

Off the Pedestal and Between the Sheets



Scandalmonger

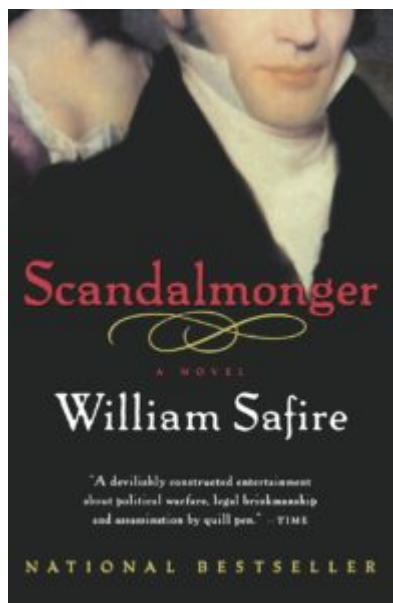


A NOVEL

William Safire

"A devilishly constructed entertainment
about political warfare, legal brinkmanship
and assassination by quill pen." —TIME

NATIONAL BESTSELLER



New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. 496pp., \$27.

As that scourge of academia, former National Endowment for the Humanities director Lynne Cheney, prepares to become Second Lady, it may be appropriate to reflect on the intense dislike that many Americans feel for the insouciant, disrespectful, debunking attitude that (they imagine) current academic historians take toward the men most of us learned in school to call the Founding Fathers. This was brought home by an e-mail that I received, out of the blue, from a web-surfing citizen who happened upon an archived post of mine on the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic's discussion list. The post in question was part of a February 1999 thread on whether "Founders," the less mythopoetic replacement for "Founding Fathers," was still a useful concept. I actually defended the concept in my post, but made the mistake of agreeing with many of the critics' premises. To this, the concerned citizen replied, "Regarding your take on 'Founders' as a concept, I don't think I have to be a knuckle-dragging, slack-jawed, ultra-right/ultra-white social critic to say that you and your academic ilk have your heads squarely up your asses. Cut the crap and wake up."

Most professional historians are justifiably proud of the historiographic revolution that has occurred since the 1960s, which has opened vast new fields of inquiry and allowed the vast majority of the American population to take their rightfully important place in the historical record. Yet out in the culture the new histories are often perceived, sometimes based on very little information, as a form of national character assassination, shocking in their disregard for the men and ideas that many Americans were raised to believe made the country great. Hence the slights to the Founders that Lynne Cheney and others detected in the National History Standards became a controversial issue and a talking point for those eager to break the alleged liberal stranglehold on the educational establishment. Indeed, especially since that controversy, conservatives have been working to take control of the Founders' political

legacy, on many fronts. One has been a string of pro-Founder books by nonhistorians, including polemics such as Thomas G. West's *Vindicating the Founders*, monographs in political philosophy treating various Founders as brilliant "lawgivers" and farsighted statesmen, and popular biographies and appreciations such as the volumes on George Washington and Alexander Hamilton by *National Review* senior editor Richard Brookhiser.

Coming in this context, William Safire's novel *Scandalmonger* is a pleasant surprise. Though Safire is a conservative pundit, a former aide to President Richard Nixon, and recently a tireless promoter of the various Clinton administration scandals, he is not out to put the Founders back on their pedestals. Instead, Safire's hero is one of the Founders' most infamous detractors, the Scottish émigré journalist James Thomson Callender, whose publications were instrumental in launching many of the scandals that (as the *New York Times* might put it) have dogged the Founders ever since. Safire follows Callender sympathetically through all the events that have led a bipartisan coalition of historians (including defenders of both Jefferson and Hamilton) to savage the journalist over the years, with occasional time off as a martyr to freedom of the press. The novel is divided into four sets of scandals, though only two of the incidents described follow the usual definition of that word. "The Hamilton Scandals" imaginatively portrays Callender's role in exposing what was then called the Reynolds affair, in which Alexander Hamilton claimed that an extramarital affair and blackmail explained his suspicious payments to James Reynolds, a man suspected of insider trading in government securities. "The Sedition Scandal" provides an overly melodramatic account of Callender's and Matthew Lyon's travails as victims of the Sedition Act. "The Jefferson Scandals" covers the acts that have earned Callender the nastiest epithets from historians, his turn against Thomas Jefferson and his subsequent origination of the public controversy over the president's relationship with his slave, Sally Hemings, among other moral failings. The final section, "The Libel Scandals," deals with the persecutions suffered by Callender and Federalist editor Harry Croswell for their criticisms of Jefferson, and Callender's allegedly suspicious death in Richmond.

The setting of *Scandalmonger* is the political demimonde where Callender worked, and while Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, Alexander Hamilton, and other bona fide Founders make substantial appearances, hack writers and politicians such as William Cobbett and first House of Representatives clerk John Beckley loom even larger. A more important character yet is Maria Reynolds, the femme fatale whose "slim waist and full bosom" (34) stoked the passions of Alexander Hamilton and (in Safire's account) Aaron Burr and James T. Callender as well. Callender not only gets to be the protagonist of the novel, but also, in what is easily Safire's most far-fetched invention, its romantic hero as well. Apparently the years of heavy drinking and malnutrition were good for Callender, who is described as "darkly handsome" (50) with a "hard body" (305), doubtless toned by the long hours sitting in chairs scribbling political essays. Representations of Reynolds's décolletage and Callender's surprisingly voluptuous lips decorate the book's dust jacket.

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As these details indicate, Safire's general approach is much closer to the left-leaning historical novelist Gore Vidal than to other conservative writers on the Early Republic. Like Vidal's *Burr*, *Scandalmonger* interviews the period from the vantage point of a secondary figure maligned in most standard accounts, and strives to present the men and women of the period as full-, or even hot-, blooded human beings. Those keeping score at home will want to note that Safire and Vidal concur on Burr as the finest lover among the Founders, though in *Scandalmonger* Hamilton gets what Safire apparently intends as his book's steamiest love scenes. "Only when he was certain she was quite ready for him did he commit himself," Safire's Hamilton remembers, sounding as if he were gauging congressional support for one of his financial proposals. "She took him in with a long cry of unashamed delight, which pleased him no end" (34). Move over, Jackie Collins.

Despite including these bodice-ripping romance novel elements, Safire is actually quite punctilious in distinguishing historical fact from invention. Perhaps remembering how journalists pilloried Oliver Stone for indiscriminately mixing staged and archival footage in *JFK*, Safire announces the fictionality of the Callender-Reynolds romance at the outset and then provides an elaborate "Underbook" noting the sources of many quotations and anecdotes and identifying invented conversations and incidents. Unlike many other writers of popular history and historical fiction, Safire clearly respects and has absorbed at least some of the recent historiography on his subject. He singles out two books by Michael Durey (a biography of Callender and a later monograph on transatlantic radicals) as major sources, and in truth, this novel would not have been possible to write without Durey's work. Safire and his research assistants also made extensive use of various published primary sources, Callender's and William Cobbett's published writings, and at least one little-known manuscript item from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. This preparation allows Safire to deal honestly with some issues that tend not to show up in more Founder-centered accounts, such as the principled objections many Jeffersonian radicals had to the iconification of George Washington, and the role of class and wealth in structuring some of the political relationships and outcomes of the early party conflict. It is refreshing to find the Founders treated as working politicians and as members of the social and economic elite, rather than merely as statesmen with profounder thoughts than everyone else.

Truth in reviewing notice: the bibliography at the end of the "Underbook" includes a 1996 article on John Beckley by the present author. That piece seems to have influenced Safire's characterization of Beckley and some other aspects of the book, so I may be somewhat biased in assessing his historiographical acumen. I would, however, disclaim any credit for a ludicrous, admittedly

fictional early scene in which Beckley greets both Callender and Cobbett at the Philadelphia docks holding a "Clerk of the House" sign like a modern airport limousine driver (42).

One area where Safire seems to differ from the historiography concerns the motivations behind Callender's activities. While contemporaries and historians have called him a traitorous hack, Michael Durey's biography makes it clear that Callender was driven by ideology as much as money or revenge, though the latter factors were certainly present. One of the most uncompromising radicals among the Republican exile journalists of the 1790s and a man who suffered as much as any of them for his beliefs, Callender was also marked by his Scottish Calvinist background with a stern moralism and an extremely dark view of human nature. Conditioned to expect sin and compelled to expunge it, Durey's Callender could not help lashing out against the hypocritical sexual culture he found in Virginia.

As the title of the novel indicates, Safire paints Callender as a figure much more congenial to the ideals of modern reporters and pundits. His considerably less grim Callender is primarily a driven newsman, whose overriding imperative is to find, tell, and sell good stories about the high and mighty. (His moral outrage is considerably restrained by the fact that Safire has him conducting an affair with Maria Reynolds at the time.) For Safire's Callender, the insult "scandalmonger" is a badge of honor.

While the signs are less obvious than they might have been, the conclusion is hard to avoid that William Safire's identification with James Thomson Callender, scandalmonger against President Jefferson, has something to do with his own role as a scandalmonger against President William Jefferson Clinton. This becomes particularly clear toward the end of the book, as Callender's scandals fail to damage Jefferson politically. Safire has at least two characters (374, 393) wonder "how Jefferson had been able to maintain, through all these sordid revelations, his hold on the public sentiment." In the same section of the book, Safire has Jefferson allies in Richmond facilitating Callender's death, echoing the insinuations made about the suicide of Clinton aide Vincent Foster.

Interestingly, Safire does not follow the Monica Lewinsky era conservative jeremiads in moralizing on this theme, and indeed he mutes the whole moral element in Callender's campaign against Jefferson. Instead, one of the stronger (and relatively few) justifications offered for scandalmongering is psychosexual in nature. One scene has Maria Reynolds pondering the reasons for her putative attraction to Callender. Normally he was not much sexually, "more like a son . . . than a lover." Callender only became hot stuff when wielding his pen in a scandal, when he "found some inviting target in his sights, and became consumed with the need to bring down the reputation of the high and mighty." Then "his passion transformed him, if just for a few hours, into the man of power she had come to dread," and swoon over (326). The notion of muckraking journalism as an aphrodisiac seems like mere pundit wish

fulfillment. More serious and revealing of the scandalmongering impulse is the suggestion that bringing down a reputation suffuses the journalist, normally a weak and passive observer, with a gratifying, quasi-sexual sense of power.

Finally, it must be admitted that, while similar to Gore Vidal's *Burr* in some respects, *Scandalmonger* does not come close to *Burr* as a novel. Safire does better as a historian than he does as a writer of imaginative fiction. For instance, a great deal of historical background information is presented in a reasonably accurate but often comically awkward fashion, as the thoughts or dialogue of characters. The effect is not unlike characters in old musicals who suddenly break into song while walking down the street or brushing their teeth, except that Safire's characters break into . . . exposition. Often their words and thoughts are tinged with prophecy as well, showing a remarkable knowledge of how historians centuries hence would explain (and name) the events they were living through.

On the way to his first assignation with Maria Reynolds, Alexander Hamilton puts a bank bill in his pocket and begins to "envision the day when banknotes would be issued throughout the nation by the United States Bank, backed by the full faith and credit of the Federal government, and not . . . by local banks that were all too often on the brink of insolvency." He then spends the next few blocks recalling congressional passage of the bank bill, his debate with Jefferson and Madison over enumerated versus implied constitutional powers, and the fact that Washington had signed the bill "and, perhaps without fully realizing the strength he was gathering to the Executive, laid the foundation for financing a continental empire." When he reaches the Reynolds home, Maria's seductive small talk begins with a question about Hamilton's use of pseudonyms in the press (33-34).

Even more ham-fisted is a moment much later in the book when James Monroe stops to ponder "the growing spiritual movement that called itself 'the second Great Awakening,'" an historians' term that almost certainly never passed the lips of any early nineteenth century political figure. "This was a surge of religious enthusiasm among the more Calvinistic of the Congregationalists, along with the 'gospel' Methodists and Baptists," Monroe explains to himself, before making "a mental note to urge Jefferson to begin to be seen attending church regularly in Washington" (348), apparently for the benefit of the television cameras. In a similar vein, characters mention the "code duello" by name, explain, and re-explain it in such literal terms as to suggest that dueling was required by statute rather than growing from a set of customs (81, 90, 362, 367, 378-79, 385).

William Safire has made a noble effort to present a less pious and better-rounded view of the Founders and their politics than many conservatives prefer, but his book is trapped uncomfortably in a limbo between history and fiction that, stylistically at any rate, renders it less than effective as either.

Further Reading:

For conservative defenses and appreciations of the Founders, see, among others: Thomas G. West, *Vindicating the Founders: Race, Sex, Class, and Justice in the Origins of America* (Lanham, Md., 1997); C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence, Kans., 1999); Gary Rosen, *American Compact: James Madison and the Problem of Founding* (Lawrence, Kans., 1999); Karl-Friedrich Walling, *Republican Empire: Alexander Hamilton on War and Free Government* (Lawrence, Kans., 1999); Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* (New York, 1996); Richard Brookhiser, *Alexander Hamilton, American* (New York, 1999). Somewhere in this category one would have to put former secretary of education William J. Bennett's weird book of advice from the Founders (including some for the lovelorn), *Our Sacred Honor: Words of Advice from the Founders in Stories, Letters, Poems, and Speeches* (New York, 1997).

The following works listed in Safire's "Underbook" are mentioned above: Michael Durey, *"With the Hammer of Truth": James Thomson Callender and America's Early National Heroes* (Charlottesville, Va., 1990); Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence, Kans., 1997); and Jeffrey L. Pasley, "'A Journeyman, Either in Law or Politics': John Beckley and the Social Origins of Political Campaigning," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (1996): 531-69.

On William Safire's role in creating and sustaining the Clinton scandals, see Gene Lyons, *Fools for Scandal: How the Media Invented Whitewater* (New York, 1996).

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