

Learning from the anti-dueling movement

Alexander Hamilton's 1804 death in a duel galvanized popular opposition. We need a similar campaign around gun violence.

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On July 11, 1804, in Weehawken, New Jersey—just across the Hudson River from Manhattan—two longtime political adversaries faced off in [a duel](#). The result: Vice President Aaron Burr shot and mortally wounded the former secretary of the treasury, Alexander Hamilton. (No, Dick Cheney was not the first vice president to shoot someone!)

Dueling, which Benjamin Franklin [characterized](#) as a “murderous practice,” was technically illegal in most states. But it had become popular as part of a “culture of honor” among veterans of the Continental Army. Soldiers and politicians sought to mimic the European military elites they had encountered while fighting alongside them against the British. “The rage for dueling here,” a visitor from France noted in 1779, “has reached an incredible and scandalous point.”

Those who wished to engage in a duel found ways to circumvent local laws. Dueling was illegal in the District of Columbia, so politicians simply crossed the Anacostia River to Bladensburg, Maryland. In the early 19th century, more than 50 duels took place in the area that became known as the [Bladensburg Dueling Grounds](#).

Not all duels ended in fatality. Because firearms were still rather crude, a duel often inflicted injury rather than death. In the peculiar etiquette of the duel, as long as shots were exchanged, “honor” had been served—and the combatants often reconciled.

Hamilton's death, however, provoked a public outcry. Newspapers characterized the duel as “dreadful” and “barbarous and vicious.” At Hamilton's funeral, ships in New York Harbor flew their flags at half mast. The scene at the Trinity Episcopal Church

gravesite, according to the *New York Evening Post*, was enough “to melt a monument of marble.”

The duel in Weehawken began to galvanize popular opposition. Ministers led the charge against dueling, joined by college presidents and other leaders in society. The minister Lyman Beecher was patriarch of the family that included educational reformer Catharine Beecher, famous and infamous pastor Henry Ward Beecher and the “little woman who started the big war,” Harriet Beecher Stowe. In 1806, two years after Hamilton’s death, Lyman Beecher published [a pamphlet against dueling](#)—in which he urged voters to pledge never to vote for anyone who supported dueling.

Evangelical reformers like Beecher pointed out that the notion of grown men pointing guns at each other was barbaric and unworthy of a civilized society. Preachers and reformers launched a moral crusade not only to outlaw dueling but also to consolidate the public’s repugnance toward anyone who supported the practice. Although Congress finally passed a law against dueling in 1839, the practice continued. By the onset of the Civil War, however, reformers and moral suasion had so discredited dueling that it all but disappeared.

I’m struck by the parallels with current [discussions about gun control](#). The rhetorical flurry following the Newtown shootings reveals an earnestness for new restrictions. But I have my doubts that legislation is sufficient, especially given the patchwork of state laws, many of which differ widely. In addition to legislation, we also need to advance a moral argument against the culture of violence that characterizes American society, from video games to motion pictures. We glorify violence on the hockey ice and the football field, not to mention the gladiatorial combat on cable television. It’s no wonder that anyone thinking himself aggrieved resorts to violence.

Common-sense legislation—shoring up background checks, outlawing assault weapons—provide a starting point. But people of good faith also need to mount a moral campaign similar to that waged against dueling in the 19th century—similar even to the moral outrage against dog fighting that emerged following the arrest of [Michael Vick in 2007](#).

The Newtown massacre provides an occasion for making that argument, just like the death of Alexander Hamilton precipitated the crusade against dueling. Just as dueling had become popular among the post-Revolutionary generation, we have

become a society transfixed by guns and vigilante justice. It's all too easy to settle a score or to avenge a perceived slight by pulling a trigger, whether in Columbine or Oak Creek or Aurora or Newtown or on the streets of Los Angeles or Chicago.

The crusade against dueling highlights the value of moral argument as a complement to the law in order to stem the ills of society. It's time for people of character to stand up and declare that resorting to violence is unacceptable in a civilized society, that the answer to too many guns is not more guns. Real reform requires more than legislation; it demands that we construct a moral consensus against behaviors that undermine the common good.

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