Narrative: 
Aaron Bur and Hubris

☐ I can identify the dangers of hubris and how serving the republic is a noble virtue, while pursuing one’s self-interest is a lowly vice.

Essential Vocabulary

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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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<td>duplicitous</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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<td>machinations</td>
<td>A scheming or crafty action or artful design intended to accomplish some usually evil end.</td>
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Narrative

Many historical figures, and characters in fiction, have demonstrated great ambition and risen to become important leaders in politics, the military, and civil society. Some people, such as Cicero, George Washington, and Martin Luther King, Jr., were interested in using their position of authority to serve the republic, promote justice, and advance the common good with a strong moral vision. Others, such as Julius Caesar, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Adolf Hitler, were often swept up in their ambitions to serve their own needs of seizing power and keeping it, personal glory, and their own self-interest. The former acted with a noble ambition for the health of the republic and civil society; the latter usually acted with hubris, or excessive pride and arrogance, before their fall.

Aaron Burr was a leading American political figure in the early republic and was not immune to the vice of hubris. On July 11, 1804, Vice President Burr faced off against his political nemesis, Alexander Hamilton, on a field in Weehawken, N.J. for a duel. Hamilton had called Burr an unprincipled and dangerous man, and Burr demanded a duel because of the insult. The two met, and Burr killed Hamilton. Burr then went into hiding to escape charges of dueling and murder in New York and New Jersey. Despite these pending charges, he had the audacity to
preside over the U.S. Senate for the impeachment trial of a Supreme Court justice, Samuel Chase, while himself evading the law and justice.

During that summer and fall, Burr met with General James Wilkinson, the commander of the U.S. Army and a secret double-agent and traitor in the pay of the king of Spain. The two met privately in Burr’s boardinghouse and pored over maps of the West. They planned to invade and conquer Spanish territories. His plans revealed a growing self-serving ambition for greater power and recognition, even if it meant betraying his country.

The duplicitous Burr also met secretly with British minister Anthony Merry to discuss a proposal to separate the Louisiana Territory and western states from the Union and form an independent western confederacy. Though he feared “the profligacy of Mr. Burr’s character,” Merry was intrigued by the proposal since the British sought the failure of the American republic and looked to stir up trouble on the frontier. Burr hoped the British would provide military and financial assistance as well as a generous payment to him. He informed his son-in-law that he was traveling out West to “seek another country.” Burr’s hubris was leading him to become involved with wild and dangerous intrigues against his country.

The plotting vice-president received great praise for dignity and impartiality as he presided over the impeachment trial of Justice Chase. However, this was not enough for President Thomas Jefferson to keep him in office as vice-president. He had engaged in machinations against Jefferson in the 1800 presidential election even though they were the same party. Eventually, the House had broken a tie between the two and selected Jefferson president. Jefferson witnessed Burr’s self-serving political ambitions and decided to dump his vice-president in favor of a new man. Burr then gave a tearful farewell to the Senate since he was being replaced as vice-president. He told his colleagues:

“The Senate, is a sanctuary and a citadel of law, or order, or liberty—and it is here—it is here—in this exalted refuge—here, if anywhere will resistance be made to the storms of popular frenzy and the silent arts of corruption; and if the Constitution be destined ever to perish by the sacrilegious hands of the demagogue or the usurper, which God avert, its expiring agonies will be witnessed on this floor.”

For the next two months, Burr traveled extensively in the West, ironically fulfilling his own warnings about the threat posed to the republic by a dangerous traitor practicing, as he had put it, the “arts of corruption.” He visited shipyards, military suppliers, banks, and forts. He also met with wealthy individuals and General Andrew Jackson to attempt to enlist their support. Many of the meetings
bore fruit, winning promises of financial and military support. Burr then rode down the Mississippi River and reached his final destination of New Orleans. He forged ties with the Mexican Association, a group of powerful individuals who shared his dream of liberating Mexico from Spanish imperial rule. In addition, Burr learned that the city presently had more than 50 French cannons. Burr returned to the East with the groundwork laid to launch his plan. In all of this plotting, Burr saw himself as the leader of the expedition and any new country that was created. His plotting was part of a design aimed at his own lust for power and greatness rather than serving the American republic.

President Jefferson heard various rumors and received direct warnings about Burr’s machinations in the West. Burr returned to the nation’s capital and actually met with the president to demand a government position but was spurned. In August 1806, Burr headed back out to the West to accomplish his shadowy enterprise. He was frustrated in achieving his aims at several points. Burr was able to recruit a few dozen people to join him as a military force but not the thousand he believed he could raise. In addition, he failed to gather enough boats and the weapons to carry out the plot. Burr’s design was unraveling fast.

James Wilkinson, like many plotters in a conspiracy, turned on Burr and warned New Orleans, the Spanish, and President Jefferson of Burr’s designs in order to stay in their good and generous graces. Wilkinson went to New Orleans to bolster its defenses and secure the artillery in case of Burr’s attack. Governor Claiborne declared martial law and arrested a few suspected conspirators. Jefferson issued a proclamation warning any Americans against participating in the Burr conspiracy to engage in treason against the United States by splitting off the West and crowning its would-be leader emperor. Federal prosecutors then seized Burr and sought to indict him with grand juries, but they determined there was not enough direct evidence. Nevertheless, officials in several states seized the boats and supplies of the conspiracy. Finally, the governor of the Mississippi Territory had Burr’s followers arrested. Burr fled from authorities in disguise and was eventually tracked down, arrested, and brought back to Richmond, Virginia for trial. The charge was treason.

Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall presided over the trial of former Vice President Aaron Burr for treason. Marshall was an impartial justice but had supported the Federalist Party. His distant cousin, President Thomas Jefferson, was a leader of the rival Democratic-Republican Party, and the two struggled personally and politically over the Burr trial. Jefferson was personally offended by Burr’s interference with his administration’s diplomacy with Spain and became
heavily involved in the case. The president did everything in his power to pressure Marshall to return a guilty verdict.

The Framers of the Constitution believed it was important to use a specific and exacting definition of the crime of treason because of the seriousness of the crime. Article III, clause 3 of the Constitution reads:

“Treason against the United States, shall consist only in levying War against them, or in adhering to their Enemies, giving them Aid and Comfort. No Person shall be convicted of Treason unless on the Testimony of two Witnesses to the same overt Act, or on Confession in open Court.”

Marshall eventually decided that the evidence presented by federal prosecutors did not meet the constitutional standard of treason and acquitted Burr.

Aaron Burr may have been acquitted in a court of law, but that did not mean he was innocent of ambitious, unpatriotic machinations that might have split the new nation into separate confederacies with himself as the emperor of a western confederacy. Many Founders agreed that he was an unprincipled character only interested in his own power and ambitions. They thought him an American version of Cataline, a Roman senator who launched a conspiracy to overthrow the Roman Republic. The Founders believed serving the republic was a noble virtue, while arrogantly pursuing only one’s narrow self-interest and power was a lowly vice.
Analysis Questions

- What crime did Aaron Burr commit as a sitting vice-president?
- 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?
- Could Wilkinson and Burr really trust each other? Can conspirators in a criminal plot ever trust each other? Why or why not?
- 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?
- 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?
- What benefit might Wilkinson have derived from betraying Burr?
- 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 surrendering these 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?