[Ludwig] exhibited so many signs of exceptional sanity it was a foregone conclusion that the world would someday declare him to be mad.” As Brener himself says, “How well the world could use more such madmen.”

The world could use a few more Breners also. His observations about Hermann Levi’s role in Wagner’s later life inspire deep regret that no phonographic equipment ever captured Levi’s clearly astonishing abilities in opera direction. Levi and Porges were among the pallbearers at Wagner’s funeral; Wagner called Levi “dear Best Friend,” and Levi for his part called Wagner “best and noblest of men […]. The most beautiful thing I have experienced in my life is that I was permitted to be close to such a man.” This, notwithstanding Wagner’s eccentric and unfulfilled hopes that Levi would undergo baptism before conducting Parsifal. Brener, like so many persons whose normal writing style indicates great amiability, can, when required, be properly severe. He exposes Gutman’s lofty contempt for scholarly ethics: “[Wagner]’s operatic texts and prose works alike are contorted by Gutman beyond recognition, and mixed in with that author’s opinions in such a fine mesh that it is difficult, and for the uninitiated hardly possible, to tell where one ends and the other begins.” (Gutman has called Parsifal “an allegory of the Aryan’s fall and redemption,” heedless of the fact that the Third Reich banned stagings of the work from 1939 onwards.) Further, Brener devotes almost a whole chapter to revealing the fatuities of the Freudian Peter Gay, who has contended—on no discernible foundation except his own caprices—that Levi, despite his exceptional solicitude for his rabbi father, somehow exemplified Jewish self-hatred. How any form of self-hatred can be reconciled with the ferocious leadership demands of conducting in general, and theatrical conducting in particular, Gay refuses to explain.

No such gaps and implausibilities disfigure Brener’s volume. There do occur a few slips in this work, which a second edition might usefully amend. (Brahms’s Schicksalslied, “Song of Destiny,” is twice misspelled as “Shicksallied” [pp. 224, 227]; and opera composer Peter Cornelius, described [p. 90] as “about Tausig’s age,” was in fact seventeen years Tausig’s senior.) Yet against so much through which Brener has put us in his debt, these solecisms are inconsequential. Brener, by his enthusiasm and erudition, has validated the remark of that superb Wagnerian maestro Sir Georg Solti (himself of Jewish extraction): “To me, anyone who can create such beauty, whether he be half-Jewish, anti-Semite […] or royalist, is first and foremost a musical genius and will remain so as long as civilization lasts.”

A Founder of Nothing
Kevin R. C. Gutzman


Aaron Burr is not by any definition I know of a “founder” of anything. He did not help to author a state or federal constitution, nor did he help to ratify one. He did not serve in the First Congress, which created the Executive departments, adopted the Judiciary Act of 1789, and referred
twelve proposed constitutional amendments to the states. He did not help to ratify any of those.

So why should Burr be called a “founder”? One supposes that, as in the case of other works about non-founding “founders” in recent years, it is a matter of marketing. Burr, after all, is an obscure figure, essentially unknown to the book-buying public, and so how else might one sell a magnum opus about his life?

The era of what has come to be called “Founders Chic,” of mass sales of ponderous, pedestrian doorstops about the likes of John Adams and Alexander Hamilton, as well as of similarly unenlightening works on lesser lights such as John Jay, Gouverneur Morris, and other politicians of the Early Republic, proceeds apace; and so one cannot much blame Nancy Isenberg or Viking for wanting to tap into the market—despite the fact that Burr was not a founder, in any obvious sense, of anything other than the Jeffersonian Republican Party that nearly drove him to his doom.

Why, then, is Nancy Isenberg interested in him? What led her to drop a long work on this fellow, long object of nearly universal disdain, into the great pool of American historiography?

A hint is provided by the subject of her last work, Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America: Burr, she says, was (grant her her premise for a minute) “the only founder to embrace feminism.” Indeed, Isenberg’s Burr is a classic feminist, trailing a bevy of amours across Europe, recounting sexual adventures to his daughter, maintaining a diary detailing it all…and championing Mary Wollstonecraft with his wife, who was married at the time he first took up with her. Burr is oddly contemporary, almost the model of a liberal American politician or intellectual in, say, 2007.

Isenberg’s book does not solely lionize her subject for his sexual opinions and waywardness, however. To have done so would have played into the hands of Burr’s critics in his own day, who pointed to his amorous license as emblematic of his supposed general licentiousness. Instead, Burr’s behavior in this regard is “contextualized” via a series of observations along the line of “Jefferson did it too” or, more often, “So did Hamilton.” In some cases, one almost blushes at the obvious fallaciousness of the importation of poor Hamilton into accounts of particular episodes in Burr’s life with which he had nothing in particular to do; it seems that Isenberg does not realize that tu quoque is a classic fallacy.

Burr’s life might offer sufficient interest on its own to the reader already interested in the Early Republic and familiar with the general outline of its history. Having won laurels in the military during the Revolution, Burr ascended to the post of U.S. senator from New York. He then helped to organize the Jeffersonian Republican victory in New York City, thus New York State, and thereby the country at large, in the presidential election of 1800-01. So significant a figure was Burr that the Republicans pushed him for vice president in 1796, then made him their vice presidential candidate in 1800.

Burr suffered serious mistreatment at the hands of Virginia Republicans in 1796, as they engineered some Republican electors’ dropping him from their ballots to ensure that Jefferson obtained more votes than he did. Burr dutifully soldiered on, as Isenberg shows, in winning the pivotal metropolis for Jefferson in 1800 despite Burr’s 1796 experience. Had he and his allies been as self-serving in 1800 as Virginians had been in 1796, Isenberg hints, Burr might….

Well, what Burr is remembered for now is the drawn-out process culminating in Jefferson’s triumph over Burr in the House of Representatives in 1801. Since the federal
constitution’s authors had not foreseen the advent of political parties, they had not anticipated that running mates would gain the same number of Electoral College votes. The Constitution provided that the candidate receiving the most votes became president, with the runner-up winning the vice presidency.

Since Burr and Jefferson received an equal number of electoral votes in 1800, there was no winner. The House of Representatives, then, was to decide the matter, with each state delegation having one vote. The process dragged on for many ballots over several days in the House, and, as the standard account has it, Burr perfidiously hung back and waited to see whether a coalition of anti-Jefferson Federalists and pro-Burr Republicans might make him president.

Isenberg says that this is not a valid account. Burr, she says, was the head of one of three major factions of New York Republicans among which Jefferson had to choose. Burr’s estrangement from the Jefferson administration grew out of Jefferson’s decision to back one of the competing factions.

Isenberg makes clear that she believes that Burr would have been a better president than Madison. Since the militarily inexperienced Madison’s tenure as president was marked chiefly by his feeble conduct of the War of 1812, it is more than plausible that warrior Burr would have surpassed Madison in that context. In fact, since the failed foreign policy of the Jefferson administration was largely of Secretary of State Madison’s making, it is interesting to speculate how American history might have been different if Burr, not Madison, had been Jefferson’s favorite. One imagines, for example, that Burr might have avoided the fruitless war altogether.

As to the chief source of Burr’s infamy, the fateful encounter with Hamilton, it is an underlying theme of the book. Isenberg foreshadows her account of the duel throughout, as in stating that Burr was slow to anger during the Revolution. Besides that, Isenberg tells her reader in numerous ways throughout that Hamilton more or less deserved it.

In what sense did Hamilton deserve it, and why did he take the steps that ultimately prompted Burr to challenge him? Just as Isenberg’s Jefferson undercut Burr in New York politics to head off the possibility that Burr would beat Madison to the presidency, so her Hamilton was anti-Burr for years and years before 1804 because he saw Burr as his chief obstacle to political dominance of the Empire State.

What did Hamilton do? He calumniated Burr from virtually the moment he noticed him, telling General Washington during the Revolution that Burr was untrustworthy. Over time, Hamilton’s descriptions of Burr (always secret) became increasingly harsh. In time, Hamilton and other Federalists cast Burr as a sexual reprobate at the center of a circle of loose men, a new Catiline, an allusion that the Sallust-reading political elite of the Early Republic clearly understood.
Isenberg says that Burr never acted this way toward any of his political enemies, in contrast both to Jefferson and to Hamilton.

Ultimately, Burr heard that Hamilton had characterized him in a way he simply could not let pass. Confronted with a letter demanding that he take it back, as Burr had made Hamilton do once before, Hamilton refused to make his recantation public. Burr, in conformity with the code duello, insisted on it. When Hamilton would not comply, Burr demanded satisfaction—that is, a duel.

Isenberg notes that Burr had not made a practice of dueling, while Hamilton had. She also opines that Hamilton’s behavior at the dueling ground gave the lie to the traditional story that Hamilton, given the chance, had not intended to shoot Burr. In short, Hamilton’s death comes across essentially as Hamilton’s fault.

Having shot Hamilton, Burr fled. Soon enough, he was indicted for his action in two states, in one of which indictments for this crime were virtually unheard of, and in the other of which it was not even illegal! Next followed several years in which Burr was essentially an exile from New York. But he still had to fulfill his term as vice president.

At the end of his tenure as vice president, Burr presided over the impeachment trial of Justice Samuel Chase. Isenberg’s description of this episode, like much of her treatment of legal and constitutional matters, leaves something to be desired. As she explains it, Chase was the object of political venom and did not deserve to be removed from office by the Senate. All he had done, after all, was to hector defense counsel, disallow relevant evidence, railroad accusations through grand juries, and generally behave in a completely partisan and passionate manner on the bench. As Harvard’s great legal historian Raoul Berger put it, there has never been anyone else in American history who more deserved to be impeached and removed from office than this prejudiced justice.

Isenberg’s chief concern in her account is with Burr’s personality. His conduct of Chase’s trial, she says, was firm and fair, intended to give the justice a rebuke. She concludes her account by noting that Chase’s post-impeachment career was far less controversial than before, and she points to Burr’s conduct of the trial as responsible, in fact entirely meet.

The final major episode in Burr’s life, the sequence of events culminating in his 1807 treason trial, receives a fair retelling here. Burr, it is clear, did not deserve to be tried for treason, but was at most “guilty” of planning and perhaps initiating a filibuster, a private military expedition against nearby foreign possessions. Jefferson’s attitude toward Burr, his Chase-like pursuit of his former ally, seems exactly as petty and lawless as this low point in the president’s career actually was.

Isenberg says that Burr should be recognized as a thinker on a par with Jefferson and Hamilton, although she offers essentially no reason to believe this beyond his unusually egalitarian attitude toward women’s education, his reform career in New York politics, and a rather pedestrian valedictory speech in the Senate (Burr had been studiedly non-partisan, etc.) at the end of the Chase trial. She calls him a “founder,” even though, as noted before, he was not. She rightly credits him with higher political ethics than Hamilton displayed, and her evaluation of the reasons for Burr’s being cut out of the Jefferson administration is persuasive. This book does offer insight into a significant figure in the Early Republic, then, even if Burr was simply not all that Isenberg cracks him up to have been.