis questions provided can be used to help students comprehend and think critically about the content. As the teacher, you can decide which questions best fit your students’ needs and time restraints.

Lastly, the lesson includes sources used in this lesson for further reading and suggestions for cross-curricular connections.

Resources

**Student Resources**
- Engage: Ambition Graphic Organizer
- Aaron Burr & Hubris Narrative
- Assess & Reflect: Ambition Action
- Plan Organizer

**Teacher Resources**
- Analysis Questions
- Virtue in Action
- Journal Activity
- Sources for Further Reading
- Virtue Across the Curriculum

**Anticipate**

**Scaffolding Note:** You may use this activity as an entry point to your lesson.

Ask students to define the term “ambition” and come up with one person who comes to mind when they hear it. Ask students to explain why this person seems ambitious.

Pair up students, and have them share their definitions of ambition and their examples.

Create a class definition of ambition or a master list of examples.

**Transition by asking students,** What do all of our examples have in common? Is there only one kind of ambition?
Engage

**Scaffolding Note:** You may use this activity to prepare your students and introduce the vocabulary and ideas discussed in this lesson. Be sure students are clear on the definitions of and differences between self-serving and self-sacrificing ambition before completing the organizer.

**Glossary term:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hubris</td>
<td>To have excessive pride, vanity, and arrogance that leads to a tragic fall.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-serving</td>
<td>Using one’s talents and ambition to only serve oneself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sacrificing</td>
<td>Using one’s talents and ambition for the greater good.</td>
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Ensure students understand the difference between self-serving and self-sacrificing ambition, as described on the handout.

Break the students up into groups of 3-4. Have them brainstorm a few examples of self-serving ambition and betraying the public trust.

Distribute the **Engage: Ambition Graphic Organizer** and reflection questions and ask students to complete them. Make a list of three examples in stories or movies of characters who were ambitious to serve the larger good and three characters who pursued their own self-interest.

Invite the groups to share their answers and evidence to explain how those characters pursued self-sacrificing or self-interested ambition. As a large group, discuss: *How do you know when ambition is self-sacrificing or self-serving?*

- Ask a follow-up: *Why is ambition directed toward self-sacrifice and public service a civic virtue, whereas self-interested ambition is a vice?*

Explore

**Transition** to the **Aaron Burr & Hubris Narrative**. Students will learn and discuss the story of Aaron Burr to understand the complexities of ambition.

**Scaffolding Note:** It may be helpful to instruct students to do a close reading of the text. Close reading asks students to read and re-read a text purposefully to ensure students understand and make connections. For more detailed instructions on how to use close reading in your classroom, use these directions. Additional reading strategies (see Appendix) are provided for other options that may meet your students’ needs.
Essential Vocabulary:

<table>
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<th>Hubris:</th>
<th>To have excessive pride, vanity, and arrogance that usually leads to a tragic fall.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Duplicitious</td>
<td>Someone who intentionally misleads people, especially by saying different things to different people or acting in different ways at different times.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Machinations</td>
<td>A scheming or crafty action or artful design intended to accomplish some usually evil end.</td>
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Transition to the analysis questions. Have students work individually, with partners, or as a whole class to answer the questions.

Scaffolding Note: If there are questions that are not necessary to your students’ learning or time restraints, then you can remove those questions.

Analysis Questions

1. What crime did Aaron Burr commit as a sitting vice president?

2. Should Burr have faced justice for his actions in the duel with Alexander Hamilton? Should the Senate have impeached and removed Burr from the vice presidency for his crimes and flight from the law?

3. Could Wilkinson and Burr really trust each other? Can conspirators in a criminal plot ever trust each other? Why or why not?

4. How could Burr give a farewell speech warning about threats to the republic and then act just like the dangerous person he described? Was Burr engaging in self-deception about the civic virtue of defending law and liberty? Did he knowingly betray the public and personal trust others placed in him?

6. What actions did Burr take in the West to prepare for his conspiracy? Why do you think he was so brazen and did not do a lot to hide his plot?

7. What benefit might Wilkinson have derived from betraying Burr?

8. Should Aaron Burr have been convicted of treason, even if the evidence did not exactly achieve the constitutional standard? Do you think justice was done in Burr’s trial for treason?
George Washington demonstrated the republican virtues of public service, self-sacrifice, and patriotism through his long years as general and president, and then his surrendering of those powers to return to Mount Vernon. In what ways can we come closer to understanding the virtue of noble ambition and patriotic service to the republic by examining its opposite? How does Burr’s attempted treason against the republic help you understand civic virtue?

Assess & Reflect

Virtue in Action

**Scaffolding Note:** You may use this activity to help your students reflect on and apply the content they learned about Aaron Burr and hubris.

Have students think reflectively and create an actionable plan to practice self-sacrificing ambition that serves a greater purpose. Have students complete the *Assess & Reflect: Ambition Action Plan Organizer* and reflection questions.

**AND/OR**

**Hubris Journal Activity**

The hubris of human nature captivated real persons (such as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Adolf Hitler) as well as fictional characters (such as Hamlet, Anakin Skywalker, and Killmonger). They gamble everything on winning power and greatness for themselves, yet they frequently seem to have a tragic fall in the end because of their hubris.

Have students self-reflect and answer the following question in their journal: *Why do self-serving persons and characters frequently seem to fall?*

**Extend**

Sources & Further Reading

Explore the following list for additional sources and further reading on Aaron Burr.

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV
Virtue Across the Curriculum

Below are corresponding literature suggestions to help you teach about ambition and hubris across the curriculum. Sample prompts are provided for the key corresponding works. For the other suggested works, or others that are already part of your curriculum, create your own similar prompts.

- Julius Caesar in *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* by Plutarch
  - □ How does Plutarch warn about the dangers of ambition in Caesar’s story?

- *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare
  - □ Which character displays a more tragic hubris: Macbeth or Lady Macbeth? Explain your reasoning.

- Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitsgerald

- Icarus and Daedalus (Greek Mythology)
  - □ How does ambition lead Icarus to a tragic fall?

- Arachne and Athena (Greek Mythology)
  - □ Who displays a greater hubris in this myth, Arachne or Athena? Explain your reasoning.

OTHER WORKS

- The Golden Fish (The Brothers Grimm)
- *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare
- Alexander the Great in *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, by Plutarch
- Voldemort or Grindelwald in the *Harry Potter* series, by J.K. Rowling
- Saruman and Boromir in the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy, by J.R.R. Tolkien