



What Hamilton reveals about climate change denial

Girish Shahane

July 23rd, 2020

The musical *Hamilton*, available to stream on Disney+ Hotstar, has garnered a bagful of Tony awards for its creator Lin-Manuel Miranda and resurrected the renown of its protagonist Alexander Hamilton. The youngest of the seven major founding fathers of the US, Hamilton was the only immigrant among them. An illegitimate child born on the Caribbean island of Nevis, he fought valiantly in crucial battles during the War of Independence, rose to become aide-de-camp to George Washington at the age of 20 and wrote 51 essays defending the new republic's constitution. These remain key texts in judicial interpretations of US constitutional law.

Nominated treasury secretary in George Washington's inaugural cabinet at the age of 34, Hamilton founded the US coast guard and customs department, established America's first central bank, forerunner of today's Federal Reserve, and stabilized the economy of a country facing financial ruin from massive war debts. The former Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke called him "without doubt the best and most foresighted economic policymaker in U.S. history".

Miranda's Broadway smash makes exciting theatre out of dry events like the writing of essays and the founding of a bank. Its multiracial cast brings 18th century political conflicts to life through songs that range from conventional show tunes to battle rap, with an emphasis on the hip hop side of the equation.

Hamilton faced two major antagonists in the course of his life. His quarrel with Aaron Burr grew so personal that they fought a duel while Burr was vice-president. Hamilton shot to miss, Burr shot to kill, and both succeeded in their aims. The second rivalry concerned ideology and involved one of his few intellectual equals, Thomas Jefferson, secretary of state under George Washington and later the third US president.

The ideas that Hamilton and Jefferson fought over resonate through American history and are influencing responses to the covid-19 pandemic today. Generally speaking, if you support a government mandate to wear masks, you are a Hamiltonian. If you consider the proposal an attack on freedom, you are a Jeffersonian. Hamilton belonged to the Federalist Party which, as the name suggests, favoured a strong central government financed by reasonable duties and taxes. Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans sought greater autonomy for states and individuals. Hamilton was a New Yorker who believed in a well-regulated mercantile society, Jefferson a Virginian who envisioned a laissez-faire agrarian utopia, albeit one underpinned by slavery.

Thanks primarily to Jefferson and his colleague James Madison, the US constitution is shaped to discourage government intervention in the lives of citizens. In the words of Elena Kagan, a moderate member of the US supreme court, "The Constitution generally imposes limitations on government rather than establishes affirmative rights and thus has what might be thought of as a

libertarian slant." This libertarian, laissez-faire tendency has enabled a lot of what is best in the US, but also much of what is worst.

Resistance to mask mandates is an example of the latter. The idea behind making face coverings compulsory is that pandemics are both individual and social threats. We protect not just ourselves but the rest of the population by avoiding infection. We can disregard the personal danger by asserting youth and healthiness, or simply state it is nobody else's business, but that fails to address the societal aspect of the issue. People across the world understand this and many, especially those from community-oriented cultures like Japan, which I wrote about in my last column, are befuddled by Americans making a fetish of refusing masks. The refusal, foolish as it looks, has deep roots going back to the very founding of the nation.

The former US president Barack Obama often emphasized interpersonal responsibility by citing scripture about people being keepers of their brothers and sisters. In dealing with covid-19, his successor Donald Trump has taken the Jeffersonian line favoured by his political base, refusing to mandate masks federally as over 50 nations have done, and leaving crucial decisions to state governors and individuals. His abdication of responsibility in the name of freedom has considerably worsened the crisis.

The inability of laissez-faire discourse to handle the pandemic creates cognitive dissonance among those who hold libertarian or Jeffersonian beliefs. Since people think of themselves as caring, it would go against their self-image to say, "Sure, a mask mandate will cost me very little while saving thousands of lives, but I oppose it anyway because I am against government interference." They resolve the cognitive dissonance by disdaining either the problem or the solution. So, we get, "Covid is no worse than the flu" or "Masks have not been shown to work and can even be damaging".

If a commitment to an extreme form of individualism is proving counterproductive in the face of the current crisis, it has been even more treacherous in the fight against the greatest longer-term threat we face, climate change. Tackling it requires nations to act in concert and intervene in markets to favour clean sources of fuel over dirty ones. It requires federal mandates to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and targeted subsidies for technologies with the potential to counter global warming.

Like a pandemic, climate change is impossible to counteract through a free-market framework, not least because the primary polluters and the primary victims of global warming tend not to reside in the same geographies. The Jeffersonian mindset, which once revolted against Alexander Hamilton's imposition of a tax on whiskey to help pay off the war debt, despises the idea of a multilateral response involving federal levies and regulations.

Yet, few people can bring themselves to say, "Global warming is destroying millions of livelihoods and will destroy tens of millions more, but governments should do nothing about it if that involves regulation or taxation." Instead, they resolve the cognitive dissonance of a catastrophe that is impervious to their favoured ideology by claiming the problem does not exist. This defence mechanism explains why libertarian think tanks like the Cato Institute and Heartland Institute have come to be prime disseminators of the false idea that anthropogenic global warming is a hoax.

We should not be surprised that libertarians, believers in an ideology ostensibly founded on rationality, have spread a conspiracy theory about global warming. After all, Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the stirring words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...", also defended the use of African men and women as property to be bought and sold.