

## *The Generation*

NO EVENT in American history which was so improbable at the time has seemed so inevitable in retrospect as the American Revolution. On the inevitability side, it is true there were voices back then urging prospective patriots to regard American independence as an early version of manifest destiny. Tom Paine, for example, claimed that it was simply a matter of common sense that an island could not rule a continent. And Thomas Jefferson's lyrical rendering of the reasons for the entire revolutionary enterprise emphasized the self-evident character of the principles at stake.

Several other prominent American revolutionaries also talked as if they were actors in a historical drama whose script had already been written by the gods. In his old age, John Adams recalled his youthful intimations of the providential forces at work: "There is nothing . . . more ancient in my memory," he wrote in 1807, "than the observation that arts, sciences, and empire had always travelled westward. And in conversation it was always added, since I was a child, that their next leap would be over the Atlantic into America." Adams instructed his beloved Abigail to start saving all his letters even before the outbreak of the war for independence. Then in June of 1776, he purchased "a Folio Book" to preserve copies of his entire correspondence in order to record, as he put it, "the great Events which are passed, and those greater which are rapidly advancing." Of course we tend to remember only the prophets who turn out to be right, but there does seem to have

been a broadly shared sense within the revolutionary generation that they were "present at the creation."<sup>1</sup>

These early premonitions of American destiny have been reinforced and locked into our collective memory by the subsequent triumph of the political ideals the American Revolution first announced, as Jefferson so nicely put it, "to a candid world." Throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America, former colonies of European powers have won their independence with such predictable regularity that colonial status has become an exotic vestige of bygone days, a mere way station for emerging nations. The republican experiment launched so boldly by the revolutionary generation in America encountered entrenched opposition in the two centuries that followed, but it thoroughly vanquished the monarchical dynasties of the nineteenth century and then the totalitarian despotisms of the twentieth, just as Jefferson predicted it would. Though it seems somewhat extreme to declare, as one contemporary political philosopher has phrased it, that "the end of history" is now at hand, it is true that all alternative forms of political organization appear to be fighting a futile rearguard action against the liberal institutions and ideas first established in the United States in the late eighteenth century. At least it seems safe to say that some form of representative government based on the principle of popular sovereignty and some form of market economy fueled by the energies of individual citizens have become the commonly accepted ingredients for national success throughout the world. These legacies are so familiar to us, we are so accustomed to taking their success for granted, that the era in which they were born cannot help but be remembered as a land of foregone conclusions.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the confident and providential statements of leaders like Paine, Jefferson, and Adams, the conclusions that look so foregone to us had yet to congeal for them. The old adage applies: Men make history, and the leading members of the revolutionary generation realized they were doing so, but they can never know the history they are making. We can look back and make the era of the American Revolution a center point, then scan the terrain upstream and downstream, but they can only know what is downstream. An anecdote that Benjamin Rush, the Philadelphia physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, liked to tell in his old age makes the point memorably. On July 4, 1776, just after the Continental Congress had finished making

its revisions of the Declaration and sent it off to the printer for publication, Rush overheard a conversation between Benjamin Harrison of Virginia and Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts: "I shall have a great advantage over you, Mr. Gerry," said Harrison, "when we are all hung for what we are now doing. From the size and weight of my body I shall die in a few minutes, but from the lightness of your body you will dance in the air an hour or two before you are dead." Rush recalled that the comment "procured a transient smile, but it was soon succeeded by the solemnity with which the whole business was conducted."<sup>3</sup>

Based on what we now know about the military history of the American Revolution, if the British commanders had prosecuted the war more vigorously in its earliest stages, the Continental Army might very well have been destroyed at the start and the movement for American independence nipped in the bud. The signers of the Declaration would then have been hunted down, tried, and executed for treason, and American history would have flowed forward in a wholly different direction.<sup>4</sup>

In the long run, the evolution of an independent American nation, gradually developing its political and economic strength over the nineteenth century within the protective constraints of the British Empire, was probably inevitable. This was Paine's point. But that was not the way history happened. The creation of a separate American nation occurred suddenly rather than gradually, in revolutionary rather than evolutionary fashion, the decisive events that shaped the political ideas and institutions of the emerging state all taking place with dynamic intensity during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. No one present at the start knew how it would turn out in the end. What in retrospect has the look of a foreordained unfolding of God's will was in reality an improvisational affair in which sheer chance, pure luck—both good and bad—and specific decisions made in the crucible of specific military and political crises determined the outcome. At the dawn of a new century, indeed a new millennium, the United States is now the oldest enduring republic in world history, with a set of political institutions and traditions that have stood the test of time. The basic framework for all these institutions and traditions was built in a sudden spasm of enforced inspiration and makeshift construction during the final decades of the eighteenth century.

If hindsight enhances our appreciation for the solidity and stability

republican legacy, it also blinds us to the truly stunning improbability of the achievement itself. All the major accomplishments were unprecedented. Though there have been many successful colonial rebellions against imperial domination since the American Revolution, none had occurred before. Taken together, the British army and navy constituted the most powerful military force in the world, destined in the course of the succeeding century to defeat all national competitors for its claim as the first hegemonic power of the modern era. Though the republican paradigm—representative government bottomed on the principle of popular sovereignty—has become the political norm in the twentieth century, no republican government prior to the American Revolution, apart from a few Swiss cantons and Greek city-states, had ever survived for long, and none had ever been tried over a landmass as large as the thirteen colonies. (There was one exception, but it proved the rule: the short-lived Roman Republic of Cicero, which succumbed to the imperial command of Julius Caesar.) And finally the thirteen colonies, spread along the eastern seaboard and stretching inward to the Alleghenies and beyond into unexplored forests occupied by hostile Indian tribes, had no history of enduring cooperation. The very term “American Revolution” propagates a wholly fictional sense of national coherence not present at the moment and only discernible in latent form by historians engaged in after-the-fact appraisals of how it could possibly have turned out so well.

Hindsight, then, is a tricky tool. Too much of it and we obscure the all-pervasive sense of contingency as well as the problematic character of the choices facing the revolutionary generation. On the other hand, without some measure of hindsight, some panoramic perspective on the past from our perch in the present, we lose the chief advantage—perhaps the only advantage—that the discipline of history provides, and we are then thrown without resources into the patternless swirl of events with all the time-bound participants themselves. What we need is a form of hindsight that does not impose itself arbitrarily on the mentality of the revolutionary generation, does not presume that we are witnessing the birth of an inevitable American superpower. We need a historical perspective that frames the issues with one eye on the precarious contingencies felt at the time, while the other eye looks forward to the more expansive consequences perceived dimly, if at all, by

those trapped in the moment. We need, in effect, to be nearsighted and farsighted at the same time.

On the farsighted side, the key insight, recognized by a few of the political leaders in the revolutionary generation, is that the geographic isolation of the North American continent and the bountiful natural resources contained within it provided the fledgling nation with massive advantages and almost limitless potential. In 1783, just after the military victory over Great Britain was confirmed in the Treaty of Paris, no less a figure than George Washington gave this continental vision its most eloquent formulation: “The Citizens of America,” Washington wrote, “placed in the most enviable condition, as the sole Lords and Proprietors of a vast Tract of Continent, comprehending all the various soils and climates of the World, and abounding with all the necessities and conveniences of life, are now by the late satisfactory pacification, acknowledged to be possessed of absolute freedom and Independence; They are, from this period, to be considered as Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designed by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity.” If the infant American republic could survive its infancy, if it could manage to endure as a coherent national entity long enough to consolidate its natural advantages, it possessed the potential to become a dominant force in the world.<sup>5</sup>

On the nearsighted side, the key insight, shared by most of the vanguard members of the revolutionary generation, is that the very arguments used to justify secession from the British Empire also undermined the legitimacy of any national government capable of overseeing such a far-flung population, or establishing uniform laws that knotted together the thirteen sovereign states and three or four distinct geographic and economic regions. For the core argument used to discredit the authority of Parliament and the British monarch, the primal source of what were called “Whig principles,” was an obsessive suspicion of any centralized political power that operated in faraway places beyond the immediate supervision or surveillance of the citizens it claimed to govern. The national government established during the war under the Articles of Confederation accurately embodied the cardinal conviction of revolutionary-era republicanism; namely, that no central authority empowered to coerce or discipline the citizenry was permissible, since

it merely duplicated the monarchical and aristocratic principles that the American Revolution had been fought to escape.<sup>6</sup>

Combine the long-range and short-range perspectives and the result becomes the central paradox of the revolutionary era, which was also the apparently intractable dilemma facing the revolutionary generation. In sum, the long-term prospects for the newly independent American nation were extraordinarily hopeful, almost limitless. But the short-term prospects were bleak in the extreme, because the very size and scale of the national enterprise, what in fact made the future so promising, overwhelmed the governing capacities of the only republican institutions sanctioned by the Revolution. John Adams, who gave the problem more concentrated attention than anyone except James Madison, was periodically tempted to throw up his hands and declare the task impossible. "The lawgivers of antiquity . . . legislated for single cities," Adams observed, but "who can legislate for 20 or 30 states, each of which is greater than Greece or Rome at those times?" And since the only way to reach the long-run glory was through the short-run gauntlet, the safest bet was that the early American republic would dissolve into a cluster of state or regional sovereignties, expiring, like all the republics before it, well short of the promised land.<sup>7</sup>

The chief reason this did not happen, at least from a purely legal and institutional point of view, is that in 1787 a tiny minority of prominent political leaders from several key states conspired to draft and then ratify a document designed to accommodate republican principles to a national scale. Over the subsequent two centuries critics of the Constitutional Convention have called attention to several of its more unseemly features: the convention was extralegal, since its explicit mandate was to revise the Articles of Confederation, not replace them; its sessions were conducted in utter secrecy; the fifty-five delegates were a propertied elite hardly representative of the population as a whole; southern delegates used the proceedings to obtain several assurances that slavery would not be extinguished south of the Potomac; the machinery for ratification did not require the unanimous consent dictated by the Articles themselves. There is truth in each of these accusations.

There is also truth in the opposite claim: that the Constitutional Convention should be called "the miracle at Philadelphia," not in the customary, quasi-religious sense, whereby a gathering of demigods

received divine inspiration, but in the more profane and prosaic sense that the Constitution professed to solve what was an apparently insoluble political problem. For it purported to create a consolidated federal government with powers sufficient to coerce obedience to national laws—in effect, to discipline a truly continental union—while remaining true to the republican principles of 1776. At least logically, this was an impossibility, since the core impulse of these republican principles, the original "spirit of '76," was an instinctive aversion to coercive political power of any sort and a thoroughgoing dread of the inevitable corruptions that result when unseen rulers congregate in distant places. The Antifederalist opponents of the Constitution made precisely these points, but they were outmaneuvered, outargued, and ultimately outvoted by a dedicated band of national advocates in nine of the state ratifying conventions.

The American Revolution thus entered a second phase and the constitutional settlement of 1787–1788 became a second "founding moment," alongside the original occasion of 1776. The first founding declared American independence; the second, American nationhood. The incompatibility of these two foundings is reflected in the divisive character of the scholarship on the latter. Critics of the Constitution, then and now, have condemned it as a betrayal of the core principles of the American Revolution, an American version of France's Thermidorian reaction. Strictly speaking, they were and are historically correct. Defenders of the Constitution, then and now, have saluted it as a sensible accommodation of liberty to power and a realistic compromise with the requirements of a national domain. That has turned out, over time, to be correct, though at the time even the advocates were not sure.

Uncertainty, in fact, was the dominant mood at that moment. Historians have emphasized the several compromises the delegates in Philadelphia brokered to produce the constitutional consensus: the interest of large versus small states; federal versus state jurisdiction; the sectional bargain over slavery. The most revealing feature in this compromise motif is that on each issue, both sides could plausibly believe they had gotten the best of the bargain. On the all-important question of sovereignty, the same artfully contrived ambiguity also obtained: Sovereignty did not reside with the federal government or the individual states; it resided with "the people." What that meant was any-

one's guess, since there was no such thing at this formative stage as an American "people"; indeed, the primary purpose of the Constitution was to provide the framework to gather together the scattered strands of the population into a more coherent collective worthy of that designation.

This latter point requires a reflective review of recent scholarship on the complicated origins of American nationhood. Based on what we now know about the Anglo-American connection in the pre-Revolution era—that is, before it was severed—the initial identification of the colonial population as "Americans" came from English writers who used the term negatively, as a way of referring to a marginal or peripheral population unworthy of equal status with full-blooded Englishmen back at the metropolitan center of the British Empire. The word was uttered and heard as an insult that designated an inferior or subordinate people. The entire thrust of the colonists' justification for independence was to reject that designation on the grounds that they possessed all the rights of *British* citizens. And the ultimate source of these rights did not lie in any indigenously American origins, but rather in a transcendent realm of natural rights allegedly shared by all men everywhere. At least at the level of language, then, we need to recover the eighteenth-century context of things and not read back into those years the hallowed meanings they would acquire over the next century. The term *American*, like the term *democrat*, began as an epithet, the former referring to an inferior, provincial creature, the latter to one who panders to the crude and mindless whims of the masses. At both the social and verbal levels, in short, an American nation remained a precarious and highly problematic project—at best a work in progress.<sup>8</sup>

This was pretty much how matters stood in 1789, when the newly elected members of the federal government gathered in New York City and proceeded to test the proposition, as Abraham Lincoln so famously put it at Gettysburg, "whether any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." We have already noted some of the assets and liabilities they brought along with them. On the assets side of the historical ledger, the full list would include the following: a bountiful continent an ocean away from European interference; a youthful population of nearly 4 million, about half of it sixteen years of age or younger and therefore certain to grow exponentially over subsequent

decades; a broad dispersion of property ownership among the white populace, based on easy access to available land; a clear commitment to republican political institutions rooted in the prowess and practice of the colonial assemblies, then sanctified as the only paradigm during the successful war for independence and institutionalized in the state constitutions; and last, but far from least, a nearly unanimous consensus that the first chief executive would be George Washington, only one man, to be sure, but an incalculable asset.

On the liability side of the ledger, four items topped the list: First, no one had ever established a republican government on the scale of the United States, and the overwhelming judgment of the most respected authorities was that it could not be done; second, the dominant intellectual legacy of the Revolution, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, stigmatized all concentrated political power and even, its most virulent forms, depicted any energetic expression of governmental authority as an alien force that all responsible citizens ought to repudiate and, if possible, overthrow; third, apart from the support for the Continental Army during the war, which was itself sporadic, uneven, and barely adequate to assure victory, the states and regions comprising the new nation had no common history as a nation and no common experience behaving as a coherent collective (for example, while drafting the Declaration in Philadelphia in June of 1776, Jefferson had written back to friends in Virginia that it was truly disconcerting to find himself deployed at that propitious moment nearly three hundred miles from "my country"); fourth, and finally, according to the first census, commissioned by the Congress in 1790, nearly 700,000 inhabitants of the fledgling American republic were black slaves, the vast majority, over 90 percent, concentrated in the Chesapeake region and points south, their numbers also growing exponentially in a kind of demographic defiance of all the republican rhetoric uttered since the heady days of 1776.<sup>9</sup>

If permitted to define a decade somewhat loosely, then the next decade was the most crucial and consequential in American history. Other leading contestants for that title—the years 1855–1865 and the 1940s come to mind—can make powerful claims, to be sure, but the first decade of our history as a sovereign nation will always have primacy because it was first. It set the precedents, established in palpable fact what the Constitution had only outlined in purposely ambiguous

theory, thereby opening up and closing off options for all the history that followed. The Civil War, for example, was a direct consequence of the decision to evade and delay the slavery question during the most vulnerable early years of the republic. Similarly, America's emergence as the dominant world power in the 1940s could never have occurred if the United States had not established stable national institutions at the start that permitted the consolidation of the continent. (From the Native American perspective, of course, this consolidation was a conquest.) The apparently irresistible urge to capitalize and mythologize as "Founding Fathers" the most prominent members of the political leadership during this formative phase has some historical as well as psychological foundation, for in a very real sense we are, politically, if not genetically, still living their legacy. And the same principle also explains the parallel urge to demonize them, since any discussion of their achievement is also an implicit conversation about the distinctive character of American imperialism, both foreign and domestic.

A kind of electromagnetic field, therefore, surrounds this entire subject, manifesting itself as a golden haze or halo for the vast majority of contemporary Americans, or as a contaminated radioactive cloud for a smaller but quite vocal group of critics unhappy with what America has become or how we have gotten here. Within the scholarly community in recent years, the main tendency has been to take the latter side, or to sidestep the controversy by ignoring mainstream politics altogether. Much of the best work has taken the form of a concerted effort to recover the lost voices from the revolutionary generation—the daily life of Martha Ballard as she raised a family and practiced midwifery on the Maine frontier; the experience of Venture Smith, a former slave who sustained his memories of Africa and published a memoir based on them in 1798. This trend is so pronounced that any budding historian who announces that he or she wishes to focus on the political history of the early republic and its most prominent practitioners is generally regarded as having inadvertently confessed a form of intellectual bankruptcy.<sup>10</sup>

Though no longer a budding historian, my own efforts in recent years, including the pages that follow, constitute what I hope is a polite argument against the scholarly grain, based on a set of presumptions that are so disarmingly old-fashioned that they might begin to seem

novel in the current climate. In my opinion, the central events and achievements of the revolutionary era and the early republic were political. These events and achievements are historically significant because they shaped the subsequent history of the United States, including our own time. The central players in the drama were not the marginal or peripheral figures, whose lives are more typical, but rather the political leaders at the center of the national story who wielded power. What's more, the shape and character of the political institutions were determined by a relatively small number of leaders who knew each other, who collaborated and collided with one another in patterns that replicated at the level of personality and ideology the principle of checks and balances imbedded structurally in the Constitution.

Mostly male, all white, this collection of public figures was hardly typical of the population as a whole; nor was it, on the other hand, a political elite like anything that existed in England or Europe. All of its members, not just those like Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton with famously impoverished origins, would have languished in obscurity in England or France. The pressures and exigencies generated by the American Revolution called out and gathered together their talents; no titled and hereditary aristocracy was in place to block their ascent; and no full-blown democratic culture had yet emerged to dull their elitist edge. They were America's first and, in many respects, its only natural aristocracy. Despite recent efforts to locate the title in the twentieth century, they comprised, by any informed and fair-minded standard, the greatest generation of political talent in American history. They created the American republic, then held it together throughout the volatile and vulnerable early years by sustaining their presence until national habits and customs took root. In terms of our earlier distinction, they got us from the short run to the long run.

There are two long-established ways to tell the story, both expressions of the political factions and ideological camps of the revolutionary era itself, and each first articulated in the earliest histories of the period, written while several members of the revolutionary generation were still alive. Mercy Otis Warren's *History of the American Revolution* (1805) defined the "pure republicanism" interpretation, which was also the version embraced by the Republican party and therefore later called "the Jeffersonian interpretation." It depicts the American Revolution

as a liberation movement, a clean break not just from English domination but also from the historic corruptions of European monarchy and aristocracy. The ascendance of the Federalists to power in the 1790s thus becomes a hostile takeover of the Revolution by corrupt courtiers and moneymen (Hamilton is the chief culprit), which is eventually defeated and the true spirit of the Revolution recovered by the triumph of the Republicans in the elections of 1800. The core revolutionary principle according to this interpretive tradition is individual liberty. It has radical and, in modern terms, libertarian implications, because it regards any accommodation of personal freedom to governmental discipline as dangerous. In its more extreme forms it is a recipe for anarchy, and its attitude toward any energetic expression of centralized political power can assume paranoid proportions.

The alternative interpretation was first given its fullest articulation by John Marshall in his massive five-volume *The Life of George Washington* (1804–1807). It sees the American Revolution as an incipient national movement with deep, if latent, origins in the colonial era. The constitutional settlement of 1787–1788 thus becomes the natural fulfillment of the Revolution and the leaders of the Federalist party in the 1790s—Adams, Hamilton, and, most significantly, Washington—as the true heirs of the revolutionary legacy. (Jefferson is the chief culprit.) The core revolutionary principle in this view is collectivistic rather than individualistic, for it sees the true spirit of '76 as the virtuous surrender of personal, state, and sectional interests to the larger purposes of American nationhood, first embodied in the Continental Army and later in the newly established federal government. It has conservative but also protosocialistic implications, because it does not regard the individual as the sovereign unit in the political equation and is more comfortable with governmental discipline as a focusing and channeling device for national development. In its more extreme forms it relegates personal rights and liberties to the higher authority of the state, which is “us” and not “them,” and it therefore has both communal and despotic implications.<sup>11</sup>

It is truly humbling, perhaps even dispiriting, to realize that the historical debate over the revolutionary era and the early republic merely recapitulates the ideological debate conducted at the time, that historians have essentially been fighting the same battles, over and over again, that the members of the revolutionary generation fought originally

among themselves. Many historians have taken a compromise or split-the-difference position over the ensuing years, the basic choice has remained constant, as historians have declared themselves Jeffersonians or Hamiltonians, committed individualists or dedicated nationalists, liberals or conservatives, then written accounts that favor one camp over the other, or that stigmatize one side by viewing it through the eyes of the other, much as the contestants did back then. While we might be able to forestall intellectual embarrassment by claiming that the underlying values at stake are timeless, and the salient questions classical in character, the awkward truth is that we have been chasing our own tails in an apparently endless cycle of partisan pleading. Perhaps because we are still living their legacy, we have yet to reach a genuinely historical perspective on the revolutionary generation.<sup>12</sup>

But, again, in a way that Paine could tell us was commonsensical and Jefferson could tell us was self-evident, both sides in the debate have legitimate claims on historical truth and both sides speak for the deepest impulses of the American Revolution. With the American Revolution, as with all revolutions, different factions came together in common cause to overthrow the reigning regime, then discovered in the aftermath of their triumph that they had fundamentally different and politically incompatible notions of what they intended. In the dizzying sequence of events that comprises the political history of the 1790s, the full range of their disagreement was exposed and their different agenda for the United States collided head-on. Taking sides in this debate is like choosing between the words and the music of the American Revolution.

What distinguishes the American Revolution from most, if not all, subsequent revolutions worthy of the name is that in the battle for supremacy, for the “true meaning” of the Revolution, neither side completely triumphed. Here I do not just mean that the American Revolution did not “devour its own children” and lead to blood-soaked scenes at the guillotine or the firing-squad wall, though that is true enough. Instead, I mean that the revolutionary generation found a way to contain the explosive energies of the debate in the form of an ongoing argument or dialogue that was eventually institutionalized and rendered safe by the creation of political parties. And the subsequent political history of the United States then became an oscillation between new versions of the old tension, which broke out in violence

only on the occasion of the Civil War. In the nineteenth century, the tens of millions of Americans in the familiar form, dominant in the nineteenth century, the tens of millions of Americans in the appearance as a conflict between state and federal sovereignty. The source of the disagreement goes much deeper, however, involving conflicting attitudes toward government itself, competing versions of citizenship, differing postures toward the twin goals of freedom and equality.

But the key point is that the debate was not resolved so much as built into the fabric of our national identity. If that means the United States is founded on a contradiction, then so be it. With that one bloody exception, we have been living with it successfully for over two hundred years. Lincoln once said that America was founded on a proposition that was written by Jefferson in 1776. We are really founded on an argument about what that proposition means.

This does not mean that the political history of the early republic can be understood as a polite forensic exercise conducted by a marvelously well-behaved collection of demigods. Nor is the proper image a symphony orchestra; or, given the limited numbers involved at the highest level of national politics, perhaps a chamber music ensemble, each Founding Father playing a particular instrument that blends itself harmoniously into the common score. The whole point is that there was no common score, no assigned instruments, no blended harmonies. The politics of the 1790s was a truly cacophonous affair. Previous historians have labeled it "the Age of Passion" for good reason, for in terms of shrill accusatory rhetoric, flamboyant displays of ideological intransigence, intense personal rivalries, and hyperbolic claims of imminent catastrophe, it has no equal in American history. The political dialogue within the highest echelon of the revolutionary generation was a decade-long shouting match.<sup>13</sup>

How, then, did they do it? Why is it that Alfred North Whitehead was probably right to observe that there were only two instances in Western history when the leadership of an emerging imperial power performed as well, in retrospect, as anyone could reasonably expect? (The first was Rome under Caesar Augustus and the second was the United States in the late eighteenth century.) Why is it that there is a core of truth to the distinctive iconography of the American Revolution, which does not depict dramatic scenes of mass slaughter, but, instead, a gallery of well-dressed personalities in classical poses?<sup>14</sup>

My own answers to these questions are contained in the stories that follow, which attempt to recover the sense of urgency and improvisation, what it looked and felt like, for the eight most prominent political leaders in the early republic. They are, in alphabetical order, Abigail and John Adams, Aaron Burr, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington. While each episode is a self-contained narrative designed to illuminate one propitious moment with as much storytelling skill as I can muster, taken together they feature several common themes.

First, the achievement of the revolutionary generation was a collective enterprise that succeeded because of the diversity of personalities and ideologies present in the mix. Their interactions and juxtapositions generated a dynamic form of balance and equilibrium, not because any of them was perfect or infallible, but because their mutual imperfections and fallibilities, as well as their eccentricities and excesses, checked each other in much the way that Madison in *Federalist* 10 claimed that multiple factions would do in a large republic.

Second, they all knew one another personally, meaning that they broke bread together, sat together at countless meetings, corresponded with one another about private as well as public matters. Politics, even at the highest level in the early republic, remained a face-to-face affair in which the contestants, even those who were locked in political battles to the death, were forced to negotiate the emotional affinities and shared intimacies produced by frequent personal interaction. The Adams-Jefferson rivalry and friendship is the outstanding example here, though there are several crucial moments when critical compromises were brokered because personal trust made it possible. Though the American republic became a nation of laws, during the initial phase it also had to be a nation of men.

Third, they managed to take the most threatening and divisive issue off the political agenda. That issue, of course, was slavery, which was clearly incompatible with the principles of the American Revolution, no matter what version one championed. But it was also the political problem with the deepest social and economic roots in the new nation, so that removing it threatened to disrupt the fragile union just as it was congealing. Whether or not it would have been possible to put slavery on the road to extinction without also extinguishing the nation itself remains an open question; it is the main subject of one of the following



stories. Whatever conclusion one reaches concerning that hypothetical question, with all the advantage of hindsight and modern racial attitudes as a moral guide, the revolutionary generation decided that the risks outweighed the prospects for success; they quite self-consciously chose to defer the slavery question by placing any discussion of it out-of-bounds at both the national and federal levels.

Fourth, the faces that look down upon us with such classical dignity in those portraits by John Trumbull, Gilbert Stuart, and Charles Willson Peale, the voices that speak to us across the ages in such lyrical cadences, seem so mythically heroic, at least in part, because they knew we would be looking and listening. All the vanguard members of the revolutionary generation developed a keen sense of their historical significance even while they were still making the history on which their reputations would rest. They began posing for posterity, writing letters to us as much as to one another, especially toward the end of their respective careers. If they sometimes look like marble statues, that is how they wanted to look. (John Adams is one of my favorite characters, as you will see, because he was congenitally incapable of holding the pose. His refreshing and often irreverent candor provides the clearest window into the deeper ambitions and clashing vanities that propelled them all.) If they sometimes behave like actors in a historical drama, that is often how they regarded themselves. In a very real sense, we are complicitous in their achievement, since we are the audience for which they were performing; knowing we would be watching helped to keep them on their best behavior.<sup>15</sup>

Chronology, so the saying goes, is the last refuge of the feebleminded and only resort for historians. My narrative, while willfully episodic in character—no comprehensive coverage of all events is claimed—follows a chronological line, with one significant exception. The first story, about the duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, is out of sequence. In addition to being a fascinating tale designed to catch your attention, it introduces themes that reverberate throughout all the stories that follow by serving as the exception that proves the rule. Here is the only occasion within the revolutionary generation when political differences ended in violence and death rather than in ongoing argument. And Burr, if I have him right, is the odd man out within the elite of the early republic, a colorful and intriguing

character, to be sure, but a man whose definition of character does not measure up to the standard.

Enough justifying and generalizing. If the following stories converge to make some larger point, the surest way to reach it is through the stories themselves. It is a hot summer morning in 1804. Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton are being rowed in separate boats across the Hudson River for an appointment on the plains of Weehawken. The water is eerily calm and the air thick with a heavy mist . . .