

Hamilton's Profound Question Gains Urgency Today

By Don Sutherland

In *Federalist No. 29*, which concerns the role and regulation of the militia during times of insurrection and invasion, Alexander Hamilton raised a question that is far more profound and far broader in its application than the context in which it was asked in that essay. Hamilton's question gets to the underlying assumption at the heart of representative government.

In that document, Hamilton asked, "Where in the name of common-sense, are our fears to end if we may not trust our sons, our brothers, our neighbors, our fellow-citizens?" That essay was published in the *New York Daily Advertiser* on January 10, 1788.

Now, 232 years later, the need to address that question retains its relevance. Moreover, it has gained urgency. The recent events that resulted in the needless slaughter of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd—one in Louisville and the other in Minneapolis—at the hands of the police who are charged to protect the public have brought the nation back to that question.

All across the nation, people are now rising to demonstrate for structural reforms. Despite the enormous gains of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the nation's having elected its first African American President—not for one term, but for two—the malignancy of systemic racism persisted beneath the public's notice, tarnishing policing, tearing apart families, claiming innocent lives and spreading grief. So long as it was hidden from public sight, it festered and little changed.

But the arrival of smartphones with video capability shattered the veil in which systemic racism routinely inflicted a terrible and growing toll out of sight to most but the communities victimized by it. Everyone could now see that awful cancer out in the open.

In response to the demonstrations, the President had a historic opportunity to provide leadership in pursuit of reform. Instead, he fired the "heavy artillery" of Twitter, further inflaming passions and further dividing people. In just one week's time, the White House has been barricaded, fenced, and isolated from the American people. Almost overnight, a Baghdad-style "Green Zone" has been constructed. Almost daily, it has been expanding in size. This is Washington, DC, not some capital of a distant authoritarian state. This is hardly what those who put their names on the Declaration of Independence could ever have imagined in launching their struggle.

That brings us back to Hamilton's question. If the Administration of Donald Trump, cannot "trust our sons, our brothers, our neighbors, our fellow-citizens" then what legitimacy does it still possess? If it cannot trust the people it is supposed to serve, what mandate does it have left to govern? If its distrust the American people is so deep that it must transform the nation's capital into a fortress—symbolically severing its ties to the American people—what else might it pursue? Then, where "are our fears to end?"

History is playing out. It is playing out with a rapidity of events seldom witnessed by any single generation.

This generation has a unique opportunity to become its authors. Our choices will allow us to write how the narrative unfolds. What we write is still a matter of choice.

At present, there remain two distinct paths. One leads ever deeper into distrust, darkness and national decline. That path relies on fences, walls, suppression of choice and increasingly the resort to naked force. The guardians of the status quo have set off down this path.

The other leads to renewal, tolerance, and ultimately a vibrant community in which all people share an equal place and command equal respect by virtue of their common humanity. Here, there are no walls or fences. Decisions enjoy the legitimacy of broad public support.

This is the path the demonstrators have taken. Every day, more and more people are joining them. These are our daughters, our sons, our sisters, our brothers, our neighbors, and our fellow citizens. Their efforts—our efforts—are nothing to fear. The destination that lies ahead is something we should all look forward to.