



## Does ‘Hamilton’ Have All the Answers for U.S. Foreign Policy?

Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig

July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020

**Emma Ashford:** Happy Fourth of July, Matt! I celebrated in the now-traditional way: watching *Hamilton* on repeat and enjoying the Founding Fathers singing all the catchy songs. How was your holiday weekend?

**Matthew Kroenig:** It was good. I watched a program about another great American, the documentary *The Last Dance* about Michael Jordan’s final NBA season. *Hamilton* is still on my family’s to-do list.

**EA:** Glad to hear it! Alexander Hamilton has some ideas I think you should seriously consider. For example: his opposition to regime change. As he puts it in the musical: “If we try to fight in every revolution in the world, we never stop. Where do we draw the line?”

**MK:** Let’s come back to that later if that’s OK? Sticking with July Fourth for a moment, we had many people this year saying they didn’t feel like celebrating because the United States is so flawed. And Donald Trump’s speech at Mount Rushmore was widely criticized as divisive. I don’t get it. Even though we have our problems in the United States, this is still the greatest country on Earth. Americans can work on our imperfections even as we celebrate our strengths. And Trump’s speech was mostly a pretty standard speech about American exceptionalism.

**EA:** Did we watch different speeches? I’ve never seen a president celebrate the Fourth of July before by calling on Americans to fight against “far-left fascism” that’s “designed to overthrow the American Revolution.” You don’t think that kind of hyperbole is divisive?

**MK:** That part was direct, but other parts of the speech praised American achievement and mentioned Martin Luther King Jr. and Frederick Douglass on themes of equality. And it is a fact that there is a threat to our traditional liberal principles from a radical left that is becoming increasingly illiberal and intolerant.

**EA:** I don’t doubt that his language plays well on Fox News and with the president’s base. But the illiberalism we’re talking about is a tiny minority of a minority here.

**MK:** I think it is more mainstream; many are now cowering in fear of being “canceled” by woke mobs. The *New York Times*, for example, fired editors for running an op-ed by a sitting U.S. senator expressing a view shared by much of the country.

**EA:** I think they mostly fired that editor for not doing his job. He didn't even read a controversial op-ed before publication!

**MK:** Since when is a controversial op-ed a problem?

**EA:** Look, I'll grant that there's an illiberal undercurrent in some of today's debates that I don't much like. But the right to free speech includes both your right to speak and the right of others to criticize you for it.

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He accused his critics of working to "defile the memory" of the founding generation. But you've got Attorney General Bill Barr actively undermining the rule of law to help the President's cronies, and the president calling for peaceful protesters to be arrested. If that's not illiberalism, I don't know what is.

But we're way off topic. To paraphrase *Hamilton* again, can we get back to foreign policy? Please?

The big news this week is Hong Kong.

**MK:** Indeed, as Americans were celebrating freedom, the people of Hong Kong were losing theirs. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is really baring its teeth. It criminalizes so-called subversion and sedition, meaning that effectively all protests could be banned. There have been arrests, while activist groups have disbanded, and some dissidents have fled the country.

To make matters worse, in addition to the national security law, there were reports this week here in *Foreign Policy* and elsewhere that China is forcibly sterilizing its Muslim Uighur population and selling their hair abroad. Usually, comparisons to Nazi Germany are way overblown, but the CCP is doing its best to make them relevant.

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**EA:** You'd think they'd at least try to hide their repression. But at the end of the day, there's not much the U.S. government can really do to prevent human rights abuses on Chinese territory. And the most obvious options aren't likely in this administration. There's trade restrictions, which Trump isn't keen to use now he has his "deal" with China. And there's a proposal in Congress to open up immigration to those fleeing Hong Kong. But it's hard to see how the administration reconciles that with its opposition to almost all immigration.

**MK:** The U.S. policy to revoke Hong Kong's special economic privileges makes good sense, as would allowing refugees from the territory. And while there are limits to what Washington can do directly, the United States can use China's overreach to its advantage. Many are outraged by China's human rights abuses. For example, the Free World Commission, a group of legislators from leading democracies, issued a joint statement condemning the national security law.

Australia ended its extradition treaty with the city and has offered residency to thousands of people from Hong Kong. And the U.K. has provided a path to citizenship for up to 3 million people there. Previously, countries were trying to stay neutral, but China's aggressive actions are provoking a counterbalancing coalition against it.

**It's hard to see how the Trump administration reconciles welcoming those fleeing Hong Kong with its opposition to almost all immigration.**

**EA:** This is good! I'm particularly thrilled to see that the Conservative Party government in Britain was able to overcome its anti-immigration tendencies in this case, given the historic obligation that Britain owes to the citizens of Hong Kong.

But the absence of any concrete promises from the United States is notable. You can't believe that this administration will honestly open up immigration to fleeing Hong Kongers? The Hong Kong Safe Harbor Act, which offers Hong Kong residents refugee status, is likely headed to the president's desk for signature soon. But given his prior stances on refugees—and his unwillingness to challenge Xi Jinping on other human rights abuses—I'm not so sure he won't veto it.

**MK:** It's possible, but the president has surprised me before with his tough actions on China. It took courage to push back on China's unfair trade practices at a time when everyone was getting rich doing business there.

And there is value in getting major partners aligned on the China threat. Hong Kong is the near-term crisis, but China will present a long-term challenge to the global economic system, to U.S. alliances in Europe and Asia, and to freedom and democracy around the world.

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**EA:** But this administration is even trying to end skilled immigration. They just announced that all students whose classes cannot be held in person due to the coronavirus will have their visas revoked and must return home.

**MK:** Darn, we were just having such a good fight and now we will have to agree. Brain drain is one of America's superpowers. There is an illegal immigration problem that needs to be fixed, but the United States should continue to recruit the best and the brightest from around the world to study at American universities and to entice them to stay and contribute to the country's economic and cultural dynamism.

But agreement is boring. Let's get back to regime change.

**EA:** Well, Harvard University's Stephen M. Walt has a great [column up this week here at \*Foreign Policy\*](#) in which he argues that the U.S. response to COVID-19 pretty definitively proves that if Washington can't manage its own problems, it's not capable of successfully engaging in regime change. He's got a point.

**MK:** Walt and others have overlearned the lessons of the Iraq War. Yes, invading a country, overthrowing the government, deploying more than 100,000 troops, and staying for a decade should only be undertaken with extreme caution, if at all. But regime change (pressuring

autocratic regimes, promoting democracy and human rights, etc.) should still be an important tool in the U.S. foreign-policy toolkit.

**EA:** You're the professor, not me. So you're aware of the academic research on regime change that shows that it's almost never successful for a simple reason: It's hard to impose a government from abroad that can be both accountable to the population and responsive to a foreign sponsor. That's why the governments Washington imposes usually end in disaster, whether it's the shah's fall and the 1979 Iranian Revolution, or Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki fomenting sectarianism in Iraq. And Walt's point that if the U.S. government can't even create a coronavirus testing infrastructure at home, then it probably can't run a different country, is even more persuasive.

I'm more open to debate on the peaceful forms of democracy promotion: helping activists, providing technology, etc. But is there even a single successful case of U.S.-led regime change through force?

**MK:** Let's see. Germany. Japan. And it depends on how you define success. The Iraq War was costly, but I am glad Saddam Hussein is no longer in power.

**EA:** You're right about Germany and Japan, but it was under very different circumstances: the end of a world war, with multilateral occupation by all the world's key advanced powers. And those states were already coherent nation-states with good, solid institutions. Regime change might be possible in those cases, but why would the United States want to pursue it? If the only places regime change can succeed are advanced industrialized states, that's hardly helpful. Unless you want to engage in regime change in Norway to make sure that Trump finally gets the Norwegian refugees he wants so badly?

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