

Vox

Donald Trump's feud with the cast of *Hamilton*, explained

The Trumpian backlash is what happens when both sides can claim to be populist.

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Vice president-elect Mike Pence was supposed to have a quiet night at the theater on Friday when he went to see *Hamilton*. But after Pence was greeted by boos from the audience and an impassioned curtain-call speech from the actor Brandon Dixon (who plays eventual Vice President Aaron Burr), Donald Trump turned the incident into a weekend-dominating news story. Pence ended up getting asked about it when he appeared on Fox News Sunday; calls to “#BoycottHamilton” from Trump supporters were trending all weekend on Twitter.

Philosophically, it's an ironic twist. One of the themes embraced by the musical *Hamilton* is expressed in the line that gives the play's finale its title: “You have no control/Who lives, who dies, who tells your story.” This is not a philosophy endorsed by President-elect Donald Trump. If there's one thing he can't stand, it's someone else telling his story.

But politically, a clash over *Hamilton* was probably inevitable. The musical isn't just a cultural phenomenon, but, for a certain subset of its fans, a beacon for a progressive America. *Hamilton*'s central conceit is “what if the Founding Fathers were people of color, and hip-hop were the language of their oratory”; the show, and its creator Lin-Manuel Miranda, were closely associated with Barack Obama and the Hillary Clinton campaign.

The clash between the cast (and audience) of *Hamilton* and the incoming Republican administration is about demographics and values — but it's also about who really gets to speak for America, and whether it's a contradiction in terms for a billionaire to be a populist or for a steeply-priced Broadway show to be a mass-culture phenomenon.

Mike Pence's *Hamilton* visit concluded with a speech from the cast: “We, sir, are the diverse America”

On Friday night, Vice President-elect Mike Pence and his wife went to see *Hamilton*. The choice made sense: When the hottest ticket in New York (it's sold out for the next nine months) is also a musical about the Founding Fathers, it's an obvious way for a politician to spend a night out.

But Pence was recognized immediately, and most of the other attendees at the Richard Rodgers weren't thrilled to see him, apparently: He was reportedly booed before the show.

When Brandon Dixon, who plays Aaron Burr, stepped out to interrupt the curtain call to draw attention to Pence, the audience started to boo again. But Dixon tried to calm them — instead delivering a scripted, heartfelt plea on behalf of the show's cast:

You know, we have a guest in the audience this evening. And Vice President-elect Pence, I see you walking out, but I hope you will hear us just a few more moments. There's nothing to boo here, ladies and gentlemen. There's nothing to boo here. We're all here sharing a story of love. We have a message for you, sir. We hope that you will hear us out.

And I encourage everybody to pull out your phones and tweet and post, because this message needs to be spread far and wide, okay?

Vice President-elect Pence, we welcome you and we truly thank you for joining us at *Hamilton: An American Musical*. We really do.

We, sir, are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents — or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights, sir.

But we truly hope that this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and work on behalf of *all* of us. All of us.

We truly thank you for sharing this show — this wonderful American story told by a diverse group of men, women of different colors, creeds, and orientations.

Pence had walked out of the theater before Dixon began his scripted statement; but according to reports, he paused in the lobby to hear it. Dixon ended his speech with a plea to the audience to donate to Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, a charity that *Hamilton* and other shows support (Javier Muñoz, who plays Hamilton, is HIV-positive) — which made it clear that the purpose of the speech wasn't just to shame Pence, but to remind the audience that the diverse America *Hamilton* celebrates is something worth defending.

But Dixon and the Hamilton cast had no control who told their story.

The backlash among Trump and fans was an expression of “patriotic correctness”

By the end of Friday night, the incident was being reported as Dixon “lecturing” Pence and being “rude” to him — inspiring outraged tweets throughout the weekend by President-elect Trump himself:

Our wonderful future V.P. Mike Pence was harassed last night at the theater by the cast of Hamilton, cameras blazing. This should not happen!

Pence himself, for what it's worth, didn't seem to have a problem with how he was treated: When asked on Sunday about the booing, he replied, “this is what freedom sounds like.” But the

president-elect (and many of his fans) were far less sanguine, demanding respect on his behalf. “Boycott Hamilton” was trending on Twitter for much of the weekend — a sentiment that’s mockable if you know that the New York and Chicago productions are sold out roughly through Doomsday, but might become a more serious proposition once the show launches a touring company that will travel to states Trump won.

President-elect Trump and his supporters had two problems with how Pence was treated. The first was that booing the vice president-elect is inappropriate and rude, and that the citizens of America should be more deferential to one of the men entrusted to lead their country.

This is just the latest instantiation of a debate that’s been ongoing since Trump won the election, nearly two weeks ago. On one hand, he is the duly elected president-elect of the United States; on the other hand, he lost the popular vote. And, even with a post-election bump in approval rating, fewer than half of Americans view him favorably.

Is it disrespectful to call Trump “not my president,” as some of the protesters against him have done? Is it obligatory to give him the benefit of the doubt until he arrives in office? There are legitimate questions here, and, unsurprisingly, the pundits most inclined to urge respect for Trump were those most upset by the “rudeness” at Hamilton.

But the outrage was particularly keen because the cast of Hamilton are actors, not politicians. Dixon’s speech during curtain call was seen as a political interjection into a presumably apolitical context.

As my colleague Constance Grady has pointed out, the idea that theater exists outside of politics is laughable. But what really jumps out from that Trump tweet is the phrase “safe and special place.” Intentionally or otherwise, Trump is echoing demands for “safe spaces” associated with progressive activists on college campuses.

Cultural conservatives, including Trump supporters, tend to gleefully mock such demands — characterizing those who make them as special snowflakes unable to handle criticism.

Trump rode to office, in part, as a crusader against political correctness who wasn’t afraid to tell harsh truths and offend people. But Donald Trump himself has been known to take criticism poorly.

To his fans, this isn’t a contradiction: Donald Trump, especially now that he’s president-elect, really does deserve deference in the name of patriotism. It’s a phenomenon that Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute has labeled “patriotic correctness”: a brand of right-wing hypersensitivity that gets just as offended by insults to American pride and patriotism (like protests against the president-elect or “The Star-Spangled Banner”) as any college activist gets over insults to diversity.

Unsurprisingly, participants in “patriotic correctness” tend to have a lot of ideas about how American history ought to be taught, and are greatly sensitive to attempts to change traditional American-greatness curricula to emphasize the participation of marginalized groups, or to portray the Founding Fathers as anything less than one-dimensional heroes. *Hamilton*, by race-bending the Founding Fathers and having them speak in an idiom associated with the streets, is

the kind of cultural remix they don't appreciate. (Even though, ironically, *Hamilton* has itself been criticized for failing to address the founders' moral complicity with slavery.)

The night after Pence attended the show in New York, the production in Chicago was interrupted during the first act by an audience member outburst. Apparently, he'd been incensed by the line "Immigrants: we get the job done"; two songs later, he stood up and shouted "Our side won! Our side won! F*** anyone who didn't vote for Trump, you don't belong here!"

The audience member was arrested, but it's not impossible to imagine that future outbreaks of "patriotic correctness" will happen at *Hamilton* performances now that it's been identified as a battleground in the culture wars.

Hamilton is a ripe target because it's beloved by a certain kind of liberal

If President-elect Trump believes that the theater must be a "safe and special place," though, he probably should have warned his vice president-elect about *Hamilton* to begin with. The politics of its creator and producers are pretty much on its sleeve — both in the show itself and in the way the production has supported progressive and Democratic causes. (The show's line "Immigrants: we get the job done" went from a throwaway line of dialogue, to an applause line that required pausing for ovations, to the title and theme of an entire song on the newly-released *Hamilton* Mixtape.)

During the presidential campaign, a special performance of *Hamilton* was held for donors to Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton. Creator Lin-Manuel Miranda recorded a PSA encouraging Latinos to vote. And Miranda and fellow original cast member Renée Elise Goldsberry performed a version of the song "Ten Duel Commandments," with rewritten pro-Clinton lyrics, at a Clinton fundraiser that totally earned the cliché "star-studded": everyone from Julia Roberts to Lena Dunham appeared.

After Clinton's defeat, this sort of "celebrity liberalism" is one of the many, many things that's come in for recrimination. The Clinton campaign's use of cultural figures to encourage young people to vote has been used instead as evidence that the campaign was out of touch with the needs of most American voters, particularly those in the white working class. Dunham has become the poster child for out-of-touch "celebrity" outreach — *Hamilton* is the other.

Lin Manuel Miranda (R) performs with Renée Elise Goldsberry during the Hillary Victory Fund - Stronger Together concert at St. James Theatre on October 17, 2016, in New York City. Broadway stars and celebrities performed during a fundraising concert for the Hillary Clinton campaign. *Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images*

There's a reason for this: *Hamilton*'s mass popularity has bred a backlash, mostly centered on how hard it is to get a ticket and the corollary belief that since not every fan of the show has seen it, the rest must be pretending (a belief that only makes sense if you believe that it's less than authentic to like a show based on its soundtrack).

The people criticizing Clinton's celebrity outreach (mostly people to the left of the Democratic Party mainstream and urging it to return to economic populism) are also, in many cases, the

people who've been making the most incisive critiques of not only the phenomenon but the show itself.

To them, *Hamilton's* hardworking-immigrant-makes-good-and-creates-a-bank-friendly-financial-system narrative (while it's borrowed from hip-hop tropes about making it rich) is a perfect illustration of how liberalism has used racial diversity as a distraction while selling out to financial capitalism. And the production itself — portraying wealthy slaveholders as people of color, to appeal to people who can afford to shell out four figures for a single ticket — embodies liberal hollowness.

Of course, to date this has mostly been a debate on the left side of the aisle. *Hamilton* hasn't come in for conservative backlash before this past weekend. But it helped set up the battle lines that were drawn after Pence's attendance: that *Hamilton*, regardless of its racial diversity, is a symbol of a Democratic cultural elite too busy patting itself on the back for being inclusive to care about real Americans.

Was Trump's temper tantrum a misdirection — or just him being thin-skinned?

There is a very good argument that we shouldn't be talking about this at all. The *Hamilton* cast said something respectful to Vice President-elect Pence; Pence took it as an expression of their free speech. Case closed. The only reason it's under discussion is because Trump himself raised a stink about it on Twitter — and Donald Trump shouldn't be granted the power to monopolize your attention in that way.

That's the argument my colleague Matt Yglesias and others have made. They point out that Trump's *Hamilton* hissy-fit overtook coverage of the conflicts of interest posed by his incipient presidency — from questions about his connections with India's newly appointed US trade envoy, to stories that diplomats are being encouraged to stay at Trump Tower as a way to curry favor with the president-elect. It also buried coverage of the \$25 million settlement he signed Friday in a set of fraud lawsuits against Trump University.

Some people have gone so far as to speculate that Trump deliberately threw a temper tantrum about *Hamilton* to distract from the more serious stories — or even that he sent Mike Pence to the musical to create a spectacle. You don't have to believe that, though, to recognize a pattern in the way the press treated Trump as a candidate and now as president-elect — chasing after the latest outrageous thing he says, rather than looking at the often-obscured actions of those around him.

But the counterargument to this is equally persuasive: Donald Trump's insistence on whining about any criticism of him or his administration shows something important about his character.

To some, it signals that Trump is seeking to delegitimize any critical speech even before he's elected — or even that he'll seek to restrict or ban it. You don't have to believe that Trump has a plan, though, to think that a president who can't take criticism — and who insists on using his bully pulpit to complain about it — is a president who's easily manipulated by anyone who knows how to provoke him.

There are going to be a lot of culture-war clashes along these lines during the Trump presidency

Over the eight years of the Obama administration, America's become used to having a "cool president." Barack and Michelle Obama love Hamilton — and since many fans of Hamilton are also fans of the outgoing first family, the connection only serves to reinforce the coolness of both.

But now, for the first time since 2004, we have a culture industry that's aligned with the out-of-power party — and that is on record criticizing, strongly, the man who won a majority of electoral votes. That opens the culture industry up to accusations of elitism — of being ensconced in coastal bubbles, and overplaying the hand given by their wealth and power to think they have something to say to real America.

But this is complicated, in 2016, because the candidate supported by the culture industry also won the popular vote — and won strong majorities among nonwhite voters, in particular. So while the culture industry represents an economic elite, it can also — like Hamilton does — display a kind of "real America" that the incoming administration doesn't: a racially diverse one.

Hamilton is the perfect illustration of this. It's a smash hit because it brought virtuoso hip-hop to Broadway: making it something that affluent theatergoers can pat themselves on the back for liking because it has "street cred," while winning a genuine mass appeal that most Broadway shows don't.

And Donald Trump, for his part, is much less firmly aligned with one side in these culture wars than, say, George W. Bush was. Yes, his supporters are extremely prone to "patriotic correctness." But he himself lives in Manhattan — and is reportedly trying to stay there, at least part-time, after assuming the presidency.

That sets Trump and his administration up for a lot more clashes with the creative class and cultural celebrities. And both sides, continually, will have a claim to truly speak for the people