

A chilling attack on free speech

Trump attempts to bully cast of *Hamilton* over criticism of anti-democratic policies

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An incident occurred last week that is a small taste of things to come.

Vice President-elect Mike Pence attended Friday night's performance of the Broadway show *Hamilton: An American Musical*. His presence in the theater was met with a mixture of cheers and (mostly) boos. Following the show, Brandon Victor Dixon, one of the show's lead actors, addressed Pence on behalf of the cast and the musical's creators.

Dixon asked Pence, in the process of leaving his seat at the Richard Rodgers Theatre on West 46th Street in Manhattan, to remain and listen to his remarks. The actor then explained that the cast had "a message for you, sir. We hope that you will hear us out."

Dixon continued, "Vice President-elect Pence, we welcome you and we truly thank you for joining us here at *Hamilton: An American Musical*, we really do. We, sir, we 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 to work on behalf of all of us. *All of us*."

"Again, we truly thank you for sharing this show, this wonderful American story told by a diverse group of men [and] women of different colors, creeds, and orientations."

The statement was written by *Hamilton*'s creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda, in collaboration with the show's director, Thomas Kail, and lead producer Jeffrey Seller, with input from cast members. *Hamilton*, which has been hugely successful, is a musical based on Ron Chernow's 2004 biography of Alexander Hamilton

(1755/57–1804), a significant figure in the American Revolution and the early days of the United States.

In 2016, the show received a record-setting 16 Tony nominations and took home 11. It was also the recipient of the 2016 Grammy Award for Best Musical Theater Album and won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

President-elect Donald Trump responded to Dixon's polite and conciliatory--one might say, overly polite and conciliatory--remarks aimed at the incoming vice president (when audience members booed at the mention of Pence's name, Dixon told them, "There's nothing to boo here, ladies and gentlemen. There's nothing to boo here. We're all here sharing a story of love"), with a series of thuggish Tweets Saturday and Sunday.

Trump first wrote, "Our wonderful future VP Mike Pence was harassed last night at the theater by the cast of *Hamilton*, cameras blazing. This should not happen!"

How would Trump propose to prevent such comments? It is no idle threat when an individual who will soon have the FBI and the intelligence-military apparatus at his disposal insists that "This should not happen!" Dixon replied, in a Tweet of his own, that "conversation is not harassment, sir."

Trump's next message read: "The theater must always be a safe and special place. The cast of *Hamilton* was very rude last night to a very good man, Mike Pence. Apologize!" And finally: "The cast and producers of *Hamilton*, which I hear is highly overrated, should immediately apologize to Mike Pence for their terrible behavior."

The demand that critics should "apologize" for criticizing a public official is an expression of

authoritarianism. Along the same lines, Trump's first response to protests after the November 8 election blamed the demonstrations on "professional protesters, incited by the media." One of those being considered for the post of director of Homeland Security in a Trump administration, Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke, wrote a series of Tweets last week calling for a "state of emergency" to be declared and for the ongoing anti-Trump protests to be "quelled" by the military.

Pence struck a more dignified pose than Trump in response to the *Hamilton* incident. He told Chris Wallace of Fox News, "I really enjoyed watching *Hamilton*. It was a real joy to be there. I heard a few boos. I wasn't offended by what was said."

This is mere posturing. The vice president-elect is a hardened right-winger. As a talk show host, congressman and governor of Indiana, Pence advanced views typical of the Christian fundamentalist and Tea Party right. He strongly supported the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration's "war on terror," and each measure aimed against Iran and Syria. He voted in favor of every attack on democratic rights and the expansion of NSA and CIA surveillance powers.

Pence has been hostile to social spending and public education and is a furious opponent of abortion and gay rights. The Indiana congressman gloated in 2005 that Hurricane Katrina had cleared the way for "free market" solutions in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast generally.

In 2015, as governor, Pence signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which permitted individuals and companies to discriminate based on their "religious beliefs." Advance America, an ultra-right Christian outfit, explained on its web site that the law means "Christian bakers, florists and photographers should not be punished for refusing to participate in a homosexual marriage!"



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