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Hamilton on Broadway and the Founding in American Culture

An Introduction

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MATTHEW BROWN

The Broadway musical *Hamilton* (2015) has become the rare theater event that takes a prominent place in American popular culture and political discourse.¹ Its runaway commercial and artistic success has created a unique place of renewed prominence for its central character, Alexander Hamilton, America's first Treasury secretary. It has also provided a uniquely influential voice for the musical's creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda, and his interpretation of the American Founding, its players, and its legacy. I organized this symposium and arranged for a group of thoughtful scholars of the American Founding, economics, and financial history to attend the Broadway show and contribute papers to this volume. The goal is to help us better understand what legacy might emerge from this cultural phenomenon and how it might influence our understanding of the American Founding well into the twenty-first century.

Over the course of American history, veneration of the Founding and Founding Fathers has become something of a regular feature in American culture, politics, and

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1. The musical has already been credited with helping nix plans to remove Alexander Hamilton from the U.S. \$10 bill (Calmes 2016).

The Independent Review, v. 21, n. 4, Spring 2017, ISSN 1086–1653, Copyright © 2017, pp. 485–487.

even business. But its uses have gone well beyond the mere act of celebrating patriotism and American freedom that most people consider when thinking about the Founding. In the 1790s, Thomas Jefferson and his allies sought political advantage by working to solidify his status as the author of the Declaration of Independence as part of their ongoing battle for influence against Hamilton's Federalist Party and its contender for leading "author of Independence," John Adams (Maier 1998). The trend of elevating the Founders to the status of American saints and using them to cast judgment on contemporary events and figures emerged clearly in the 1820s during the lead-up to the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 1826. This celebration coincided with the beginning of what is now an almost two-hundred-year-old successful business model of commercially popular biographies of the Founders (Wills 2002).

In 1876, America's first World's Fair, the Centennial International Exhibition, was hosted in Philadelphia in conjunction with the Centenary of the Declaration of Independence and combined a celebration of America's one hundredth anniversary with displays of new inventions and technologies. The event helped reintroduce and promote a popular narrative of American dynamism, power, expansion, and success following the devastation of the Civil War (see, e.g., Rydell 1987). Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the concerns about both American independence from foreign rule and the possibility and survival of democratic self-governance waned, the Founding, in particular the Declaration of Independence and other supporting Founding documents, became used more and more commonly to support the causes of groups such as women, African Americans, and other minorities in the quests to achieve legal recognition of their equal right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." In his famous "Peoria Speech," prior to his ascension to the presidency, Abraham Lincoln illustrated this shift in the political and popular uses of the Founding by referencing the incongruity between the Founding's loftiest of Enlightenment ideals and the continuation of widespread legal and constitutional injustices: "Our republican robe is soiled and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. . . . Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence" (quoted in Lehrman 2008, 320).

In more recent decades, the Founding has continued to be deployed to promote particular causes and to support and legitimize social and political commentary. The bicentennial in 1976 coincided with a period of deep economic "malaise" and political crisis following the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War. The Founding was used again as a historical ideal and opportunity to encourage renewed dedication to rebuilding the idea of American exceptionalism (Ryan 2012). And even more recently, in the wake of the attacks on September 11, 2001, the Founding was called upon to revitalize the national narratives of resilience and power when it was quickly announced that the new World Trade Center reconstruction's most prominent building, initially dubbed "Freedom Tower," now One World Trade Center, would be 1,776 feet tall in a direct reference to the Founding (Associated Press 2006).

Into this milieu, following the plummeting popularity of the various wars that have dominated the years since 2001 and the resurgence of progressive political ideas since 2008, steps the cultural phenomenon of *Hamilton*. In the past two years, *Hamilton* has amassed an impressive list of major awards on top of its runaway popular and financial success. In 2016, *Hamilton* became only the ninth musical to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama since 1918, when the prize was first awarded for theater. Other musical winners in this elite group include cultural lodestars *South Pacific* (1950), *A Chorus Line* (1976), and *Rent* (1996).² *Hamilton*'s phenomenal success and expanding influence points to its potentially significant cultural legacy, which includes its interpretation of both Alexander Hamilton as well as his role and impact on American society, a legacy that may last well into the twenty-first century.

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Acknowledgments: Financial support for this symposium was provided by the Academy on Capitalism and Limited Government Foundation.

2. See the list of Pulitzer Prizes at <http://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/218> (accessed October 5, 2016).