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THE HAMILTON CULT

HAS THE MUSICAL ECLIPSED THE MAN?

BY ROBERT SULLIVAN

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Has the celebrated musical eclipsed the man himself?

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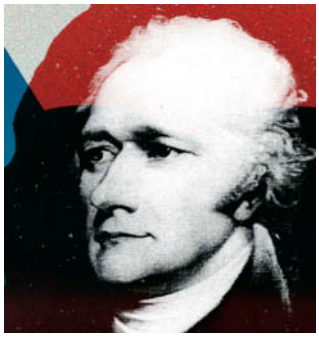
The problem with any attempt to debunk *Hamilton,* currently America's most beloved musical, starts with the history of the word *debunk.* It was coined by the writer W. E. Woodward in his 1923 novel *Bunk,* whose protagonist was notable for "taking the bunk out of things." Inspired by a newspaper article he had read about delousing stations for European soldiers, Woodward came up with *debunking.* As it happens, he almost never used the word again. But just a few years after his novel came out, Woodward published *George Washington: The Image and the Man,* in which he attempted to correct the record on the first president. Washington, he insisted, wasn't so much a saint or a military genius as a great businessman.



Woodward didn't necessarily intend to debunk Washington in his biography. His goal, he said, was to liven up history writing, which he considered "dull, insipid and far too scholarly in style." Not unlike the producers of *Hamilton,* he was trying to introduce the man in the street to a *real* Founding Father, whom he described as possessing a "typical captain of industry attitude." The 1929 crash was years away; it wasn't a slam. Indeed, coming from Woodward, who had himself worked in the financial industry and written something called *Watch Your Margin: An Insider Looks at Wall Street,* it was probably a compliment. Nonetheless, Woodward was "attacked," as the *New York Times* noted in his 1950 obituary, "by patriotic societies and history scholars."

He tried to disassociate himself from the word he had created. "As a matter of fact," Woodward wrote, "I am an admirer of George Washington, and there is not a debunking paragraph in the whole book." It didn't matter. When he published a glowing biography of Thomas Paine in 1945, the *Herald Tribune* headlined its review WOODWARD DEBUNKS THE DEBUNKERS OF TOM PAINE. And in his memoirs, which also appeared more than two decades after his novel, he was still bemoaning his unhappy invention: "If I had it to do over again I would hesitate a long time before creating the word 'debunk,' and would make an effort to find another way to express the idea."

All of which is to say that the past is complicated, and explaining it is not just a trick, but a gamble. Sometimes—especially in the wake of HBO's *John Adams* (2008)—history can seem like a sequence of fan-produced biopics, memorializing every last Founding Father (as opposed to Mothers, though Abigail at least got some screen time). Washington, of course, has been celebrated from the moment he took command of the rebel army in 1776. Alexander Hamilton, a pioneer of such mundane aspects of American life as the waterworks, the industrial park, and the debt structure

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Illustrations by Jimmy Turrell. This page: source painting of Alexander Hamilton (detail) by John Trumbull courtesy the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

that simultaneously funded a federal militia and the expansion of a newborn empire, is a less likely folk idol.

Yet now he is making up for lost laudatory time. Lin-Manuel Miranda's Tony-winning musical comes at a moment when America wants to believe it is (to use a term that made little sense at the beginning of the Obama presidency and is even more nonsensical now) post-racial. To embrace *Hamilton* is to embrace a liberal outlook on the world that even conservatives can tolerate, and sometimes vice versa. Out with welfare cheats, in with bootstrapping immigrants who don't depend on the state for food stamps or health care. "Here's a story that talks about American history and the ideals of American democracy," a Rockefeller Foundation executive told the *New York Times* last October. Here was, she continued, "an immigrant who is impoverished initially and shows through perseverance and grit what he can achieve, in a vernacular that speaks to young people, written by a product of New York public education."

The Rockefeller Foundation went even further, announcing a plan to bring 20,000 New York City eleventh graders, predominantly from low-income families, to see *Hamilton*. The organization also launched a project with the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History to develop "educational programming for students and teachers designed around the *Hamilton* experience." Meanwhile, politicians from every part of the ideological spectrum—Bernie Sanders, Bill and Hillary Clinton, Lynne and Dick Cheney—are all for the show, having voted in some cases by repeat attendance. So are such celebrities as Beyoncé, who liked King George's walk, and Lena Dunham, who lauded the show's pedagogical firepower. "Love to hate things that others adore but Hamilton on Broadway is unimpeachably perfect. Wept, laughed, raged," she tweeted. In a subsequent tweet, she added: "If every kid in America could see Hamilton they would thirst for historical knowledge and then show up to vote."

In the face of such euphoria, who's going to nitpick without feeling sheepish, let alone ineffectual? Well, there's William Hogeland, a historian who has written extensively about Hamilton as both founding financier and post–Revolutionary War military commander. "I get trapped in this corner," he says. He expects that fans of the musical will view him as a "sort of naysayer, trying to debunk something about *Hamilton*. But you can't debunk a Broadway play! What people take away from it is this almost cultic love of this guy they don't know anything about. If you knew what he was really about, would you still be so in love with him? That, I think, is the question."

Back in 2002, just after the attack on the World Trade Center, Hogeland became interested in the relationship between crowd violence and terror: how did leaders persuade their followers to embrace violence, whether used against the state or on its behalf? This thinking brought him to a consideration of the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, a mass protest in western Pennsylvania that was eventually put down by federal militia. Hogeland sold a publisher on the idea, proposing a narrative history of the rebellion, which Washington and Hamilton quashed at the head of 12,000 troops.

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It seemed like an auspicious moment for a post–Revolutionary War book. The Founders were hot, as were hefty narratives produced by the likes of Ron Chernow and David McCullough, both journalists turned historians. "I thought I'd ride on their coattails," Hogeland says. Another thought that occurred to him: "This would be a great movie!"

It would be still, although Washington would be a grumpy supporting player and Hamilton the star, since the august general turned back at Bedford, Pennsylvania, leaving the army in the hands of his treasury secretary. (The secretary of war, Henry Knox, was off dealing with some matters of personal finance in Maine, where he was, like Washington, a real-estate speculator and landlord.) In a letter dated September 20, 1794, Hamilton urged Thomas Mifflin, the governor of Pennsylvania, to strike against the rebels before the army even showed up—he should "act against the Insurgents with all possible activity and Energy." Hamilton continued: "The advanced season leaves no time to spare, and it is extremely important to afford speedy protection to the well disposed, and to prevent the preparation and accumulation of greater means of Resistance, and the extension of Combinations to abet the Insurrection." In Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* (2004), the army's conquest of the Pennsylvania hinterlands is presented as a necessary move by the "typically decisive" hero. His opponents, meanwhile, are crude Scotch-Irish frontiersmen "who regarded liquor as a beloved refreshment."

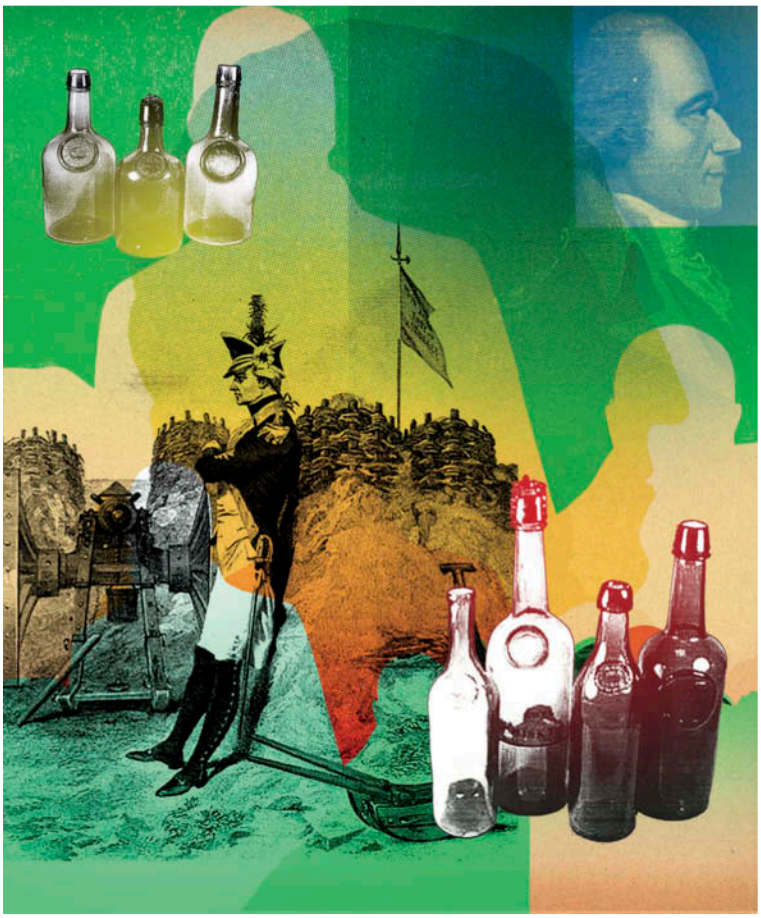
In *The Whiskey Rebellion* (2006), Hogeland views them as something else: Americans with

legitimate grievances. "Contrary to what many historians suggest," he says, "the Whiskey Rebellion can't be understood as a last gasp of anti-federalism." After all, the rebels weren't against taxes. In most cases, they weren't against the federal government: indeed, many were veterans who had fought to install that government in the first place. What they wanted was "equal taxation"—i.e., progressive taxes that would impose a lesser burden on the poor. Herman Husband, one of the protesters that Hamilton and Washington were so intent on locking up, was a seventy-six-year-old proponent of what we would now call social security. He was thrown in jail in Philadelphia for treason and sedition, released by a judge and jury a year later; he soon died from pneumonia exacerbated by the long walk home through the mountains. It was men like Husband that Hamilton was thinking of when he declared, after the alleged insurgents were languishing in jail, that there was "no road to despotism more sure or more to be dreaded than that which begins at anarchy."

For Hogeland, the moral of the story is harder to discern. "In the end," he says, "I have a lot of sympathy for what the Whiskey Rebels were reacting to, and for what they were trying to achieve. The tragedy is that violence became the only way either side could imagine confronting the issues. It's a painful reflection on human choices—or the lack of choices." The Whiskey Rebellion gets short shrift in *Hamilton*. (It was mentioned, if not exactly lingered over, in the off-Broadway version of the play.) But to be fair, this is entertainment, not a textbook—and jailing an old man (and a Quaker!) for his pro-entitlement politics is something of a distraction when you're celebrating the guy on the ten-dollar bill.

A lot depends on luck: say, being in the right Caribbean countinghouse at the right time. But if you want your book to be a best-seller, a miniseries, a Broadway show—if you want to have celebrities tweeting you—then you must come up with answers to the questions posed by history. Answering questions about Alexander Hamilton, or even raising them, has always been a complicated affair. But in post-9/11 America, it was harder than ever, since Hamilton's cheering section was largely composed of conservative thinkers.

Hamilton's reputation had, of course, spent years in the doghouse. Much of this earlier debunking was inspired in part by the husband-and-wife historians Mary and Charles Beard, who viewed the ideology of the American Revolution as a confluence of economic interests. The Beards didn't despise the Founders: it was more a matter of taking them off their mythic pedestals than cutting them down to nothing, while forcefully reminding readers that the Constitution, however deathless a document, was also the work of a "small and active group of men immediately interested through their personal possessions in the outcome of their labors." But their influence was pervasive, extending even to W. E. Woodward. Just a decade after Woodward's attempt to bring George Washington down to earth, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Dealers were extolling the agrarian Thomas Jefferson over Hamilton. Congress paid for construction



to begin on the Jefferson Memorial in 1938, even as they used Hamiltonian big-government solutions to manage the Great Depression.

Hamilton love in government circles remained the exception for a long time, although reporters noticed that he was slowly creeping back in. James Reston, the Establishment columnist at the *New York Times*, advised Ronald Reagan to act in a Hamiltonian manner, despite the Gipper's vaunted distaste for centralization and monetary tampering. Donald Regan, the Merrill Lynch veteran who served as Reagan's treasury secretary, was spotted with a portrait of Hamilton in his office.

It was only during the Clinton years, however, that Hamilton's star truly began to rise again. In 1997, a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed by

Source engraving of Hamilton as an artillery officer during the American Revolution © North Wind Pictures Archive/Alamy; source painting of Hamilton (detail) by William Weaver © Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, MA/Bridgeman Images

David Brooks and William Kristol praised the first treasury secretary as a proponent of "national-greatness conservatism." Richard Brookhiser's *Alexander Hamilton: American,* published in 1999, was not made into a musical—but it was made into an exhibition at the New-York Historical Society, glorifying Hamilton's financial genius while briskly dismissing his critics. (The show, including a good

many documents from the Gilder Lehrman Institute, is still making the rounds.) Brookhiser, a senior editor at *National Review,* later recalled what had attracted him to the iconic figure:

> Alexander Hamilton's story, besides offering an irresistible arc, from the West Indies to the ten-dollar bill to Weehawken, was a story of making a revolution real. For all the brilliance of his generation, only a handful of the founders understood modern finance; if Hamilton had not taken charge of the treasury when he did, America would have become the first banana republic, only the term, in a nod to our climate, would have been *maple republic.*

Five years later, Chernow's biography raced to the top of the bestseller list. Given his résumé—he had written books on free-market triumphalists John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan—Chernow was the perfect Hamilton reputation-reviver. David Brooks, the neo-Hamiltonian-in-chief, lauded the book in a *Times* column. He would later draw a parallel between Hamilton and the other Roosevelt, whose trust-busting and vehement anti-corporate rhetoric struck him as beside the point. "I don't deny that many business and Wall Street types would like to capture the system for their own benefit," Brooks conceded. "As Theodore Roosevelt observed, every new social arrangement begets its own kind of sin, which has to be punished by law. But as Roosevelt and his great hero Alexander Hamilton understood, corruption is the price we pay for economic freedom, and the benefits of that freedom vastly outweigh the costs."

The Founding Fathers are on record as worrying about how their deeds and actions might be recounted by posterity. "The history of our revolution will be one continued lie from one end to the other," John Adams complained. "The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electric rod smote the earth and out sprang George Washington." By the mid-1790s, Revolutionary War veterans already paraded in separate groups, unable to agree on the definition of "the glorious cause."

The Founders were right to worry. Disagreements over not just the substance of American history but how to teach it have continued to the present day. One of the liveliest battles occurred in 1994, right at the dawn of the Hamilton revival, and began with a surprise attack by Lynne Cheney, who was eager to take down a forthcoming set of national history standards. Her *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, which appeared on October 20, was entitled "The End of History."

Prior to publishing her denunciation, Cheney had been the chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), where she spearheaded a 1992 report on the decline of education in the United States—particularly the teaching of history. The fear of what conservatives called relativism was in the air. Liberals, in their view, were replacing facts with politically correct opinions. "We would wish for our children that their decisions be informed not by the wisdom of the moment," declared Cheney in the report, "but by the wisdom of the ages."

There was bipartisan agreement that American education needed help, a sentiment that had already moved President George H. W. Bush to call for reform. A national standards council was convened in 1991, cochaired by Charlotte Crabtree, the director of the National Center for History in the Schools (N.C.H.S.) at UCLA, and Gary Nash, a distinguished historian and professor at the same university. It included an impres-

Source photographs of *Hamilton* being performed at the Grammy Awards (details), 2016 © Theo Wargo/Getty Images

sive (and inclusive) group of educators and scholars, with Cheney's office reportedly suggesting many of the twenty-eight members.

The N.C.H.S. had been funded in 1988 by the NEH, under Cheney—indeed, she cited it as one of her accomplishments. While she had left the NEH in 1993, moving on to the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, and the board of directors of Lockheed-Martin, a military contractor, Crabtree and Nash were nevertheless surprised and appalled by her ambush on October 20. "Imagine an outline for the teaching of American history in which George Washington makes only a fleeting appearance and is never described as our first president," she wrote. Not long after, in a book called *Telling the Truth,* Cheney redoubled her assault on the guidelines, describing them as the "most egregious example to date of encouraging students to take a benign view of—or totally overlook—the failings of other cultures while being hypercritical of the one in which they live." She counted up the mentions of the Ku Klux Klan (seventeen), Senator Joe McCarthy and McCarthyism (nineteen), and the Great Depression (twenty-five). Most upsetting to people who agreed with her assessment was that the standards presented American history as "grim and gloomy."

A few days after Cheney's op-ed appeared, Rush Limbaugh was ripping out pages from a textbook on the air, warning parents everywhere: "Here's Paul Revere. He's gone! Here's George Washington as president. Look at all these pages in this book. He's gone!" Limbaugh called the standards that Cheney had first set in motion and was now decrying "a bunch of P.C. crap."

The two sides eventually drew up their forces for an epochal clash on *Dateline*. Cheney repeated her claims about the corrupt N.C.H.S., which had, she said, enlisted the foot soldiers of political correctness—more specifically, "various political groups such as African-American organizations and Native American groups." Senator Bob Dole was shown speaking to veterans about the standards. "This is wrong," Dole said, "and it threatens us as surely as any foreign power ever has."

The standards, it should be said, were voluntary. They offered ways of presenting material, analyzing it, rather than mandating any particular recipe for teaching history. As a *Times* editorial noted, for every suggested exercise that would put John D. Rockefeller on trial for his business practices (particularly irritating to Cheney), there was an exercise celebrating the increase of wealth and freedom. In all, there were 2,600 sample assignments, though if you tuned in to *Dateline* that evening in 1995, you might have thought that this huge expenditure of work was a kind of Ponzi scheme, as Jane Pauley quizzed Gary Nash:

> PAULEY: How should children be taught about George Washington? What should they be taught?
> NASH: They should understand how Washington emerged out of the planter aristocracy of Virginia, and they should understand that it was a slave-owning aristocracy.
> PAULEY: Was he a great man?
> NASH: He certainly was a great man.
> PAULEY: You mentioned slave-owning first.
> NASH: Well, he was a great man, no doubt of it.
> PAULEY: But do we need to weave America's sad and long history of racism and slavery throughout the entire timeline of American history?
> NASH: Yes, we do. Because it happened.

THE FOUNDERS WERE RIGHT TO WORRY. DISAGREEMENTS OVER NOT JUST THE SUBSTANCE OF AMERICAN HISTORY BUT HOW TO TEACH IT HAVE CONTINUED TO THE PRESENT DAY

For the next two years, Nash and Crabtree explained, debated, and refined the standards, making changes under a volley of criticism from Congress, most of it from the right. Some of these critics probably had only a hazy idea of American history. That couldn't be said of Nash, the author of a dozen books, including landmark studies of race and the Revolutionary era. Yet his approach as a historian was unlikely to impress his opponents. In *The Unknown American Revolution* (2005), he argues that the War for Independence as we know it was the culmination of numerous smaller-scale insurrections throughout the 1760s and 1770s. There were resistance movements by tenant farmers, urban mechanics and artisans, seamen, slaves, women, and Native Americans—i.e., the lower classes, with which the elite eventually joined forces to throw off the British crown.

To put it another way: Nash's book, a synthesis of much of his work, is the opposite of those Great Man tomes that rise like hot-air balloons up the bestseller list. It shows a sequence of revolutions—what the author calls "unknowing rehearsals for revolt and radical reform." It features not just a handful of plantation-owning Virginians and well-heeled New Englanders but sailmakers in New York, oystermen in Boston, backcountry farmers in North Carolina, and even women: Magdalen Valleau, a Huguenot, led colonial land riots in New Jersey as early as the 1740s. Crucially, the book also maintains that the reluctance on the part of Southern plantation owners to break

with England was overcome by their fear of slave uprisings. (Indeed, it was Lord Dunmore, Virginia's royal governor, who offered to emancipate and arm the state's slave population in November 1775; what he called his Ethiopian Regiment wore sashes with the inscription LIBERTY TO SLAVES.) And revolutions kept happening, even after the Treaty of Paris officially ended the armed conflict with England in 1783. This, ultimately, seems the point of standards like those proposed by the N.C.H.S.: to see history in flux, as opposed to static and mere biography.

Meanwhile, how did the actual history standards pan out? In 1995, a *Times* reporter visited several New York City high schools in an effort to answer that very question. "Where's the black man?" a student at a high school in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant asked. (The student was looking for Crispus Attucks, the black man who died in the Boston Massacre, and this was in pre-gentrified Bed-Stuy.) At Stuyvesant High School, in Manhattan, students debated Alexander Hamilton's vision of the nascent American republic. "Hamilton protected an infant democracy," a girl named Christina argued. "He protected the rich," a girl named Elaine shot back. At the end of the debate, the students arguing for Hamilton just barely lost.

When the American colonists had won the war—thanks to, among other things, French naval assistance and Mexican financing—their rough confederation was a fiscal mess. Most state budgets were deeply in the red; even some state boundaries were a contested blur. It was Hamilton who found a way to solder the republic together. He had mastered the art of finance, taking cues from the British Empire and in particular from the fiscal strategies of Robert Walpole, prime minister from 1721 to 1742 and a pioneer of the so-called sinking fund. In essence, the sinking fund that Hamilton designed paid off debt through bond issues, which in turn encouraged speculation. To put it another way, he built a government based on debt assumption—with, incredibly, the support of George Washington, the loan-hating president who insisted that "no pecuniary consideration is more urgent than the regular redemption and discharge of the public debt."

This is the stuff—the arcane maneuverings of public finance and bond markets—that William Hogeland tackled in *Founding Finance* (2012). To some extent, he hoped to debunk the idea that he was out to vilify Hamilton. The man was a genius, he argued, a great financier. Bonds, not duels and mistresses, are what made him tick—although bonds are seemingly meager material for a musical. Even less heartening, at least for a contemporary Broadway audience, is that Hamilton had little interest in paying off these debts.

Instead, Hogeland argues, Hamilton, under the tutelage of Robert Morris, was trying to increase the debt. This was his strategy for growing an empire out of a clutch of bankrupt states: assuming a federal debt structure. "His genius, his brilliance, was not in paying off the debt but in funding it," says Hogeland. "And yet the very people who know that he is famous for funding and assumption will tell you, 'Oh, Hamilton knew he had to pay the debt.' How come we keep saying these things when they are the opposite of what he was trying to do?"

THE WHISKEY REBELLION WAS A PROTEST AGAINST THIS NEW FEDERAL STRUCTURE, THE FIRST RESISTANCE AGAINST A NEW SYSTEM THAT REMINDED PEOPLE OF THE SYSTEM THAT THEY HAD JUST BEEN FIGHTING

The Whiskey Rebellion was a protest against this new federal structure, the first resistance against a new system that reminded people of the system that they had just been fighting. Farmers in western Pennsylvania, just beyond the Appalachian Mountains, shipped their grain by mule to the East, often converting it to the more transportable form of whiskey. Hamilton taxed the whiskey at the point of production, using the revenue to make interest payments to government bondholders who did not themselves pay taxes on what they earned. It was, plain and simple, a redistribution of wealth. Yet even Hamilton was unnerved by the resulting frenzy, if only for how it looked politically. In the Pittsburgh area, citizens put up liberty poles, using the very same iconography that had been so effective during the Revolution—and once again, it was meant to protest taxation by faraway powers, though now the powers were closer than England.

The armed force that marched on Pittsburgh was bigger than anything the Americans had mustered during the war. It was commanded predominantly by officers from wealthy Eastern families, while the troops were poor and often rowdy—Hamilton himself patrolled camp for miscreants. What had happened to the Continentals? The veterans of the war against King George had barely made it home to places like western Pennsylvania. And once they arrived, they were often paupers. "It would shock Americans to learn what Hamilton did to soldiers at the end of the war," Nash says. "He paid officers five years' salary on retirement. Do you know what he paid the soldiers? Nothing." Actually, the federal

government did offer them something: back pay in scrip, meaning titles to land in the West. But the soldiers, destitute after so many years in the field, sold the titles to speculators for food.

Today you can retrace the route of the army from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. Hamilton, like Hannibal, was tasked with moving thousands of men through cold, wet, treacherously rugged mountains. Along the way, the treasury secretary received instructions from Washington, the commander in chief insisting that the troops not steal from the rural communities they passed, many of which had themselves been labeled insurgent. In Bedford, now a little town off the highway between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, there is still a plaque marking the location where Washington slept "en route to quell the Whiskey Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania." Three thousand soldiers marched through the place, trailing a candlelit transparency with Washington's image on one side and the words WOE TO ANARCHY on the other.

Especially when you drive through them, especially when you cross over from east to west, you see that the lands beyond the Allegheny Mountains were themselves resources to Washington, Hamilton, and Jefferson.* All three agreed that they were building a North American empire—they just disagreed on how to go about it. Washington, for example, hoped to connect the region to the Potomac via an elaborate system of canals. ("Hearing little else for two days from the persuasive tongue of the great man," a Mount Vernon visitor wrote in 1785, "I confess completely infected me with canal mania.") Indeed, the old general was making notes on land investments as he traveled west to stamp out anarchy.

By the end of October 1794, the Whiskey Rebellion had collapsed. The federal troops met no resistance, and contented themselves with arresting a couple dozen men, such as Herman Husband, and bringing them back to Philadelphia for trial. In a sense, though, the insurrection—which was a kind of class war—never ended. "A lot of people in the run-up to the Revolution thought that inequality should be a big issue," Nash says. "That was pretty much an axiom of eighteenth-century reasoning."

But the Revolution didn't solve those issues. And if you talk to people along the route that Hamilton and the army took in 1794, you could almost believe that the Whiskey Rebellion, which had everything to do with geography and natural resources and social stratification and almost nothing to do with the Great Man theory of history, is still in progress. You learn about communities of Eastern Europeans who came to work in the mines and the steel and coke mills, before the owners began boarding them up. You hear about jobs that started leaving in the 1960s, and really haven't returned, anywhere west of the Alleghenies, to a largely lower-income white population. Once these people swore allegiance to John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers, and until Ronald Reagan's ascent, they might have voted for the party of Jefferson—but now they are as likely to vote for Trump as for Clinton. "At some point, the county turned red," says Christine Buckelew, the president of the Fayette County Historical Society. She comes from a long line of farmers, who, she recalls, thought Baltimore was far away.

As far as *Hamilton* goes, it seems important to note that George Washington loved the theater. In 1790, when the federal government was based briefly in New York City—this was when Congress met on Wall Street, and the executive mansion occupied a site at what is now the Manhattan pier of the Brooklyn Bridge—the theater district was near City Hall. Washington showed up at all the plays, once even laughing in public, a major event for this most reticent of politicians. (He was the Samuel Beckett of his day, very big on silent pauses.) He certainly believed in the theater as an instrument of edification. "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country," a line that we attribute to an about-to-be-hanged Nathan Hale, was likely borrowed from *Cato* (1713), a play by Joseph Addison that Washington had staged for the troops, endeavoring to tie the political moment to a classical past by aligning the war with what he saw as the greatness of Rome.

In our current moment, we are watching politicians align themselves with the greatness of a really great Broadway musical—the first woman to be nominated for a major party's presidential bid quoted from the play in her acceptance speech, after buying out the entire theater for a fund-raiser a few weeks before. Just as interesting is the crusade to get high-school students to *Hamilton*. It has been reported

* *The relationship between popular unrest and natural resources—what might be called geological politics—is an underlying theme of this election season. The states crucial to any electoral victory for Donald Trump, meaning Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, contain some of the world's largest deposits of coal and iron. On a similar note, the European Union, from which Britain will be making its slow-motion exit, was originally brought about by the creation of a common market for French and German coal. Ukraine, yet another bone of geopolitical contention, happens to be a preeminent coal producer. All of which is to say that this humble fossilized fuel, in use for at least three millennia, still has the power to make or break regional economies and sway megalomaniacal statesmen. Geography matters in other ways, too. Vermont, a strategic north–south passageway between the United States and Canada, had to be handled with kid gloves by Hamilton, who negotiated its peaceful entry into the fledgling nation in 1791. The secessionist impulse—what its proponents call Vexit—has never entirely disappeared from the Green Mountain State. I spoke with one of them, Rob Williams, a historian and the publisher of the* Vermont Independent, *who saw* Hamilton last year. *"Oh, I loved it," he said. "I thought it was tremendous propaganda."*

that at the very first performance of the play, at New York City's Public Theater, Lesley S. Herrmann, executive director of the Gilder Lehrman Institute, turned to the person next to her—who was Ron Chernow—and said, "We have to get this in the hands of kids."

Get it into the hands of kids they did, as I have already noted. Without a doubt, the play has interested young people in the Revolutionary era, a great thing, and scholars have pointed out that *Hamilton* is packed with historical detail, also pretty great. There are, to be sure, some factual pratfalls. Ironically, given its multicultural casting, there is still what Lyra D. Monteiro, a historian at Rutgers, has called a "truly damning omission." "Despite the proliferation of black and brown bodies onstage," she writes, "not a single enslaved or free person of color exists as a character in this play." *Hamilton* depicts an era in which, for example, 14 percent of all New Yorkers were black, the majority of them slaves—and yet, Monteiro notes, "one could easily assume that slavery does not exist" in its universe. But if you say these things, you feel like a churl, defiantly going up against Lynne Cheney's precepts: emphasize the positives in American history, stick with the Great Men, and so forth.

I recently met a teacher who took his students to *Hamilton*. They were excited, of course. Who wouldn't be? The Rockefeller Foundation sponsored their visit specifically because they were from low-income neighborhoods—places where they could ill afford tickets to a Broadway show, let alone the price tag for Hillary Clinton's fund-raising performance in July. (For $100,000, donors got two premium seats and attended a wrap party with the candidate afterward.) They boned up on their Hamiltonian history, told their friends and family, got dressed up. They each paid the sum of ten dollars—a Hamilton—since their benefactors called for this rudimentary investment. When they arrived at the theater, they stood in line and received their tickets. Then the scalpers descended, offering the students hundreds of dollars apiece.

"I could see them looking at the scalpers and looking at me," the teacher recalls. "What was I supposed to say? I just said that if you're going to sell your ticket, then you're not going to be able to discuss the show." None of the students sold their tickets. Touched by their idealism and disturbed by this curbside reminder of the relationship between speculation and economic inequality, the teacher led the group into the theater. "The play's about how anybody can make it," he says. "But it's not true."

The show, he stresses, was great: an amazing spectacle. On this point, Hogeland is in complete agreement. His objections, after all, have more to do with historical emphasis.

"I think the musical is theatrically brilliant," he says. "But it's just the icing on the cake of this industry that's existed for decades now, trying to promote Hamilton as something other than what he actually was." The duel with Burr, his relationship with his wife and his mistress—these are rich material for a narrative biography, Hogeland concedes, but in terms of Hamilton's impact on the formation and the very nature of the United States, they are little more than footnotes. "Accidents," he calls them. They lead us to overlook what Hamilton thought was his own purpose in life. "The liberals and people on the left who are lauding Hamilton because he was an active-government guy—they just aren't getting what was important about him. It was the intertwining of military force and wealth concentration as almost the definition of nationhood. I think if you asked him, he would say, 'Yeah, that's it, that's the key, that's what I know how to do, and no one else knew how to do it.' That's his genuine legacy. We just have to sort out how we feel about it."

Art is transformative. It can make people feel great—about themselves, about another person, about a character in a Broadway musical or some aspect of the thing we refer to as America. *Hamilton,* as we have seen, has made history come alive, to use the overused phrase. But wait—who said history was dead? Sure, people try to kill it all the time, intentionally or unintentionally, by obscuring it or by rendering it unconscious, bludgeoning it with dates and names and (sometimes the bluntest instrument of all) facts. By now, however, the parade of Great Men reminds me of nothing so much as the boldface names in an old gossip column, a dying form, by the way, that tends to service players who already know their names but like to hear them again. History is alive only when it is in dialogue with the present. I would argue—and I am certainly not alone—that history is less like something you learn than something you do, that you take your part in, a terrifying notion if you are inclined toward the status quo.

The American Revolution, the armed military conflict with England, is long over. But in our contemporary environment of extreme economic inequality, the unsung Stamp Act protesters or Tea Party rowdies sound less singular, less distant; they are like actors, not in a play but in a pageant whose outcome was and is beyond their imagining, constantly rewriting itself. And yet their concerns are ours, down to the last indignant detail. "Is it equitable that 99, rather 999, should suffer for the Extravagance or Grandeur of one," lamented a New York newspaper in 1765, "especially when it is considered that men frequently owe their Wealth to the impoverishment of their Neighbors?" Neither Hamilton nor *Hamilton* will answer that question to our satisfaction. If this current election tells us anything, it is that the Whiskey Rebellion never truly ended, and while the soundtrack is always changing, the curtain may never come down. ■