

Sir

I have maturely considered your letter of yesterday delivered to me at about nine last and cannot find in it cause of satisfaction.

There appears to me in the first place an attempt to prop the veracity of Clingman by an assertion which is not correct, namely that I had acknowledged all his previous information to be true. This was not & could not be the fact. I acknowledged parts of it to be true but certainly not the whole—on the contrary, I am able to prove that a material part of it, according to its obvious intent, is false, and I know other parts of it to be so. Indeed in one sense I could not have made the acknowledgement alleged without acknowledging myself guilty.

In the second place, there appears a design at all events to drive me to the necessity of a formal defence—while you know that the extreme delicacy of its nature might be very disagreeable to me. It is my opinion that as you have been the cause, no matter how, of the business appearing in a shape which gives it an adventitious importance, and this against the intent of a confidence reposed in you by me, as contrary to what was delicate and proper, you recorded Clingman's testimony without my privity and thereby gave it countenance, as I had given you an explanation with which you was satisfied and which could leave no doubt upon a candid mind—it was incumbent upon you as a man of

honor and sensibility to have come forward in a manner that would have shielded me completely from the unpleasant effects brought upon me by your agency. This you have not done.

On the contrary by the affected reference of the matter to a defence which I am to make, and by which you profess your opinion is to be decided—you imply that your suspicions are still alive. And as nothing appears to have shaken your original conviction but the wretched tale of Klingman, which you have thought fit to record, it follows that you are pleased to attach a degree of weight to that communication which cannot be accounted for on any fair principle. The result in my mind is that you have been and are actuated by motives towards me malignant and dishonourable; nor can I doubt that this will be the universal opinion when the publication of the whole affair which I am about to make shall be seen.

I am Sir Your humble servt

A Hamilton

Philadelphia

July 22. 1797

F. M. Esq

Passy, July 17, 1784.

Dear Sir,

I received yesterday by Mr. White, your kind letter of May 11th, with the most agreeable present of your new book. I read it all before I slept, which is a proof of the good effects your happy manner has of drawing your reader on, by mixing little anecdotes and historical facts with your instructions. Be pleased to accept my grateful acknowledgments for the pleasure it has afforded me.

It is astonishing that the murderous practice of duelling, which you so justly condemn, should continue so long in vogue. Formerly when duels were used to determine lawsuits, from an opinion that Providence would in every instance favor truth and right, with victory, they were excusable. At present, they decide nothing. A man says something, which another tells him is a lie. They fight; but whichever is killed, the point in dispute remains unsettled. To this purpose they have a pleasant little story" here. A gentleman in a coffee-house desired another to sit further from him: Why so? Because, Sir, you stink. That is an affront, and you must fight me.

I will fight you if you insist upon it; but I do not see how that will mend the matter. For if you kill me, I shall stink too; and if I kill you, you will stink, if possible, worse than you do at present. How can such miserable sinners as we are entertain so much pride, as to conceit that every offence against our imagined honor merits death?

These petty princes in their own opinion would call that sovereign a tyrant, who should put one of them to death for a little uncivil language, though pointed at his sacred person: Yet every one of them makes himself judge in his own cause, condemns the Offender without a jury, and undertakes himself to be the executioner.

With sincere and great esteem, I have the honor to be, Sir, your most obedient, and most humble servant,

B. Franklin

P. S. Our friend, Mr. Vaughan, may perhaps communicate to you some conjectures of mine relating to the cold of last winter, which I sent him in return for the observations on cold of Professor Wilson. If he should, and you think them worthy so much notice, you may show them to your Philosophical Society, to which I wish all imaginable success. Their rules appear to me excellent.

Postscript: In November of 1792, Revolutionary war veteran James Reynolds was arrested for attempting to defraud the US government. Seeking leniency, Reynolds accused Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton of participating in his scheme and offered to cooperate to prove his claim. The Senate launched a quiet investigation, led by Virginia senator James Monroe, into the Secretary's conduct. In order to disprove the Reynolds claim, Hamilton was forced to reveal the true nature of his relationship with the Reynolds family, namely his affair with James Reynolds' wife Maria, and the couple's subsequent extortion of him. Once Hamilton thoroughly proved his claim, he bound Monroe and the other senators involved to a vow of silence over the matter.

Then, in 1797, gossip publisher James Callender printed a story on the Hamilton affair, including some of the letters Hamilton had provided to the Senate. Hamilton was furious about the leak, but even more furious that Monroe refused to publicly clear his name of charges of corruption.

In this week's main letter, Hamilton confronts Monroe over the leak and demands his help. Monroe, who was at a political low-point after being recalled from his posting as Minister to France at the behest of Hamilton's Federalist colleagues, was not apt to help. Tensions escalated as the duo traded barbs by mail. A meeting between the two in Philadelphia only made things worse. Hamilton threatened Monroe with the prospect of a duel. Monroe responded by labeling Hamilton a "scoundrel." "I am ready to get your pistols." In the above letter, Hamilton also alludes to his next move towards salvaging his reputation: The "Reynolds Pamphlet," a ninety-five-page defense of his conduct as Secretary of the Treasury, which readily admitted the affair.

A duel was averted thanks to the intervention of, of all people, Aaron Burr, who would later take Hamilton's life in a duel over rumors spread about him by Hamilton. Monroe went on to a long and ascendant career in American politics, serving as governor of Virginia (twice), Minister to the United Kingdom, Secretary of State, Secretary of War (at the same time), and President of the United States.

Hamilton's frequent involvement in disputes of honor was not unusual for the time. In an era before powerful and highly-organized political parties, reputation was political life, and rumor was the poison that sent political adversaries to purgatory. If a man of ambition managed to identify the source of rumors against him, his only recourse was to demand retraction of the claim, discredit the source, or, if those tactics failed, to demand a duel to defend his honor. Duels provided protection against the spread of mistruths by imposing a cost, and offered an honorable way for ending disputes when neither side would admit fault.

Despite their utility, not every prominent American statesman of the era was a fan of dueling. George Washington was a staunch opponent of it, and Benjamin Franklin detested the practice. This week's second letter, from Franklin to his friend Dr. Thomas Percival, a prominent English physician and pioneer in the field of medical ethics, lampoons dueling and lays out the practical case against it.

For more on the deployment of honor and rumor as political tools at the birth of the Republic, we recommend Joana B. Freeman's book on the subject, "Affairs of Honor".