

Discussion Guide



Directions: Discuss the following questions with your partner(s).

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? Did he damage the reputation of the Senate when he presided over an impeachment trial at the same time he was indicted for murder and escaped justice? Should the Senate have impeached and removed Burr from the vice-presidency for his crimes and his flight from the law?
3. How were James Wilkinson and Burr driven by self-interest in their dealings with the Spanish and the British? What interest did the European powers have in seeing the American republic fail?
4. Could Wilkinson and Burr really trust each other? Can conspirators in a criminal plot ever trust each other?
5. 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? Were the extraordinary actions of Wilkinson and Governor Claiborne justified to stop Burr and his followers from fulfilling their conspiracy?
8. Should Aaron Burr have been convicted of treason even if the evidence did not exactly achieve the constitutional standard? Why does civic virtue and justice demand that citizens and courts follow the spirit and letter of the law? Can an accused criminal be guilty yet acquitted and set free? Do you think justice was done in Burr's trial for treason?
9. 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 patriotic service to the republic by examining its opposite? How does Burr's attempted treason against the republic help you understand civic virtue?