

**NOT
“A NATION OF
IMMIGRANTS”**

SETTLER COLONIALISM,
WHITE SUPREMACY,
and a HISTORY of
ERASURE and EXCLUSION

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

BEACON PRESS | BOSTON

In memory of Ramón Casiano

1916-1931

So, if ever built, what will the United States Native American Genocide Memorial Museum contain? What will it exhibit? It will be one room, a fifty-foot square with the same large photo filling the walls, ceiling, and floor. There will only be one visitor allowed at any one time. There will be no furniture. That one visitor will have to stand or sit on the floor. Or lie on the floor if they feel the need. That visitor must remain in that room for one hour. There will be no music. The only soundtrack will be random gunshots from rifles used throughout American history. Reverberation. What will that one photo be? It will be an Indian baby, shredded by a Gatling gun, lying dead and bloody in the snow. It is a photo taken by a U.S. Cavalry soldier in the nineteenth century. Very few people have seen that photo. I have not seen that photo. But I know it exists. The Smithsonian keeps such photos locked away from us. The United States wants all of us to forget the crimes it committed against the Indigenous. The United States wants us to forget. The United States wants us to forget. The United States wants us to forget.

—Sherman Alexie, from *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*

INTRODUCTION

On George Washington's birthday, 2018, the Trump administration's director of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, L. Francis Cissna, changed the agency's official mission statement, dropping the language of "a nation of immigrants" to describe the United States. The previous mission statement had said the agency "secures America's promise as a nation of immigrants by providing accurate and useful information to our customers, granting immigration and citizenship benefits, promoting an awareness and understanding of citizenship, and ensuring the integrity of our immigration system." ¹ The revised mission statement read: "U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services administers the nation's lawful immigration system, safeguarding its integrity and promise by efficiently and fairly adjudicating requests for immigration benefits while protecting Americans, securing the homeland, and honoring our values." ²

The Trump administration's official negation of the US as a nation of immigrants was unlikely to change the liberal rhetoric. During Joe Biden's 2020 bid for the presidency, the campaign issued a statement on his immigration plan, titled "The Biden Plan for Securing Our Values as a Nation of Immigrants," asserting that "unless your ancestors were native to these shores, or forcibly enslaved and brought here as part of our original sin as a nation, most Americans can trace their family history back to a choice—a choice to leave behind everything that was familiar in search of new opportunities and a new life." ³ Unlike the previous "nation of immigrants" statement, the Biden campaign's did

acknowledge prior and continuing Native presence, as well as specifying that enslaved Africans were not immigrants. However, the new rhetoric continues to mask the settler-colonial violence that established and maintained the United States and turns immigrants into settlers.

It appears ironic that Donald Trump positioned himself as anti-immigrant, being the son of an immigrant mother (from Scotland) and the grandson of an immigrant paternal grandfather (from Germany), as well as being married to an immigrant (from Slovenia). But Trump was not against European immigrants. In a January 2018 staff meeting on temporary immigration status, Trump asked, “Why do we need more Haitians? Take them out. . . . Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here? Why do we want all these people from Africa here? They’re shithole countries. . . . We should have more people from Norway.” [4](#) The month before, referring again to Haitians, Trump said that they “all have AIDS,” and about Nigerians, he said that once they had seen the United States, they would never “go back to their huts” in Africa. [5](#)

In his quest for the presidency, Trump made immigration the center of his campaign, focusing on the exclusion of Mexicans, promising to build a border wall and militarize the southern border. He claimed, “The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else’s problems,” [6](#) and railed, “When México sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people, but I speak to border guards.” [7](#)

Democratic Party politicians and liberals in general insisted that Trump and his supporters were un-American in denying the “nation of immigrants” ideology that has been a consensus for more than a half century and remains a basic principle of the Democratic Party. Most people around the world viewed the US as a nation of immigrants, while

questioning if the US was backsliding on its promise in electing Trump.

With the Democratic Party back in power in 2021, the nation of immigrants rhetoric appears be firmly back in place, although the exclusionary policies of the US will continue as they did during the Obama administration.

As Osha Gray Davidson, who has collected dozens of examples of how the phrase is used, points out, “nation of immigrants” is generally used to counter xenophobic fears. [8](#) But the ideology behind the phrase also works to erase the scourge of settler colonialism and the lives of Indigenous peoples. “We in America are immigrants, or the children of immigrants,” is the refrain. [9](#) The theme of Mitt Romney’s acceptance speech as the Republican nominee for president in 2012 included “a nation of immigrants”: “Optimism is uniquely American. It is what brought us to America. We are a nation of immigrants.” [10](#) Speaking at a Nevada high school to a large audience, President Barack Obama said: “We are a nation of immigrants, and that means we are constantly being replenished with fighters who believed in the American dream, and it gives us a tremendous advantage over other nations.” [11](#) Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, in 2016, evoked a nation of immigrants, with “the Statue of Liberty reminding us of who we are and where we came from. We are a nation of immigrants, and I am proud of it.” [12](#)

“A nation of immigrants” was a mid-twentieth-century revisionist origin story. The United States emerged from World War II undamaged by bombs and heavy population loss, which was the experience of most of the combatant nations. In fact, the United States became a beefed-up industrial powerhouse exhibiting military might, including the atomic bomb. It was poised to become the economic, military, and moral leader of the “free world.” The country that actually defeated the army of the Third Reich, the Soviet Union, was the new adversary. US postwar

administrations scrambled to conceal any trace of the United States' colonialist roots, system of slavery, and continued segregation as they developed military and counterinsurgent strategies to quell national liberation movements in former European colonies. The Soviet Union and Communist China, which took power in 1949, denounced Western imperialism and colonialism in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Pacific, and the Caribbean.

In 1958, then US senator John F. Kennedy, surely informed by liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., published the influential and best-selling book *A Nation of Immigrants*, which advanced the notion that the United States should be understood or defined through the diversity of the immigrants it had welcomed since independence. [13](#) This thesis was embraced by US historians and found its way into textbooks and school curriculums. It is neither coincidental nor surprising that Kennedy would introduce this idea as, at the time, he was strategizing how to become the first president born of immigrants—albeit very wealthy ones—and the first Catholic president in a Protestant-dominated culture. Aspiring to the presidency, Kennedy introduced a clear context and narrative in which he could transform this negative into a positive. This founding text of “a nation of immigrants” was published during Kennedy’s 1954–1960 first term as US senator from Massachusetts, two years before he was elected president.

Given that in the twenty-first century “immigration” is practically synonymous with the México-US border that was established in 1848, it is striking that Kennedy never mentioned México or Mexicans or the US-México border in the text, nor did he use the terms “Latino” or “Hispanic.” Yet, this was 1958, late in the period of the contract labor Bracero Program, which began during World War II. A total of two million Mexican citizens, with the participation of the Mexican government, migrated to the United States, particularly California, as de facto indentured agricultural

workers under time-limited contracts. Meanwhile, the burgeoning agribusiness industry in California recruited even more Mexican workers outside the program, without documentation or civil rights, and subject to deportation. More egregious than Kennedy's omission of any mention of México or the border is that the federal program known by its offensive official name "Operation Wetback" began during Kennedy's first year as senator and continued beyond his senatorial career through his presidency. "Operation Wetback" began in 1954 to round up and deport more than a million Mexican migrant workers, mainly in California and Texas, in the process subjecting millions—many who were actually US citizens—to illegal search and detention and deportation, forcing them to forfeit their property. Workers were deported by air and trains and ships far from the border, leaving those who were US citizens stranded and without the documents enabling them to return to their homes in the United States. "Operation Wetback" was a repeat of the Hoover administration's deportation of a million Mexicans in the 1930s, dubbed "Mexican Repatriation."

Regarding the status of Indigenous peoples in Kennedy's nation of immigrants scheme, the then senator wrote, "Another way of indicating the importance of immigration to America is to point out that every American who ever lived, with the exception of one group, was either an immigrant himself or a descendant of immigrants." The exception, Kennedy went on, was "Will Rogers, part Cherokee Indian, [who] said that his ancestors were at the docks to meet the Mayflower." But Kennedy disagreed, claiming that "some anthropologists believe that the Indians themselves were immigrants from another continent who displaced the original Settlers—the aborigines." This is the bogus speculation of US white nationalists who claim that those imagined original aborigines were in fact European, possibly Irish. A few pages on in the text, in the only other mention

of Native Americans, Kennedy refers to them as “the first immigrants,” while dismissing their presence as “members of scattered tribes.” [14](#)

Equally unsettling, Kennedy includes enslaved Africans as immigrants, although the book contains the infamous drawing of a slave ship, with humans chained down on their backs, scarcely an inch between each, packed like sardines. It is striking to read how profoundly Kennedy whitewashed history by noting that “the immigration experience was not always pleasant” or that “the Japanese and Chinese brought their gentle dreams to the West Coast.” He failed to mention the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 or its extension a few years later to all Asians.

This idea of the United States as a nation of immigrants was hatched in the late 1950s, and while Kennedy was its ambassador, it came to reflect the US ruling-class response to the challenges of the post-World War II anticolonial national liberation movements, as well as civil and human rights social movements domestically. In the United States, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) was founded in 1944 by D’Arcy McNickle, Helen Peterson, and other longtime Indigenous activists. At the same time, African American attorneys and other professionals were developing a legal strategy for desegregating public schools, while in 1951, more radical African Americans, including Paul Robeson and members of the Civil Rights Congress, petitioned the recently established United Nations with the detailed document *We Charge Genocide*, based on the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. A mass movement against segregation was emerging. Around the same time, Native American activists were contextualizing the situation of Native nations within the decolonization/national liberation context, and Mexican farmworkers were organizing in the fields, defeating the Bracero Program and forming unions.

These cracks in the racial order of settler colonialism and capitalism constituted a radical departure in a society locked down in patriarchal white domination and obsessed with “real” Americanism. At the end of World War II, the US social, economic, and political order was solidly and confidently a white patriarchal Protestant republic, dominated by corporations with worldwide investments and financial reserves, along with a massive military machine far greater than that of any other country in the world. Unionization movements, primarily made up of white workers, were seduced by home ownership and middle-class status, their unions becoming business oriented with their own profit-making privatized healthcare, while the United Kingdom and Western European states responded to militant union demands to institute universal, public healthcare. Black descendants of enslaved Africans lived under a totalitarian Jim Crow system in the former Confederate states and were ghettoized and discriminated against when they escaped the South in migrations for northern and coastal industrial urban areas that were stalked by urban police forces resembling slave patrols. Native Americans were abandoned on shrunken land bases that could not support life, forcing many to find work in nearby or faraway cities, while Congress began reversing New Deal reforms that had acknowledged the Native land base and governments. This culminated in the congressional termination of Native status and land bases in 1953, an erasure that took the Red Power movement two decades to reverse. On the other hand, Irish and Central, Southern, and Eastern European immigrants, mainly Catholics and Jews, had made gains in being accepted as equal, that is, as white. But on the West Coast, US citizens of Chinese and Mexican descent were discriminated against and subject to deportation, while US citizens of Japanese descent had been incarcerated in wartime concentration camps, stripped of their property and citizenship rights. Want ads for jobs

segregated men and women as well as white and Black, with lower wages for women and Black workers. Ivy League universities were overwhelmingly white and for men only, with quotas to limit the number of Jewish men.

The explosion that cracked the white republic was the 1954 US Supreme Court school desegregation decision under Chief Justice Earl Warren, who ironically, as the wartime attorney general of California, had facilitated rounding up Japanese Americans for federal incarceration. Based on decades of organizing for African American desegregation, the order for school desegregation under *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, was a great achievement, but the backlash commenced immediately. White Citizens' Councils organized all over the United States, linking racial integration with communism and labeling it un-American. Within three years of the Supreme Court desegregation decision, the white nationalist John Birch Society was launched by Robert Welch, the heir to the Welch candy fortune in Massachusetts, along with others such as Fred Koch, father of the Koch brothers, who, in the twenty-first century, have funded legislation and movements to end all government benefits and promote the privatization of public goods. The Supreme Court composition was the target of this white nationalist movement, using the Republican Party as the vehicle, and had largely achieved its goals with the Trump administration's appointment of three justices, shifting the court's ideological spectrum to five ultraconservative justices, one moderate conservative, and three liberal ones.

[15](#)

The promise of permanent progress was the context within which the Black civil rights movement grew and contributed momentum to other ongoing movements for liberation, including Puerto Rican independence and Native American self-determination, as well as the Mexican farmworker unionization movement of the 1960s, the

women's and LGBTQ rights movements, and the rising student anti-imperialist and anti-war movements that grew in opposition to the accelerating US war to overthrow the government of Vietnam. The counterrevolution against these advances brought Richard Nixon, then Ronald Reagan, to the presidency. By 1990, capitalism and militarism were triumphant in dissolving the Eastern European socialist bloc and organized liberation movements that had taken state power in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, which became shadows of their former aspirations.

The first highly visible sign of a well-organized counterrevolution inside the United States vying for political power was the evangelical antiabortion mass movement that soared following the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision to decriminalize abortion, in 1972. And, significantly, the relatively benign, century-old National Rifle Association was taken over by the Second Amendment Foundation, a white nationalist organization that had been founded in 1974 by Harlon Carter, who had been the border chief of the 1950s mass deportation of Mexicans in "Operation Wetback." This is the moment when the Second Amendment became a white nationalist cause, relying on the right-wing ideology of originalism—that is, interpreting the original meaning of the US Constitution. Parallel to postwar liberation movements, the US Central Intelligence Agency ran counterinsurgent operations against national liberation movements before and after they took power in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Africa, while J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) ran similar operations against domestic movements, including COINTELPRO, a domestic counterintelligence program. Anticommunism was the connective tissue among these organizations until the socialist bloc collapsed in 1990, although anticommunism remained a social and political weapon of control domestically and internationally.

In the mid- and late 1960s and early 1970s, while the US war in Vietnam raged, the then liberal United States ruling class and its brain trust sought ways of responding to social demands while maintaining economic, political, and military domination. They settled on multiculturalism, diversity, affirmative action, and yes, the nation of immigrants ideology in response to demands for decolonization, justice, reparations, social equality, public spending on social welfare, and an end to US imperialism, counterinsurgency, and overthrow of governments. Given attempts to offset an exclusive emphasis on white settler history and the winning of the West as the nationalist triumphal narrative, “a nation of immigrants” fit the multicultural agenda. No longer was the US a “melting pot” of assimilation to whiteness but rather a many-colored quilt. Kennedy’s *A Nation of Immigrants* had called the United States “a nation of nations.” Despite the surging of white nationalism during the twelve-year period of the Reagan-Bush administrations, by the early 1990s, the “waves of immigrants,” “nation of immigrants,” and Native peoples as “the first immigrants” narrative Kennedy had conceived was a consensus concept as it entered public school textbooks. This neoliberalism also triggered textbook wars over history standards, the right wing pushing for and demanding a return to the original narrative, especially founding fathers iconography to support their constitutional philosophy of “originalism.”

During the nearly two centuries of British colonization of the North Atlantic coast and up to US independence, the great majority of European American settlers were Protestant Anglo-Saxon, Scots Irish, and German-speaking (before Germany was a nation-state). From 1619 onward, there was a steadily increasing number of enslaved Africans. When the United States won independence, the founders inscribed in the Constitution the requirement that citizenship could be held by white males only. Despite expressed fears, especially by Alexander Hamilton and the

Federalist Party regarding immigration and the Alien and Sedition Acts, no immigration laws or procedures existed, not even during the arrival in the 1840s of 1.5 million Irish famine refugees. In 1875, the US Supreme Court declared that only the federal government, not the states, could create immigration laws and that regulation of immigration was a federal matter, though the federal immigration service was not established until 1891. Tellingly, the first federal immigration law, which created the foundation for US immigration, was the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. It is crucial to recognize that when and how “immigration” as such began, it was based on overt, blatant racism and a policy of exclusion, and it has never lost that taint. Although immigrant bashing is not new, and has long targeted Asian and Mexican workers, it has become a more fraught issue as it crystalized in the late twentieth century and accelerated in the early twenty-first century, targeting Mexicans, Asians, and Arab Muslims.

Yet, those who defend immigrants and immigration, mostly metropolitan liberals, often immigrants or children of immigrants themselves, employ the idea of a nation of immigrants naively without acknowledging the settler-colonial history of the United States and the white nationalist ideology it reproduces. Such advocates were caught by surprise and in shock when Mexican hating led to a successful presidential campaign in 2016, and even more surprised by the January 6, 2021, white nationalist violent takeover of the US Capitol.

The elephant in the room of immigration is the US military invasion and annexation of half of Mexican territory that spanned more than two decades, 1821 to 1848. During that same period, the eastern half of the United States was being ethnically cleansed with the forced removal of Native nations. White supremacy and settler-colonial violence are permanently embedded in US topography. The United States

has a foundational problem of white nationalism that wasn't new with Nixon or Reagan or Trump.

White nationalism was inscribed in the founding of the United States as a European settler-colonial expansionist entity, the economy of which was grounded in the violent theft of land and in racial slavery, and with settlers armed to the teeth throughout its history, presently numbering over three hundred million people with the same number of firearms in civilian hands. Yet only a third of the population own those guns, an average of eight each, and 3 percent of the population own 50 percent of the guns in civilian hands. A great majority of this minority of gun owners are white men who are descendants of the original settlers, or pretend to be. ¹⁶ These descendants are most obvious in the former Confederate and border states but actually are also scattered in clusters and communities in all parts of the United States. They are the latter-day carriers of the United States' national origin myth, a matrix of stories that attempts to justify conquest and settlement, transforming the white frontier settler into an "indigenous people," believing that they are the true natives of the continent, much as the South African Boers regarded themselves as the "true" children of Israel, powered by Calvinism; the Calvinist Scots settlers did in Ulster, Ireland; or Jewish settlers in Palestine—all established by an imaginary God-given covenant making them the chosen peoples.

Given the powerful influence of this cultural, religious, and demographic minority, it is essential to acknowledge its existence in order to understand persistent white supremacy and mistrust of non-European immigrants as well as Indigenous North Americans, descendants of enslaved Africans, and Mexicans. Since the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979, the United States has launched counterinsurgent wars in Afghanistan and Arab countries, accelerating anti-Muslim bigotry in the United States. And although US evangelicals enthusiastically support the settler

state of Israel, which matches their religious belief that Jesus will return when Jews return to Jerusalem, there is an underlying anti-Semitism in US white nationalism, mostly centered on a narrative of imagined Jewish domination, which works to transfer responsibility for capitalist exploitation from European and European American ruling classes to a behind-the-scenes Jewish conspiracy and control. The sacred text of US white nationalists, *The Turner Diaries*, first published in 1978, is a fictional illustration of that anti-Semitism. It is mixed with hatred of Black Americans and all people of color, the argument being that Jews use people of color to conceal their devious plan of dominance, and that the Black civil rights movement was controlled by Jews, because white nationalists deem people of color as not fully human and incapable of theory or action on their own. [17](#)

Those current realities and their history underlie the narrative of this book. The first chapter, “Alexander Hamilton,” interrogates the neoliberal celebration of founding father Alexander Hamilton. During the Obama administration, the nation of immigrants chorus actually became a musical, celebrating Hamilton as an immigrant. More than a year after *Hamilton* premiered on Broadway in 2015, writer and director Lin-Manuel Miranda, who is of Puerto Rican heritage, staged a private performance at the White House for President Obama and his family and invitees. Before the show began, President Obama spoke in praise of the work, saying, “In the character of Hamilton—a striving immigrant who escaped poverty, made his way to the New World, climbed to the top by sheer force of will and pluck and determination—Lin-Manuel saw something of his own family, and every immigrant family.” [18](#) Portraying Hamilton as an immigrant, although he was a British colonial settler in New York and virulently suspicious of “aliens,” obfuscates while celebrating his role—as a federalist—in structuring the fiscal-military state, a capitalist

state created for war. Further, portraying continental-based Puerto Ricans as immigrants obscures the continued US colonization of Puerto Rico.

[Chapter 2](#), “Settler Colonialism,” examines the genesis of the first full-fledged settler state in the world, which went beyond its predecessors in 1492 Iberia and British-colonized Ireland with an economy based on land sales and enslaved African labor, an implementation of the fiscal-military state. Both the liberal and the right-wing versions of the national narrative misrepresent the process of European colonization of North America. Both narratives serve the critical function of preserving the “official story” of a mostly benign and benevolent USA as an anticolonial movement that overthrew British colonialism. The pre-US independence settlers were colonial settlers just as they were in Africa and India or like the Spanish in Central and South America. The nation of immigrants myth erases the fact that the United States was founded as a settler state from its inception and spent the next hundred years at war against the Native Nations in conquering the continent. Buried beneath the tons of propaganda—from the landing of the English “pilgrims” (Protestant Christian evangelicals) to James Fenimore Cooper’s phenomenally popular *The Last of the Mohicans* claiming settlers’ “natural rights” not only to the Indigenous peoples’ territories but also to the territories claimed by other European powers—is the fact that the founding of the United States created a division of the Anglo empire, with the US becoming a parallel empire to Great Britain, ultimately overcoming it. From day one, as was specified in the Northwest Ordinance, which preceded the US Constitution, the new “republic for empire,” as Thomas Jefferson called the new United States, envisioned the future shape of what is now the forty-eight states of the continental US. The founders drew up rough maps, specifying the first territory to conquer as the “Northwest Territory.” That territory was the Ohio Valley and the Great

Lakes region, which was already populated with Indigenous villages and farming communities thousands of years old. Even before independence, mostly Scots Irish settlers had seized Indigenous farmlands and hunting grounds in the Appalachians and are revered historically as first settlers and rebels, who in the mid-twentieth century began claiming indigeneity. Self-indigenizing by various groups of settlers is a recurrent theme in the chapters that follow.

The third chapter, "Arrivants," narrates how enslaved Africans were hauled in chains thousands of miles from their villages and fields, naked and with no belongings, and forcibly denied not only their freedom but also their languages, customs, histories, and nationalities. Not only were they used as forced and unpaid labor, but their very bodies were legally private property to be bought and sold, soon creating a thriving, legal domestic slave market, which by 1840 was of greater monetary value than all other property combined, including all the gold in circulation, all bank reserves, and all real estate. [19](#) The Cotton Kingdom was the fiscal-military center of US capitalist development with the industrial production of cotton, giving rise to a permanent racial capitalism, even after legalized slavery ended. Plantation owners and managers maintained a military-like counterinsurgency to control the enslaved workers, often calling in the US Army to quell insurrections. During Reconstruction, following the Civil War, Ku Klux Klan terrorism against Black political or economic power was the result of the inadequacy of the US Army occupation of the former Confederate states. Army divisions were being shifted west of the Mississippi to destroy Native nations and seize the rest of continent. With the end of the occupation, Jim Crow segregation laws gave rise to a form of policing that spread in the twentieth century to major urban areas as African Americans fled the South and which continues in the twenty-first century. The Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, ratified after the Civil War, changed all-white

citizenship to include those African Americans freed from enslavement (although keeping male only) but continued segregation, discrimination, and police killings, creating a kind of contingency of full citizenship.

[Chapter 4](#), “Continental Imperialism,” begins with Anglo settlers seizing the agricultural lands of Indigenous peoples of the Southeast for plantation agribusiness in cotton and importing enslaved people from the original slave states for the grueling labor. One group of US slavers moved into the Mexican province of Texas soon after the Mexican people won their decade-long war for independence from Spain. The two-year US military invasion of México that began in 1846 finally seized México City in 1848. Under US occupation, the Mexican government, through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, was forced to relinquish the northern half of its territory. What became the states of California, Arizona, New México, Colorado, Utah, and Texas were then opened to Anglo settlement, and in the process legalizing those Anglo slavers in Texas who had already settled there illegally. The Indigenous nations in the seized territory—the Apache, Navajo, Kiowa, and Comanche—resisted US conquest for decades, as they had resisted the Spanish empire. The small class of Hispano elite in New México had welcomed and collaborated with US occupation, which led to late-twentieth-century Hispano claims of indigeneity while living on lands their ancestors had forcibly taken from the Indigenous Pueblos. This then was another site of the fiscal-military state and racial capitalism taking hold to contribute to US imperial dominance.

[Chapter 5](#), “Irish Settling,” traces the history of the English colonization of Ireland that led to the 1840s famine and the first mass migration to the United States. The Irish refugees were mostly Catholic and were despised by the majority US Anglo-Protestants, but they quickly became the nation’s second-largest European-national group, a political force to be reckoned with. Many settled in urban slums and

had few skills, having been agricultural workers. They took whatever unskilled jobs they could find, the men and boys working on the docks, pushing carts, digging canals, and constructing the railroad, and obtaining work as slave patrollers in the Cotton Kingdom and early urban police forces. Women worked as housekeepers and nannies, in factories, and often in sex work. How subsequent generations of Irish Americans became settlers, even one of their own ascending to the presidency in 1960, is a tragic story. [20](#) As well, the nearly cultlike formation of twentieth-century urban police forces and the FBI drew on Irish recruits until they became dominant and definitive as police. Racialized urban policing increasingly became a major component of the fiscal-military state.

[Chapter 6](#), “Americanizing Columbus,” tells the story of European immigrants, mostly Catholic and Jewish, who were considered not quite white. During the decade 1880–1890 alone, more than five million Central and Eastern Europeans arrived in search of jobs in burgeoning industrial and mining sites in the Northeast, Midwest, and West. Many Jewish immigrants were fleeing pogroms, while other immigrants, particularly German, were driven out by political repression and brought with them strong organizational experience that was socialistically inclined. The immigrant-driven workers’ movements forced the reformulation of industrial capitalism, but their status as immigrants made them vulnerable to political deportation in the early twentieth century. During that period, Italian immigrants arrived, mostly from southern Italy. Suffering the stigma of being Catholic and also dark complected, they were subjected to extreme discrimination. Italians and other Catholic immigrants became Americanized and accepted as white through the Roman Catholic Church and a process rooted in the myth of Columbus, especially with the 1882 founding of the Knights of Columbus and the subsequent four-hundred-year anniversary of Columbus’s first landing in the

Caribbean. This, too, was another self-indigenizing process, with the Catholic Columbus being positioned as the original founding father of the United States. In this chapter, the important role of ideology and identity politics in building the fiscal-military state is demonstrated.

The seventh chapter, “Yellow Peril,” interrogates the origins and staying power of the Western panic against Asian immigrants, starting in medieval Europe to the US Chinese Exclusion Act of May 6, 1882, and into the twenty-first century. All European American trade unions were corrupted and weakened by their anti-Chinese bigotry and support for barring Chinese workers, which accelerated the spread of yellow peril racism. In Oakland, California, socialist, union activist, and celebrity writer Jack London was among the loudest voices spewing hatred. Yellow peril suspicions also led to the internment of US citizens of Japanese descent under the liberal Franklin Roosevelt administration. Fear of Asians in general and of the Chinese in particular persists today with the US reaction to China’s economic development. This chapter considers immigration from all parts of Asia, focusing on the integral relationship of US wars and immigration, highlighting the 1950–1975 US wars in Southeast Asia.

The final chapter, “The Border,” argues that since the early twentieth century, immigrant hating in the United States is primarily about Mexicans (not Latinos in general) and is directly related to the unsettled border established in 1848 when the US annexed half of México. The fact that a third of the continental territory of the United States today was brutally annexed through a war of conquest is inscribed on that international border. The cold war against México has never ended, and the border is an open wound. There is a history of US aggression against México and Mexicans, militarily and economically as well as ideologically, from Walt Whitman to Patrick Buchanan and Donald Trump. This chapter traces the painful history of the recruitment and

expulsion of masses of Mexican agricultural workers from the 1920s to the present. US occupations of Nicaragua and the decade-long Contra War ended the Sandinista regime. During the same period, the US government armed and advised murderous regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala. The 2008 US-backed coup in Honduras produced waves of refugees from that country who, along with Salvadorans and Mayans from Guatemala, have been criminalized and their children deported, dispersed, and even lost in the ongoing situation at the US-México border.

The conclusion grapples with the position of immigrants in a settler state. One of the unspoken requirements for immigrants and their descendants to become fully “American” has been to participate in anti-Black racism and to aspire to “whiteness.” With the post-World War II work of civil rights, Black Power, and other anti-racist movements, whiteness lost much of its desirability for several generations. This process coincided with and influenced the 1965 immigration reform law that removed restrictions on immigration that had been in effect since the 1924 immigration law, which limited immigration to Western Europeans. Thereby, since the late 1960s, greater numbers of immigrants have come from the “third world,” mostly from formerly colonized countries, and many of them refugees from civil wars or US-instigated wars in their countries. The “new” immigrants are more likely than past immigrants to be college graduates or professionals. They often experience racism and “othering” in their daily lives, and for Muslims in particular, virulent hostility, which for some leads to solidarity with anti-racist movements. How they as immigrants experience and react to settler colonialism varies, with some becoming dedicated to solidarity with Native peoples’ resistance while most remain indifferent or even negate the demands of Indigenous communities and the reality of settler colonialism. Although immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the

Caribbean are not pressured to become “white,” as immigrants were in the past, they do automatically become settlers unless they resist that default. Anti-racism and diversity are widely accepted, but the problem is the general denial or refusal to acknowledge settler colonialism. As Mahmood Mamdani observes, “The thrust of American struggles has been to deracialize but not to decolonize. A deracialized America still remains a settler society and a settler state.” [21](#)

CHAPTER 1

ALEXANDER HAMILTON

In the waning days of the Obama presidency, the nation of immigrants liberal ideology dynamically soared with the 2015 Broadway musical *Hamilton*. [1](#) In the musical, Hamilton and the Frenchman Marquis de Lafayette celebrate their actions at the battle at Yorktown by proclaiming, “Immigrants: We get things done!” Of course, the United States did not yet exist in 1781 when the Yorktown engagement took place, and neither of the men were immigrants by any definition. Lafayette was a wealthy Frenchman militarist who threw his lot into the gunplay, then returned home to France without a thought of remaining in North America, while Hamilton was a citizen of Great Britain, as were all the secessionists who created the United States out of the thirteen British colonies. Citizens in Great Britain’s overseas colonies, including the thirteen colonies on the Atlantic coast of North America and those in the Caribbean, were free to move wherever they wished.

Alexander Hamilton was born in 1755 in the British Caribbean slave colony of Nevis, one of dozens of British, French, Danish, and Spanish slave colonies, whose primary product was sugar. Hamilton’s mother, who was French Huguenot, was from the mixed-European then Danish slave island of St. Croix, today part of the US colony the Virgin Islands. She moved with her sons back there when Hamilton

was ten years old. When Hamilton's mother died, a wealthy British merchant adopted him, and he apprenticed for the export-import business of Beekman and Cruger that supplied slavers and occasionally traded slave bodies. Everything in the Caribbean was about slavery. Haitian historian of Caribbean slavery Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes, "The British and French sugar islands . . . were not simply societies that had slaves, they were *slave societies*. Slavery defined their economic, social, and cultural organisation: it was their *raison d'être*. The people who lived there, free or not, lived there because there were slaves." [2](#)

When Hamilton was seventeen, local businessmen funded his further education at King's College (renamed Columbia College after independence) in New York. Certainly, Hamilton was moving to a different locale, but in the same manner as that of a young white man from the South Carolina colony or some other British colony in the Caribbean might move to New York for college. There were no institutions of higher learning in the British Caribbean colonies.

HAMILTON, THE FANTASY

Hamilton is a musical created by Lin-Manuel Miranda, who was born and grew up in New York City. His Puerto Rican father, Luis Miranda, moved to New York City when he was seventeen and met his wife, Luz Towns, there. Lin-Manuel Miranda presents himself and claims identification with Hamilton as an immigrant, obfuscating the reality of Puerto Rico as a US colony whose residents have been US citizens by birth since 1917. The musical is based on a best-selling 2004 novelistic hagiography of "founding father" Alexander Hamilton. [3](#) It may be surprising to learn that the author, Ron Chernow, was not trained in history. He holds an

undergraduate degree in English and is a journalist, but has been well rewarded for his hagiographies of founding fathers and wealthy capitalists, including a biography of George Washington for which he won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize. He is also the recipient of the National Book Award for Nonfiction for his celebration of US capitalism in his book *The House of Morgan: An American Banking Dynasty and the Rise of Modern Finance*. His 1998 biography of John D. Rockefeller and 2004 biography of Alexander Hamilton were both nominated for National Book Critics Circle Awards. ⁴ It is significant that Miranda chose to stick closely to Chernow's history, and that Chernow was credited as the historical consultant for the Broadway musical.

In both the book and the musical, much is made about Hamilton's age, which is puzzling, since a number of the prominent "founders" were young. In 1776, Hamilton was twenty-one, but Aaron Burr was only twenty; John Marshall and Nathan Hale were twenty-one; James Madison and Henry Knox, twenty-four; John Jay was thirty; Jefferson, thirty-three; Washington, forty-four. Ben Franklin, at seventy, stood out as being twice or more the age of most.

Historian Nancy Isenberg observes that Miranda's revision of the founding era and characterization of Hamilton has more to do with current politics than history, making Hamilton a symbol for the Obama era. Miranda debuted the musical in the White House for the Obamas and their guests, and Hamilton is given Obama-like qualities: "He is superior (a genius), pragmatic (concerned with finance, credit, and banks), stubborn (unrelenting and contentious); his most far-fetched attribute is that of a hip, multicultural pop star. By this calculation, if Hamilton is Obama-esque, then the American Dream is possible." ⁵

The reality couldn't be more different: Hamilton was not an immigrant and certainly no friend of immigrants either. The anti-immigrant policy of Hamilton's Federalist Party is absent from the script, allowing Hamilton to be the

immigrant-made-good who was an advocate of immigrants. Isenberg notes that “a more accurate musical about the immigrant experience would be named *Gallatin* [for the politician Albert Gallatin]. Here is the story of a Swiss émigré mocked for his French accent and hounded by the Federalists who, with him in mind, crafted a constitutional amendment that aimed to deny immigrants the right to hold public office.” [6](#)

Given the contradiction between Miranda’s celebration of Hamilton as an immigrant and the reality of Hamilton’s negative stance on immigration, the word “immigrant” was fraught. Miranda blatantly created a presentist hero in the guise of an immigrant, assuring his mostly liberal audiences that the story was their story, an immigrant story with an inspirational message to counter the toxic resurgence of nativism that would soon bring Donald Trump to the presidency. However, the real-life Hamilton responded to Thomas Jefferson’s proposal to open doors for immigration and citizenship. “Hamilton protested, fretting about the corruption of national character, and (revealingly) claiming that if only ‘native citizens’ had voted in 1800, Jefferson wouldn’t be president.” [7](#)

Article I, Section 8 of the original 1789 US Constitution enumerated the powers of Congress, including “to establish a uniform Rule of Naturalization.” Congress duly passed the Naturalization Act in 1798, requiring immigrants to wait fourteen years to become naturalized citizens. The law was passed under the guise of protecting national security, but most historians conclude that it was intended by the ruling Federalists—Hamilton’s party—to decrease the number of voters. At the time, most immigrants supported Thomas Jefferson and his Democratic-Republican party, the political rivals of the Federalists. The law had only limited effect, because many immigrants rushed to become naturalized before it went into effect, and states could at the time make their own more lenient naturalization laws. In 1798, the

Federalists pushed through the Naturalization Act, one of the four Alien and Sedition Acts (the other three are the Alien Friends Act, Alien Enemies Act, and Sedition Act). The Alien and Sedition Acts were passed by the US Congress amid widespread fear that war with France was imminent. The four laws—which remain controversial to this day—restricted the activities of foreign residents in the country and limited freedom of speech and of the press. Like the Naturalization Acts of 1790 and 1795, the 1798 act also restricted citizenship to “free white persons”—*persons* being male. [8](#)

Hamilton was no scrappy immigrant as portrayed by Chernow and Miranda. He arrived in New York when it was a British colony and was a member of the elite ruling class, a prominent New York politician, a former state assemblyman, a longtime state resident, and married into the prominent and influential New York Schuyler slaver family sixteen years before his resignation from the office of secretary of the treasury. Although Chernow’s and Miranda’s dubious claims that Hamilton was an anti-racist abolitionist have been effectively challenged, few appear to question the central theme of Miranda’s script: that Hamilton was an immigrant who thereby had a larger view of the world and had sympathy for the underdog. But Hamilton did not sympathize with immigrants or any kind of underdog. Hamilton took a hard line on the presence of foreigners and naturalization of citizenship.

The view of Hamilton as immigrant and immigrant friendly was not invented by Ron Chernow or Lin-Manuel Miranda. Even as early as 1954, historian James Morton Smith criticized Hamilton biographers for insisting on Hamilton’s liberalism, particularly regarding immigration, thereby absolving him from any involvement in invoking the draconian Alien and Sedition laws. In fact, most biographers explicitly deny that Hamilton was involved and portray him as a champion of civil liberties. Smith points out that one

biographer even asserts that the Federalists “mutinied” against Hamilton’s recommendation of moderation. In John C. Miller’s heralded study of the Alien and Sedition Acts, he claims that Congress acted against Hamilton’s advice. Even two of Jefferson’s biographers credit Hamilton for opposing their passage, one characterizing Hamilton as having been an earlier and stronger opponent of the bills than Jefferson. [9](#)

Hamilton not only opposed liberal immigration, he also supported a forceful expulsion policy. “My opinion,” he informed Pickering, who became the chief enforcement officer of the Alien and Sedition laws, “is that the mass [of aliens] ought to be obliged to leave the country.” He suggested two exceptions, however, to his proposed policy of mass removal. “The provisions in a Treaty in favor of Merchants,” he wrote, “ought to be observed and there ought to be *guarded* exceptions of characters whose situations would expose them too much if sent away and whose demeanor among us has been unexceptionable. There are a few such. Let us not be cruel or violent.” [10](#) This letter, which is supposed to illustrate Hamilton’s leniency, gives insight into Hamilton’s ideas of cruelty and violence as applied to aliens. Hamilton did not object to the section in the bill that provided that any alien could be deported without trial by jury, or to the one that stipulated that any alien who returned to the United States in violation of a removal order by the president might be imprisoned for life at hard labor without trial by jury. His sole remedy for the cruelty of the bill was protection for foreign merchants and for the few aliens whose demeanor had been “unexceptionable.” Hamilton apparently thought that it would be neither cruel nor violent to uproot the mass of peaceable aliens in the United States and deport them. [11](#)

Federalists in Congress had proposed bills to deny naturalized citizens the right to hold office or vote. The Alien Act of 1798 was a Federalist initiative pushed through

Congress during the threat of war with France. The context in which the Federalists created laws to limit immigration was the ongoing French Revolution. As politicians, the Federalists were also responding to a base that wanted to restrict US citizenship to protect a homogeneous nation against influences represented by French universalism. The United States needed to resist foreign ideas that immigrants might bring with them. The Federalists had conjured an ideology of United States citizenship that celebrated its presumably revolutionary birth and that was unrestrained by traditional provincialism, but in an attempt to define and legislate a unique nationality, they envisioned the US as a bulwark against the threat of world revolution. Irish Republicans were particularly targeted, as they were enthusiastic supporters of international revolution. [12](#) Although most aspects of the Alien and Sedition Acts were repealed, the paranoia embedded in them remains a factor in US political culture, and a reality. President Franklin Roosevelt, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, invoked the Alien Enemies Act to give legal color to the internment of citizens of Japanese descent as well as those designated as enemy aliens from Japan and Axis countries, requiring them to register and be subject to arrest.

Nancy Isenberg, author of *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr*, takes exception to Miranda's portrayal of Aaron Burr in the musical as an envious and power-hungry man without a moral compass and who is obsessed with diminishing Hamilton, leading to the duel and Hamilton's death. In reality, Burr was the opposite. Devoted to the values of the Enlightenment, he advocated criminal justice reform, press freedom, and the rights of women and immigrants. The Federalists accused Burr of "revolutionizing the state," because as a member of the New York State Legislature, he backed funding for internal improvements of roads and bridges and for debtor relief, and establishing a

more democratic method of electing state senators. And significantly, given the musical's characterization of Hamilton as pro-immigrant, it was actually Burr who, among the politicians, was uniquely friendly to immigrants. Burr gave an eloquent speech in the New York State Assembly saying that "America stood with open arms and presented an asylum to the oppressed of every nation." [13](#)

NOT AN ABOLITIONIST

Chernow and Miranda have been mostly lauded by audiences and theater critics, but they have also received sharp criticism regarding race and slavery and the portrayal of Hamilton as an abolitionist. Ishmael Reed, an African American writer, poet, novelist, playwright, and founder of the American Book Award, wrote, directed, and produced a two-act play, *The Haunting of Lin-Manuel Miranda*, which premiered in 2019. [14](#) As a writer, he clarifies, "I agree with my critics the 'Hamilfans' that Miranda has the right to take liberties with their [the founders] histories, but in doing so, he covered up their crimes. Some of those who should know better have endorsed this billion-dollar entertainment. President Obama aided the production by recording George Washington's Farewell Address with a Black choir humming softly in the background. George Washington raffled off slave children to pay his debts." Reed effectively challenges the characterization of Hamilton as an abolitionist, noting that when the successful 1791 slave revolt in Haiti occurred, Hamilton sided with the French slaveholders, not the self-emancipated slaves. [15](#) Reed also condemns Miranda for casting Black and Latino actors for the roles of Hamilton and the other "founding fathers," most of them slavers, yet having no actual enslaved Africans appear in the musical. [16](#)

Annette Gordon-Reed, Harvard professor of history and law, who won the Pulitzer Prize for her book *The Hemingses of Monticello*, writing nearly a year after the musical debuted, observed how little serious criticism the musical had received. She recognized that it was amazing theater but worried that audiences were absorbing it as accurate history. She wonders what the musical's effect would be if played, accurately, by all white actors. [17](#) Historian Lyra Monteiro is troubled by all the Black and Brown bodies on stage without a single enslaved character or even a free Black person. Although a few mentions of slavery are scattered in the lyrics, mainly concerning Jefferson, it's very likely that one viewing the musical could assume that slavery did not exist or, if it did, played little role in the lives and wealth of the men who created the United States. Yet, although slavery is hardly mentioned in the musical, antislavery is central to the portrayal of Hamilton. Following Hamilton's death in the musical, his wife, Eliza, sings, "I speak out against slavery. / You could have done so much more if you only had / Time." [18](#)

Although the family Hamilton married into was the ultrawealthy, slaveholding, and slave-trading New York Schuylers, the source of their wealth is not mentioned in the musical, nor is Hamilton's role in the family slave trade revealed. As Sarah Churchwell writes, "Anyone who didn't know better would finish *Hamilton* innocent of the fact that George Washington owned slaves, much less that Alexander Hamilton himself bought and sold them on behalf of his wife's family. Such stories try to have it both ways: for their heroes to be representative Americans, while erasing the vicious ways in which they truly were representative. The fact that everyone was doing it is not a defense, it merely measures the scale of the crime." [19](#)

In the fall of 2020, a researcher at the Schuyler Mansion found evidence that had long been overlooked in letters and Hamilton's own account books indicating that he not only

bought and sold slaves but also personally owned slaves. The researcher, Jessie Serfilippi, was unequivocal: "Not only did Alexander Hamilton enslave people, but his involvement in the institution of slavery was essential to his identity, both personally and professionally. . . . It is vital that the myth of Hamilton as 'the Abolitionist Founding Father' end."²⁰ The headline of the story published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* read "New Research Paper Claims Abolitionist Owned Slaves," continuing to insist that Hamilton was an abolitionist, which he never was. Abolitionists by definition did not own or trade slaves.²¹

Four years before *Hamilton* opened, in her critique of two biographies of Hamilton, Michelle DuRoss, a historian of Early America, challenged the characterization of Alexander Hamilton as having been an antislavery activist or abolitionist or having had a sympathy for or even identification with enslaved Africans. She clarifies that although Hamilton was not a vocal advocate for slavery, when the issue of slavery conflicted with his personal ambitions and his nearly fanatic belief in property rights, Hamilton chose those goals. Regarding his ambitions, Hamilton was tenacious in his desire to rise to the highest position possible, first in New York society, then in the United States once it was established. Most of the wealthy and influential men in positions of power who could assist him in that ambition were slave owners or slave traders. As for Hamilton sympathizing or identifying with enslaved Africans, such claims are consistently from secondary sources, and there are no existing documents that would support the claim. In his extensive correspondence, there is no mention of the horrors of plantation slavery in the West Indies. Historians describe the horrors and then attribute to Hamilton an opinion that he never expressed or alluded to.²² That Hamilton did not describe the horrors of slavery and the slave trade in the Caribbean surely could more

accurately be interpreted to mean that he took the situation for granted, as normal.

Ron Chernow's biography of Hamilton on which Miranda based his script claimed that Hamilton "saw emancipation of slaves as an inseparable part of the struggle for freedom." [23](#) Chernow, as have other Hamilton biographers, base this view on the fact that Hamilton was a member of the New York Society for the Promotion of the Manumission of Slaves. A previous Hamilton biographer, conservative journalist Richard Brookhiser, wrote that "the society did successfully push to make slavery illegal in New York—a considerable achievement in a state where slavery was a real presence." [24](#) However, DuRoss faults both biographers for citing evidence of the society's impact on New York laws, as New York did not abolish slavery until 1827. She also points out that Hamilton's devotion to property rights was not compromised by voluntary manumission of slaves, as the members of the society could still own slaves. Hamilton's membership in the New York Antislavery Society gave him yet another opportunity to be a part of upper-class New York society. [25](#) Historian Phil Magness writes, "Keep in mind that Hamilton was a prolific newspaper editorialist, penning hundreds of typically pseudonymous tracts on all manner of political issues of his day. A striking feature of the Hamiltonian corpus is the general absence of any clear, unequivocal exposition of the 'abolitionist' viewpoint so many of his biographers have attributed to him." [26](#)

BOOTSTRAPS ASCENDENCY

Hamilton supported the infamous three-fifths clause in the Constitution, which gave slavers voting representation that increased their voting and legislative power based on three-fifths of every individual they held in slavery. Hamilton

believed that the right to vote should be based on property ownership, and the more property one owned, the greater the power of representation. The musical and the book use a version of the historical character Hamilton to promote a classic US “bootstrap” narrative, as in the rap stanza that attributes success to working hard and being smart and a self-starter. As Monteiro points out, the musical is “insidiously invested in trumpeting the deeds of wealthy white men, . . . and though it makes fun of Jefferson, he is nonetheless a pivotal figure.” [27](#) It is the perfect entertainment to popularize the rampant neoliberalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and to lay the burden of failure on those who don’t make it in a system designed to benefit inherited wealth.

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, *Hamilton* cast member Leslie Odom Jr., who is Black, said, “I was a student of African-American history. I cared way more about the achievements and hard-won battles of black people in this country than I did about the founding fathers. But this show has been such a gift to me in that way because I feel that it’s my history, too, for the first time ever. We all fought in the Revolutionary War. I think this show is going to hopefully make hundreds of thousands of people of color feel a part of something that we don’t often feel a part of.” [28](#) Monteiro asks essential questions: “But is it necessarily a good thing to feel ownership over a celebratory, white narrative of the American past? Is it a good thing for people of color to feel connected to the story of Hamilton, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Burr? Or is this the historical version of the Clarks’ Doll Test that was so pivotal in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, encouraging people of color to see the important past as limited to the deeds of white men, while further silencing the historical role of people of color?” [29](#)

While the show was on Broadway and as the play appeared in other venues around the country, Miranda provided free performances for young people, with whole

classes attending. Due to the phenomenal embrace of *Hamilton*, foundation money poured in to develop curricula based on the play for school districts. Young people of color, and especially immigrant youth, were enraptured by the validation offered them in what Miranda presented as the true America, providing a hero to emulate by working hard, always being in the room where “it happened.” The modern Horatio Alger myth had been created. It seems cruel to delude aspiring young people by offering a myth; it also appears cynical, as Miranda stated in the coffee table book he created to accompany the play: “Ron [Chernow] tells you a story and he’s the star of the story. I tell you a story and I’m the star of the story. History is entirely created by the person who tells the story.” [30](#) Yes, and in Chernow’s and Miranda’s telling, that’s the problem, reinforcing as they have the liberal version of the US triumphant origin story.

THE FISCAL-MILITARY STATE

US economic conservatives have long admired Alexander Hamilton, while in the past, liberals have favored Jeffersonians. With Miranda’s play, liberals en masse rallied, mainly due to the play’s celebration of immigrants, portraying Hamilton as a founding immigrant. But neither conservatives nor liberals nor Hamilton biographers have dealt with Hamilton’s role in creating a Constitution that has been characterized as establishing the first “fiscal-military state”—that is, a state created for making war. [31](#) This aspect of Hamilton’s role is crucial to understanding the structure of the settler-colonial state entirely dependent on imported labor, both enslaved (African) and free (immigrant). The United States was thus founded as the first constitutional capitalist state and an empire on conquered land, with capital in the form of slaves and land (real

estate). It is crucial to understand that this was exceptional in the world at that time and has remained exceptional. The capitalist firearms industry was among the first successful modern corporations, an initiative of Alexander Hamilton. This was the Springfield armory in western Massachusetts established by the Continental Congress in 1777. [32](#) Arms production is one of the few industries that survived late twentieth-century deindustrialization. By 1840, the United States was the leading economic powerhouse in the world, having expanded its claimed territory beyond the Mississippi and establishing the Cotton Kingdom.

Stanford law professor and historian Gregory Ablavsky emphasizes the centrality of Indian affairs in creating the Constitution, particularly provisions concerning federalism and the fiscal-military state. He highlights how ratification created a Constitution committed to the violent expropriation of the Indigenous territories bordering the thirteen states. The Constitution created a people empowered to sustain a powerful military to carry out conquest of the continent, with the full participation of the settlers. This was what the war for independence was fought for, with great sacrifices; this is what the Anglo-American settlers desired.

For his analysis of the Constitution, Ablavsky borrowed historian Max Edling's term "fiscal-military state." Edling took the term from the historical literature on British state formation, in which it refers to "a state primarily designed for war." Edling writes that the United States did not adopt the British model wholesale, rather the Constitution created a national government that was "light, and inconspicuous," but which "held the full powers of the 'fiscal-military state' in reserve." [33](#) US historians make much of the fact that the founders did not create a large military, and thereby ignore military history. But the initial importance of the US military was mainly for the gradual taking of the continent, not for engagements with European militaries. The immediate

objective of the Washington administration's policy was to secure the Ohio territory that the British had relinquished to the United States. However, lands of this territory were owned and densely inhabited by Indigenous nations, among them the Miami and the Shawnee, with extensive village networks, transportation routes in roads and rivers, and meticulously tended farmlands. Although committed to appropriating these already inhabited lands, the administration desired to buy off rather than fight the Native peoples. British colonists had already forged into Ohio country before the revolution, against British prohibition to do so, and the Washington administration realized that the interests of the settlers and the Natives were at odds. Washington believed that the government had to be the arbiter of the conflict. Edling writes, "In the end, however, the government never managed to reconcile these clashing interests but used the army to destroy the Indian tribes, thereby setting a pattern that would often be repeated as the republic pursued its westward course of empire." [34](#)

Hamilton argued the federal military was too weak to overawe the "savages." The expansionist states of Georgia, Pennsylvania, and New York sought and gained federal protection of settler land claims. Hamilton and other Federalists invoked "savages" to justify a stronger federal state and a standing army. This elevated the dispossession of Indigenous peoples into a constitutional principle. [35](#) Ablavsky writes, "The 'savages' Hamilton referenced at the Convention were thus both impetus and justification for the creation of a federal standing army supported through direct taxation. This militarist constitutional solution to Indian affairs sought a fiscal-military state that would possess the means to dominate the borderlands at Indians' expense. While Madison's argument for centralization languished, Hamiltonian invocation of the 'savage' threat, embraced partly out of expediency, became an important part of Federalist rhetoric." [36](#)

Hamilton was right, of course. Native nations did resist settler spread and were an existential threat to settlers' ambitions of "free land" and empire for the entire nineteenth century. The first attempted military moves against the Indigenous confederacy in 1790 and 1791 were catastrophic. The United States spent \$5 million to triple the size of the army, making up five-sixths of all federal expenditures from 1790 to 1796. The Militia Act of 1792, the forerunner of the Insurrection Act of 1807, mandated a genocidal policy against the Indigenous nations of the Northwest Territory, allowing for federal troops to eliminate the resistant communities in order to allow settlers to occupy the land. The Militia Act was used two years later against Appalachian settlers in western Pennsylvania who were protesting an unfair tax on their distilleries. This was the sole work of Hamilton. Although secretary of the treasury, he was still a military commander who led twelve thousand federal troops to crush the minor "whiskey" rebellion. [37](#) Only with unlimited counterinsurgent war—destroying Indigenous towns, burning crops and food storage, driving inhabitants into peripheries as refugees—did the United States prevail, seizing most of present-day Ohio. Military historian John Grenier writes, "For the first 200 years of our military heritage, then, Americans depended on arts of war that contemporary professional soldiers supposedly abhorred: razing and destroying enemy villages and fields; killing enemy women and children; raiding settlements for captives; intimidating and brutalizing enemy noncombatants; and assassinating enemy leaders. . . . In the frontier wars between 1607 and 1814, Americans forged two elements—unlimited war and irregular war—into their first way of war." [38](#) Unlimited US wars against Native nations remained a near constant for the next century. This is the military aspect of the fiscal-military state created by the Constitution.

Simple military conquest was only one part of the process. The framing of the bloody wars to come cast the Indians as aggressive “savages” with the Anglo settlers as victims. Seventy years later, the US Army had jackbooted across the continent to the Pacific, incorporating seventeen new states and ethnically cleansing the continent east of the Mississippi by forcibly removing Native peoples. Although the legal term “genocide” did not exist until the mid-twentieth century, it was embedded in the conscious designs of the Constitution’s drafters. Ablavsky notes that the Constitution was not a document of restraint, as many argue; rather it was the foundation of a powerful early national state, whose authority was strongest on its peripheries. [39](#)

In short, the Constitution created a national state that was simultaneously weak and strong. . . . This was precisely what the expansionist states and Anglo-American settlers wanted. Their libertarian streak ran only as far as self-interest, for they welcomed a strengthened federal state as long as it was an imperialist one, focused on projecting power against the Indians rather than against its citizens. The Hamiltonians would solve the problem of Indian affairs by committing the federal state to empowering, not restraining, the inexorable westward tide. [40](#)

HAMILTON, A MILITARY MAN

Conquest of the continent, including the military conquest of México, which ceded half its territory to the United States, was only the beginning of US imperialism. Native nations were the first subjects of US empire, but not the last. When the founders were writing the Constitution, Indian affairs were a central site of nation-state formation, establishing a template for later imperial projects. Ablavsky writes that “the Federalists’ strategic deployment of the rhetoric of savagery anticipated future debates, as Indians became the stock template for America’s subsequent cross-cultural

encounters, their supposed primitiveness evolving into a free-floating discourse to justify rule over other purportedly inferior peoples.” The constitutional structures that were created to take Indigenous lands and control the continent—the definition of the national fiscal-military state—became the basis of US overseas imperialism. [41](#) The “savage” as enemy has endured as the justification for US military intervention. President George W. Bush’s Justice Department employed that precedent from nineteenth-century “Indian wars” to legitimize military actions and torture in its “War on Terror.” [42](#) An arc can be drawn from that formative time to the 2011 SEAL Special Forces Operation Neptune Spear to kill Osama bin Laden, which was code-named “Geronimo.” Once bin Laden was killed, one of the commanders reported “Geronimo E-KIA,” E-KIA being code for “enemy killed in action.”

Historian William Hogeland, writing before Lin-Manuel Miranda had conceived *Hamilton*, observed that “Neo-Hamiltonians of every kind are blotting out a defining feature of his thought, one that Hamilton himself insisted on throughout his turbulent career: the essential relationship between the concentration of national wealth and the obstruction of democracy through military force. . . . Using the military to trounce the rule of law and violate civil rights was integral to his vision of federal power, national wealth, and a strong union.” Hogeland sees Hamilton’s success in the Whiskey Rebellion as inspiring an almost obsessive militarism as he grew older. The Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 was a mass settler protest to taxation in western Pennsylvania, which Washington and Hamilton violently put down at the head of twelve thousand troops. “Out of office, Hamilton continued to order around his hacks in the Adams cabinet (or as the PBS biography puts it, he ‘advised’ them), hoping to contrive an all-out war with France. Hamilton also envisioned leading the U.S. army into Spanish Florida, then continuing into Central and South America.” [43](#) As Hogeland

told an interviewer, “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.” [44](#) That’s the fiscal-military state, a capitalist state created for war.

A hundred years’ war followed, and hardly a day passed without counterinsurgent war against one Native nation or another, or many at once. The road map (literally, the maps) for the conquest of the continent was the Northwest Ordinance promulgated by the Continental Congress in 1787, which drew up plans and military strategies for seizing this vast region of dozens of Native nations, whose citizens lived in villages surrounded by their self-subsistent food crops of maize, corn, squash, and pumpkins. During the previous two decades, George Washington, leading the Virginia colony militia, had encroached into this territory through the Appalachians, mapping the land and selling plots to land-poor white farmers, who then illegally settled on the unceded lands. Although Britain claimed the territory, in a 1763 proclamation, it barred settlement west of the thirteen colonies. The drive of colonial settlers to expand over the mountain range to appropriate this territory was a primary motivation for independence from Britain. With the establishment of the United States, the first structure of settler colonialism was erected.

The Society of the Cincinnati, a hereditary society that still exists, was founded in 1783 and composed of the military officers of the Continental Army. General George Washington was the founding president general and served as such until his death in 1799. General Alexander Hamilton succeeded him as president general in 1780. The badge of office was a diamond eagle. The society was named after Cincinnatus, a fifth-century Roman Empire war hero. [45](#) The city of Cincinnati, chartered by the United States in 1802 on the Ohio River and the border of Kentucky, was also named after Cincinnatus. The locale had been the heart of the

Shawnee Nation. It was the crucible of the founding of the United States in genocide.