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A Founding, If You Can Keep It

— ◆ —

MATTHEW BROWN

The Founding generation has always loomed large in America’s collective conscience. The smash hit Broadway musical *Hamilton* (2015) is the latest iteration in that tradition. It manages, like previous popularizations of the Founding, to create a “new” Founding that suits its time and audience. Yet despite the genius of its novel artistry and casting, *Hamilton* more often than not reinforces the traditional popular narratives, updated to contemporary upper-middle-class sensibilities, and thus in some ways fails to live up to its developing reputation as iconoclastic. Like the Founding itself, *Hamilton* is a complex phenomenon open to numerous and often contradictory interpretations.

The popular American ideals of independence, liberty, self-determination, opportunity, standing on the right side of history, and the manifestation of justice all have deep roots in the Founding and are central to how it has been employed in historical writing and popular culture for more than two hundred years now. Historical mythologies such as the American Founding evolve over time and are developed to suit the needs of contemporary users. The heated debates in popular culture and the academy in recent decades over the “truth” about certain aspects of history tend to obscure in polemical rhetoric the deeper problem of trying to re-create narratives and interpretations based on, by necessity, enormously diminished and oversimplified details (see, e.g., Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob 1994 and Hughes

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The title of this article is fashioned after the famous statement attributed to Benjamin Franklin: “A Republic, if you can keep it” (“Respectfully Quoted” n.d.)

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2004). It is important to remember, as Richard Hughes (2004) points out, that understanding these stories as mythologies does not necessarily condemn them as falsehood or fantasy but rather helps us realize that they are narratives constructed by subsequent generations to suit particular purposes. Each of those subsequent generations, authors, and popular figures has its own interpretations, biases, agendas, and gaps in knowledge. Another way to think about it is the old saying “history is written by the victors.” In a fluid society such as America, new “victors” keep emerging to question the status quo interpretation. In that sense, *Hamilton* is both novel and ordinary.

The long-standing, predominantly heroic narrative of the Founding generation goes something like this:

Unfortunately for the British—and fortunately for America—the generation that emerged to lead the colonies into independence was one of the most remarkable group of men in history—sensible, broad-minded, courageous, unusually well educated, gifted in a variety of ways, mature, and long-sighted, sometimes lit by flashes of genius. It is rare indeed for a nation to have at its summit a group so variously gifted as Washington and Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Adams. And what was particularly providential was the way in which their strengths and weaknesses compensated each other, so that the group as a whole was infinitely more formidable than the sum of its parts. They were the Enlightenment made flesh. . . . Great events in history are determined by all kinds of factors, but the most important single one is always the quality of the people in charge; and never was this principle more convincingly demonstrated than in the struggle for American independence. (Johnson 1997, 127–28)

Paul Johnson’s praise probably represents something of the apex of the contemporary hagiographic tradition toward the Founders and the Founding. Here we see Johnson engaging in the creation of a “greatest generation” mythology employed most successfully in recent popular history by Tom Brokaw (1997). Brokaw’s book *The Greatest Generation* captured and reinforced the popular celebration, almost deification, of the World War II generation around the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in the mid-1990s. This time frame also coincided with a new generation of popular works on the Founding. Brokaw’s work carried on a well-worn tradition in popular historical writing by creating a “golden age” that the present generation could look back on with nostalgia and sadness at a sense of lost greatness and by combining it with a nationalist/patriotic celebratory revelry. His approach contributed to the national mythos by reinforcing the narrative of American exceptionalism while also casting a disapproving glance at how that exceptionalism was being squandered or lost by the current generation and providing a guiding ideal for future betterment.

Brokaw's celebration of the "greatest generation" fifty years after the end of World War II was reminiscent of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of American independence in 1826—something of the unofficial birth of generational reimagining of the Founding in popular culture. The "Jubilee Generation" took out all the stops for the fiftieth anniversary of independence, glorifying the rapidly fading Founding generation and expressing their angst about their own status as the inheritors of the Founding legacy (Burstein 2001). At the half-century mark of the American experiment, most of the leading Founders had already died, and, as fate would have it (and as more than a few people would come to view as providential), both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died on July 4, 1826—the actual fiftieth anniversary day. Leadership of the republic had already changed hands to the next generation, literally, in the form of the presidency of John Quincy Adams, son of the second president and leading Founder John Adams. Across the country, the jubilee was marked with parades, carnivals, feasts, public speeches, and readings of the Declaration of Independence. In advance of the anniversary, reprints of the original declaration were commissioned from Washington, D.C., engraver William J. Stone that could be circulated in place of the worn originals (Declaration of Independence n.d.).

Quincy Adams encapsulated in many ways the transitional pains of the country leaving the Founding era behind as the Founding itself grew into the thing of legend. Bringing to office the most accomplished of résumés, John Quincy Adams was not a natural leader and lacked the *je ne sais quoi* of "the most remarkable group of men" that he followed. The hard-fought, nasty political battle between Quincy Adams as protector of the old-guard New England elite and Andrew Jackson as leader of the rabbley, vulgar, upstart frontier generation lacked all of the eloquence and providential nature increasingly ascribed to the Founders by 1826. The accusations of corruption surrounding Quincy Adams and his appointment of Henry Clay as secretary of state combined with the lurid rumors about Jackson's marital history and frontier manners no doubt had many of the jubilee's revelers pining for the "better" past, just as Brokaw would with his readers 170 years later at the fiftieth anniversary of World War II. It was believed that great leaders/warriors/men marked a better, more ideal past that needed emulating, while little, if any, attention was paid to the flaws of the past generation.

Although academic opinion in much of the history profession has in recent decades swung in a much more diverse and often critical direction toward the Founders and the Founding, popular representations have maintained the more positive or sympathetic interpretation throughout most of the years since 1826. It is nevertheless unavoidable in today's climate—and that is a good thing—to have to grapple with what seems to be the particular irony or paradox of America's origin: that the fullest manifestation of the Enlightenment ideal of individual autonomy and freedom came into being simultaneously with the codification and continuation of its opposite in the form of American slavery. *Hamilton* takes up this challenge in a novel way.

Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton* simultaneously turns this paradox, if you like, on its head and thrusts it into the forefront. The nature and runaway success of *Hamilton* demonstrate two truths: (1) the question of race and hypocrisy is a central part of the story of America's Founding, and (2) the Founding ideals are still capable of holding enormous sway on contemporary popular imagination and ideas about America.

In *Hamilton*, the issue of race isn't so much discussed in any typical fashion but cleverly made omnipresent by the use of African American and other nonwhite actors to portray the Founders. This device allows the issue to become more organically part of the question the audience considers as it experiences the performance. The show also brings out a number of important debates from the early republic that still resonate with the public today, although they are oversimplified by necessity. For example, in two memorable scenes Jefferson and Hamilton are presented engaging in debates about Hamilton's financial plan and America's military and foreign-policy neutrality. The debates are presented as "rap battles," with each character making his case in a rap and George Washington presiding as the judge. The combination of minority actors portraying well-known white historical figures with contemporary musical devices such as rap, which originated in minority communities but is widely consumed throughout society now, creates a form of historical anachronism that surprisingly helps to clarify rather than confuse the importance of the issue of race in the show. This combination, along with the caliber of the composition and performances, is a key part of *Hamilton*'s genius and success.

Yet, despite this novelty, the libretto and the actors present a variety of familiar archetypes of the Founders: a stately, regal George Washington (originally played by Christopher Jackson, Tony nominee for the role) operating above the fray of the other players; a scene-stealing, aloof King George III (originally played by Jonathan Groff, Tony nominee for the role), who can't seem to fathom the idea of the colonies wanting independence and is shocked that Washington would voluntarily give up his power ("I wasn't aware that was something a person could do. / I'm perplexed. / Are they gonna keep on replacing whoever's in charge?" [Miranda and McCarter 2016, 218]). There is a scheming, jealous Aaron Burr (originally played by Leslie Odom Jr., Tony winner for the role); and, of course, the lead character, Hamilton (originally played by the show's creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda, nominated for a Tony for his performance—losing, in a historically fitting turn of the Tony vote, to Odom as Burr), is presented as the model of the American immigrant success story: down-on-his-luck poor immigrant comes to America, works hard, pulls himself up by the bootstraps, and succeeds at the highest level.

The Jefferson and Madison characters are in some ways the most far afield from their typical popular conceptions. Jefferson (originally played by Daveed Diggs, Tony winner for the role) is a flamboyant, over-the-top, self-indulgent, bon vivant prodigy, and Madison is his cartoon, Disney-worthy, dopey sidekick. Here Miranda goes to great effort (and creative success) to create an opposite for his hero, Hamilton:

Jefferson the genius overachiever who got everything handed to him on a silver platter (by his slaves) versus Hamilton the genius overachiever who started with nothing and had to earn everything through hard work and sacrifice. And there is, of course, truth in Miranda's hammering of those stereotypes, even if he takes great historical liberties to create a Hamilton hero who is palatable to the popular audience of today. The whole over-the-top gambit could have failed if not for the bravura portrayal of Jefferson by rap artist and actor Daveed Diggs, who provides one of the strongest stage performances I have ever seen in any show anywhere. One of the few problems I have with the show as creative entertainment, rather than as popular history, is that Jefferson really overshadows Burr as Hamilton's nemesis, and one is left less interested in the ultimate "interview at Weehawken" between Hamilton and Burr and wanting the show instead to leave New York and follow Jefferson down to Washington for the eight years of his presidency. Maybe there can be a sequel. But Miranda's goal throughout the production is squarely on creating a new Hamilton who can serve as a popular hero of the Founding for today's generation.

Given Miranda's uses of the Founding and what he makes the audience consider, it isn't surprising that he goes to some lengths to make Hamilton fit into our more contemporary stereotypes of a "good guy," even though we are allowed the guilty enjoyment of Jefferson's character. (After all, who doesn't like Darth Vader more than Luke Skywalker?) In contemporary culture, it is just easier for us to admit liking the northern Founders more than the southern slave-owning Founders.¹ That is certainly a good thing, too. But as a culture that is continuously turning back to the Founding for guidance, we keep having to figure out how to deal with the conflict between the ideals we want to take from the Founding and the messiness of its reality.

One way we have done that in popular culture in recent years is by shifting the emphasis in heroic portrayals to the northern Founders. The two most prominent examples of this shift are *Hamilton* and the HBO miniseries *John Adams* (Tom Hooper, 2008), which was wildly popular upon its release in 2008. Like *Hamilton*, *John Adams* was heavily lauded, winning four Golden Globes and thirteen Emmys ("*John Adams*" n.d.). *John Adams* proved again the popularity of the Founding with mass audiences and its relevance to popular culture. And by presenting the political ideals of the Founding from the perspective primarily of John Adams and his family, the series allowed the audience to engage with those ideas without the heavy burden of trying to reconcile them with the discordant realities of slavery and numerous other injustices. Miranda reinforces this approach by focusing his Founding celebration on Hamilton, who was mostly clear of the stain of slavery, and by creating in him the ideal of the American immigrant success story (although in the process ignoring Hamilton's very real anti-immigrant and pro-elitist ideas).

1. I am giving Miranda a pass on his oversimplification of Hamilton's relationship with slavery and bigotry more generally; others address that issue in the voluminous literature that has sprung up in the wake of *Hamilton*. Here I focus more on how what he does can help us understand more about our current use and understanding of the Founding.

Thus, to some extent we see in popular culture today the emergence of yet another new Founding, one that separates out the Enlightenment political ideals that have long run through the Founding mythology from the issues of slavery, intolerance, and the nasty side of the story, which is treated as belonging almost to another society, largely the Virginian Founders.² This separation is in part a result of noble ideals (wanting to elevate in the historical and popular consciousness those less guilty of participating in great injustices), but it is also an intellectual dodge—shifting the hagiographic revelry to the (reconstructed) less-controversial figures at the expense of historical accuracy. More importantly, however, it muddies rather than clarifies the issues—avoiding tackling head on the irony, paradox, or whatever you want to call it at the heart of the Founding and of our historiographic and cultural relationship with the Founding.

The great question left unanswered by *Hamilton* is how those challenges should be handled going forward. Miranda's genius in casting minority actors in the archetypical white roles ensures that the question of race isn't ignored. But it also doesn't answer anything. Or does it? Does it show that the political Enlightenment ideals of the era are indeed color-blind (and gender-blind) by so effortlessly situating the events in the hands of minority performers? That would be an easy answer and probably the one favored by those sympathetic to the Founding as an historic ideal. I doubt it will persuade many critics in the academy who view the Founding more as a continuation of historical patriarchy and hierarchy. In that sense, *Hamilton* doesn't so much provide new answers as ask the important questions in a novel and creative way.

One problem of finding a “perfect fit” for the Founding in popular culture is that the divisions represented in history don't always fit well with our own popular preconceptions and divisions about issues today. The oversimplified reading of the Founding implicit in *Hamilton* places the Federalists (Hamilton, Adams, et al.) with the progressives today and the Democratic-Republicans (Jefferson, Madison, et al.) with the conservatives. Neither is a good fit, and the reading is a good example of how we project our own priors onto historical interpretation. This tendency is evident throughout *Hamilton*. Hamilton the character is clearly set up as the modernizing progressive of the lot, especially compared with Jefferson, despite the fact that the “real” Hamilton ended up being vastly more anti-immigrant and closer to our modern conceptions of a political enabler of crony capitalism than Jefferson.

In the three performances I saw with the original Broadway cast, one of the biggest reactions of the night came in response to the line exchanged between Hamilton and Lafayette: “immigrants; we get the job done” (“Yorktown” [Miranda

2. Here again I am restricting myself to popular representations. This trend is notably different from the contemporary development of the academic discourse on the Founding era, which has shifted the focus far more predominantly to the analysis of the issues such as economic inequality, slavery, and other forms of discrimination (prominently against women and Native Americans but also against other groups) and away from the Enlightenment ideas still prominent in popular representations.

and McCarter 2016, 121]). A great jab at anti-immigrant sentiments in the climate of the presidential election of 2016. But you could actually sense some cognitive dissonance from the crowd when Jefferson got the better of Hamilton in one debate by arguing that Hamilton's plans for more government involvement in financial markets would favor corrupt, greedy bankers over the little guy: *Uh, oh. Do we have to agree with the "bad guy"?* Of course, in historical "reality," none of those or any of the other topics was as cleanly cut as our contemporary perspectives and needs make them out to be. Both Hamilton and Jefferson would probably be considered radical libertarians today based on their government fiscal policies and radical conservative bigots on social issues. It is hard to imagine such an "accurate" portrayal winning many Tony Awards or commanding \$1,000 or more per ticket in the secondary market. *Hamilton* gives us much more of what we (as an audience) want at the necessary expense of historical accuracy.

If nothing else, it seems that *Hamilton* has shown us that the Founding is an endlessly malleable mythology that can and probably will continue to serve many purposes. Miranda's version of the Founding, with its emphasis on a positive immigrant role model and a brilliant portrayal of minorities in positions of historical leadership, accomplishes a number of noble goals. It creates a forceful repopularization of the positive and central role of immigration in American history and society at a time when that ideal is under significant attack. And it forces us to acknowledge that racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination kept the history books full of mostly white men for so long. In both of these respects, *Hamilton* is worthy of all its laurels and more. But we should tread cautiously in how easily we bend historical "fact" to serve even these worthy goals. "Fictionalized history can gain traction with alarming ease, spreading both factual errors and fundamental misconceptions: people tend to believe what they see" (Stern 2008). Hamilton, the historical figure, vigorously pursued an increasingly cronyist, elitist, antidemocratic, bigoted, anti-immigrant ideology at the height of his influence. What uses would another social agenda, if enabled with Miranda's talents, make of the veneration of Hamilton in their telling?

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