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Book Notes:
Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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Who was George Washington?

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What could be controversial about George Washington?

Well, you might be surprised. The recently issued *1776 Project Report* [1] describes him as a peerless hero of American freedom while the San Francisco Board of Education just erased his name from school buildings because he was a slave owner and had, shall we say, a troubled relationship with native Americans. [2]

Which view is true? The *1776 Project's* view, which The Heritage Foundation called "a celebration of America," [3] or the San Francisco Board of Education's? [4] This is only the most recent skirmish in "the history wars," which, whether from the political right's attempt to whitewash American history as an ever more glorious ascent or the "woke" left's attempt to reveal every blemish, every wrong ever done in America's name, are a political struggle for control of America's past in order to control its future.

Both competing politically correct "*isms*" fail to

see the American story's rich weave of human aspiration as imperfect people seek to create a more perfect union. To say they never stumble, to say they never fall short of their ideals is one sort of lie; to say they are mere hypocrites who frequently betray the very ideals they preach is another sort of lie. In reality, Americans are both – they are idealists who seek to bring forth upon this continent, in Lincoln's phrase, "government of the people, by the people, for the people" while on many occasions tripping over themselves and falling short. But an important thread in their story is that, for the most part, they learn from their mistakes, amend their behavior, and move forward.

Much like the man the San Francisco Board of Education scorns, the story of America is the story of imperfect people seeking some version of political perfection, stumbling, then recovering and moving forward.

Since next Monday is Washington's birthday, I thought it might be interesting to revisit his life. [5] Who was this man the *1776 Project* venerates and the "woke" left of the San Francisco Board of Education scorns?

I discovered that he is everywhere and nowhere. He is the man whose name everyone knows and about whom most know very little. He is on the dollar bill in which we trust and on the 25-cent coin. His name graces our national capital; a state; in every state there is a county named for him, and in virtually every county a town or township; and, in many towns, a school.

Perhaps Washington's legendary reserve obscures him; he was not an easy man to approach. There is a story of Gouvernour Morris taking a bet from Hamilton and slapping Washington on the back in a good ol'e boy moment and being frozen by Washington's cold stare.

Perhaps because he lived in the age before photography it is not quite clear how to represent him. He has been reduced to a slightly comic figure in knee breeches and powdered wig; a stuffed velvet suit with outstretched handin Gilbert Stuart's awful portrait. At worst, he is seen as a peddler on Presidents Day. At best, as Marcus Cunliffe writes, "He is entombed in his own myth." [6] Or, just like the Washington Monument, that cold and impersonal shaft of stone, he is seen, in Joseph Ellis' words, as an "icon – distant, cold, intimidating." [7]

The thought occurred to me that slightly comic stuffed suits do not mount revolutions against the most powerful empire of their time; if they do, they do not win. They do not become icons. Washington did, won, and became iconic. Or, to again quote Ellis:

> Benjamin Franklin was wiser … Alexander Hamilton was more brilliant; John Adams was better read; Thomas Jefferson was more intellectually sophisticated; James Madison was more politically astute. Yet each and all of these … acknowledged that Washington was their unquestioned superior … Washington was recognized as *primus inter pares.* [8]

First among equals – why was that? Who was he?

First, he was not a stuffed suit. In fact, of all the presidents, he most closely resembles the hero John Wayne played in countless movies. He was the original of the archetypal American male or, maybe more accurately, the archetypal American male fantasy: aloof, laconic, self-sufficient, physically

powerful, courageous, a loner. He was the man who could walk into the wilderness alone, meet its dangers, and return.

All of which he did.

Washington was equally at home on the frontier and in the drawing room; in the saddle and on the dance floor. Beginning at age 16, he was a fearless explorer and surveyor of the Virginia piedmont; at age 20 he volunteered to take Virginia's message through the forest primeval to the French at Fort LeBoeuf. He was an accomplished woodsman and Indian fighter, which today some might see as a blemish.

All of his life, he moved seamlessly between wilderness, battlefields, and high society. He loved few things more than dancing and theater. He preferred the company of women to men; he was not, however, a womanizer – no whiff of scandal was ever attached to him.

Second, speaking of his ascent, Washington was a man of gigantic ambition. He was the eldest son of a second marriage. His father died when he was 11. He had a cold and distant relationship with his mother. Through his half-brother Lawrence's marriage to Anne Fairfax, Washington became connected to Virginia's foremost colonial family. This initial entre to the Virginia elite cemented Washington's ambition to become a member of the colonial elite.

It is Washington's ambition that gives the lie to the prim, proper image of Washington as the prude who could not tell a lie. While his honesty is impeccable, he would do whatever he needed to do to advance his own cause. He was canny, shrewd – he was, in a certain sense, a social climber.

Interest – self-interest – was one of the governing principles of Washington's life. He assumed that individuals and nations would always do what was in their interest to do; if you wanted to know what an individual or country would do, ask yourself what is in their interest to do. Or, as he himself said:

> It is a maxim founded on the universal experience of mankind that no nation is to be trusted further than it is bound by its interest; and no prudent statesman or politician will venture to depart from it. [9]

It is a policy that Washington followed throughout his life; it is to his credit and our immense benefit that what he chose to do was honorable.

Although his society's values evolved over the course of his life (and he had no small part in that evolution), he sought his society's honor. In his time, a person's worth was a function of the esteem in which society held them. That esteem, in turn, was a function of the extent to which one embodied society's values.

It was an aristocratic society – a society based on honor. Washington's pursuit of society's honor was at times noble; at others perhaps not so much. It was never ignoble. In his youth, he volunteered for the Virginia militia,
sought the favor of British generals, whose dismissal of him as a mere colonial planted the seeds of future rebellion.

He exercised the self-discipline to put aside the woman he loved – Sally Fairfax, his best friend's wife – to marry the wealthiest widow in Virginia. He and Martha were married for 40 years. She was his boon companion; in all his exploits,

his unshakeable partner.

At the Continental Congress he wore his military uniform from the French and Indian War lest the delegates forget who among them had the greatest military experience.

He mastered the art of resigning – getting what he wanted by appearing not to want it. While never remotely as duplicitous as Jefferson, Washington pretended to be apolitical while being one of the age's consummate politicians.

As we shall see in his attitude toward slavery, Washington, like the people he led, was scarcely flawless, but in order to answer "Who was George Washington?" there are five things one needs to know about him. First, he was a natural leader; second, he was a man of great vision; third, he was a man of both moral and physical courage – he led from the front; fourth, although a reader, he learned by doing and never made the same mistake twice – he learned from what he called the *"anvil of experience"*; lastly, he was a man of great integrity.

Washington and Leadership

As a leader, Washington demonstrated both transactional and transformational behaviors. A transactional leader seems to make bargains with his followers – you do this for me, I will do this for you. More honorably stated, transactional leaders create bonds of loyalty between themselves and their followers. They repay loyalty in kind.

Beginning with his leadership of the Virginia "Blues" during the French and Indian War, Washington showed his troops he would support their needs if they followed his lead. This continued throughout the Revolutionary War when he reached into the ranks to find Henry Knox, Nathanael Greene, Alexander Hamilton, John Laurens, Marquis de Lafayette, and others whose loyalty he repaid in kind. He labored tirelessly with Congress to honor its commitments to the soldiers of the Continental Army.

Similarly, he was ruthless with those who betrayed him, such as Charles Lee, Thomas Conway, and, most notoriously, Benedict Arnold, who Washington vowed to hang should he ever catch him.

As a transactional leader, Washington never asked his followers to do anything that he would not do himself. Whether in battle or in politics, he led from the front. From the disaster at Fort Necessity during the French and Indian War then throughout the revolution, he was in front. In politics, from the Virginia House of Burgesses through the Continental Congress to the Constitutional Convention to the founding of the American government, Washington was in the forefront.

Washington the Visionary

As a transformational leader, Washington was a man of great vision. He was one of the first to see that America's future lay not in European entanglements, but in the West. In 1783's *Circular Letter to the States,* he foresaw the American empire:

> The Citizens of America, placed in the most enviable condition, as *the Sole Lords and Proprietors* of a vast tract of Continent … are, from this period, to be considered Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre, which seems peculiarly designed by

Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity. [10]

The phrase “sole proprietors of a vast tract” of continent was not literally true. Although Washington wrote immediately after the revolution’s successfully driving the British from east of the Allegheny Mountains, the remainder of the continent was very much occupied. The Spanish controlled the deep South and West, the French held New Orleans, and the British, while driven out of the East, still held forts in the old Northwest Territory.

And, of course, there were the Native Americans. Washington’s relations with the indigenous people were as fraught as his relationship with the enslaved workers at Mount Vernon. From the 1750s during the French and Indian War through the Revolution and General Sullivan’s raids against the Iroquois in New York state to his sending Mad Anthony Wayne to quash the native Americans in what became Ohio and Indiana, Washington tried to balance accommodation with conquest.

Conquest won.

In 1753, the Seneca leader Tanacharison (the Half-King) gave Washington the nickname Conotocaurius – Town Destroyer. It had previously been given to Washington’s great-grandfather John Washington. [11] When in 1779 during Sullivan’s raids into the lands of the Iroquois Confederacy for having aided the British, he was given the name again by the Seneca Chief Cornplanter. [12]

After the revolution, he attempted to work with the Creek Sachem Alexander McGillivray to settle land disputes between the nascent state of Georgia and the Creek Indians of the Southeast. It resulted in the Treaty of New York in 1790, but settler land-hunger doomed Washington’s efforts. [13]

Although he respected the indigenous people as warriors and admired their resourcefulness, Washington was a man of his times and supported the relentless drive of Americans over the mountains to settle what became western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and the upper Midwest.

Much more ambiguous was Washington’s relationship with slavery. He saw slavery as the spider in the cup that, as in Shakespeare’s ***The Winter’s Tale***, foretold death. For Washington, the prophesized death was his dream of a free and prosperous America. He came to understand the validity of Samuel Johnson’s famous swipe at the American rebels – “how is it we hear the loudest whelps of liberty from the drivers of negroes?” [14]

As with Native Americans, Washington was a man of his time. One can’t be too sanguine about his relationship with black Americans. But over the course of his life, in conflicted and often contradictory patterns, he changed.

As a result of his relationship with his slave-servant William Lee, who was with him through every moment of the Revolutionary War, his experience with black soldiers in the Continental Army, and his evolving understanding of the slaves at Mount Vernon based on his notions of self-interest, he learned. He called slavery his “only unavoidable subject of regret.” [15] He made ending it harder than it needed to be. As a result, it is the darkest stain on his legacy.

Did Washington really free his slaves? It is a question the San Francisco School Board asks; the *1776 Project* answers saying he freed all of his slaves upon his death. [16] In reality, the story is more complicated.

There is a famous Washington family portrait of George and Martha and their two grandchildren sitting at a table looking at a map or tapestry. The painting is framed on one side by a faded burgundy drape; on the other by a silhouette of a tree and the faint, almost shadowed image, of an enslaved servant in elegant livery. The image is almost certainly that of William Lee.

With Washington through every day of the American Revolution, Lee was an American celebrity. In the Washington family picture, however, he is like the ghost at the banquet reminding us of, as James Madison called it, “America’s original sin of slavery.” [17]

What to make of George Washington and slavery? Was he a hypocrite? Or an evolving modern bedeviled by a system he inherited? Or some combination of both? I’d argue some combination of both.

Washington died in 1799. In his will, he made provisions to free all of his slaves. Only one of them – William Lee – was immediately freed. Nearly half of Mount Vernon’s slaves remained enslaved.

Washington, like nearly all wealthy Virginians, owned slaves. He inherited 10 slaves when his father died and acquired more before he married Martha, who had slaves of her own, inheriting them from her first husband Daniel Parke Custis.

A widow was entitled to one-third of her husband’s estate, called the “dower share.” She could live off the income from it for the remainder of her life. But when she died, the money and assets reverted back to her deceased husband’s heirs. Which in Martha’s case would be her grandchildren. Technically, the property – the enslaved people – were not Martha’s. They were definitely not George’s, but, under the law of coverture, which made a wife and her property the property of her husband, they were George’s to manage.

Washington treated his slaves better than most – which is kind of like obviously damning with faint praise. A man of his times, he made the same errors as his neighbors. A personally driven man, he worked people hard. Monitoring his slaves’ output, he had people whipped and separated from their families as punishment. As with Ona Judge, Martha’s personal servant and Hercules the family cook, Washington vigorously pursued escaped slaves. While President in Philadelphia in the 1790s, he rotated his enslaved workers back and forth between Pennsylvania and Virginia to avoid Pennsylvania’s law that made anyone resident in the state for six consecutive months a free person. [18]

Washington’s thoughts about slavery evolved as he grew to understand the contradiction between slavery and the ideals of the revolution he led. To his credit, he supported abolition; to his discredit, he never implemented it while he lived.

His will demonstrated that confusion. On the plus side, it included the order to free his slaves; on the negative, it required that they remain with Martha for the rest of her life. He thought, since he couldn’t free Martha’s dower slaves, freeing some of the enslaved people and having them live amidst those still enslaved would create consternation, confusion, and unrest. However, since they knew they were to be freed, those remaining enslaved became restless. Perceiving them as a threat and believing that they were plotting against her, in January 1801, a little more

than a year after Washington died, Martha freed the rest of his slaves. [19]

So, Washington's attitude toward slavery reveals the most profound contradiction in American history – the tortured struggle between its glittering visionary ideals and the reality of, first, slavery, then the continuing 155-year post-Civil War struggle for minority rights. Washington got it wrong at first and never quite got it right, but he had the vision to learn and the integrity to struggle to make it right. Because he made the struggle harder than it needed to be, it can be argued Washington foreshadowed both America's greatness and its great struggle to live up to its ideals.

Washington's Courage

In addition to being a natural leader and a visionary, Washington also possessed great physical and moral courage. Legendary to his contemporaries, Thomas Jefferson said of him, "he was incapable of fear." [20] Washington's physical courage might best be described by an account of the Battle of Princeton:

> The Pennsylvania militia have just broken in the face of heavy musket fire and grape shot. Suddenly, Washington appears among them, urging them to rally and form a line behind him … the troops begin to move forward with Washington front-and-center astride his white English charger. … at thirty yards, Washington orders a halt and both sides exchange volleys simultaneously. An aide, Col. Fitzgerald, covers his face fearing Washington will be killed. ... But while men on both sides have fallen, Washington remains atop his horse, untouched. He turns toward Fitzgerald, takes his hand, and says, 'Colonel … bring up the troops. The day is ours.' [21]

Washington's moral courage shines through all of his life – whether resisting his desire for Sally Fairfax and, some suspect, later, Elizabeth Willing Powel, a doyenne of Philadelphia society who became his great friend and confidant; his love and loyalty to Martha Washington; the fastidious care he took to honor his obligations to his step-children; the eight years he stayed the course during the Revolutionary War, visiting his beloved Mount Vernon only twice.

Or at Newburgh, N.Y. in March 1783, when he squelched an officers' coup against Congress by the simple force of his presence. Speaking to the officers, some of whom plotted mutiny, he paused, put on his eyeglasses for the first time in front of them, and said, "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray, but almost blind in the service of my country." He told them, "As I have never left your side for one moment … as I have been the constant companion of your distresses." Men wept. The coup was over before it began. [22]

His moral courage shines brightest, however, when as the conquering general, one whom history teaches rarely relinquishes power, Washington, unlike Julius Caesar, Oliver Cromwell, and Napoleon, rejected becoming king. At the war's end, like the Roman General Cincinnatus, he resigned his commission. British ruler George III said if Washington did that, he would be "the greatest man in the world." He did, saying to Congress assembled in Annapolis, Maryland on December 23, 1783:

> Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from

> the great theatre of Action; and bidding an Affectionate farewell to this August body under whose orders I have so long acted, I here offer my Commission, and take my leave of all the employments of public life. [23]

He bowed, left, and immediately rode to Mount Vernon for his first Christmas Eve at home in nine years.

He did it again in 1796 when he handed the presidency to John Adams in the world's first peaceful transfer of power.

The Anvil of Experience

Experience was Washington's great teacher. He knew how to adapt. A Virginia planter's great pride was his tobacco crop; growing tobacco made one a member of the elite, far superior to a mere farmer. When he realized that whether from declining soil quality or price gouging by London merchants that he could no longer sustain his wealth from tobacco alone, Washington became a farmer. He mastered cash crops, built a fishery in the Potomac below Mount Vernon, and created a distillery. While his peers languished, his wealth grew.

During the war, Washington's experience taught him to stifle his instinctive desire for the climactic clash, the great battle that would end it all. He had a *mano a mano* strain to his personality; he did not fear confrontation. Contrary to his instincts, however, he realized that he could only win the war by not losing it. Not losing it meant avoiding the heroic clash and instead fighting a guerilla war of hit and run. Washington realized that he had to learn to fight like an Indian, not a European. He did. He kept his Army intact and ultimately prevailed.

Washington, a proud man, was sufficiently humble to let experience teach him he could wither as a tobacco planter or thrive as a farmer; he could fight a glorious but losing major battle or he could win by tenaciously refusing to lose. Washington was both mature and wise enough to adapt to changing realities, to learn from the "anvil of experience."

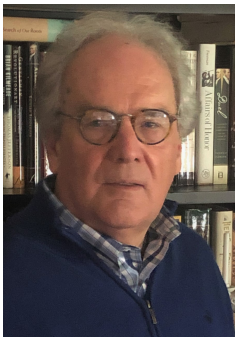
Washington's Integrity

Washington's personal integrity was part of his mystique. He died in 1799 and, for 221 years, first contemporaries and later scandal seekers have attempted to discredit him. He volunteered to lead the Continental Army for expenses only; he refused a salary. He did this again, albeit not completely, as President. He kept scrupulous expense records. No one has ever found any discrepancy. His personal life was beyond reproach. As a political leader, he loathed factions and grubbing for votes because it could lead to compromise and conflicts of interest. He understood service before self and sacrificing for the common good.

In conclusion, both the *1776 Project* and the San Francisco School Board fail to understand that history is richer than cliched bromides and after-the-fact, self-righteous judgments. If Washington's conflicted behavior toward slavery reveals the most profound contradiction in American history – the tortured struggle between its glittering visionary ideals and the reality of the continuing struggle for minority rights – then it can also be said he foreshadowed both America's greatness and its great struggle to live up to its ideals. Like Washington the man, America is a work in progress, but without him, the story would not only be unfinished but also incomplete. Without him there is no story, for without him

there is no America. It's really just that simple. He was, indeed, the first American.

For a more enhanced experience of George Washington, listen to Dr. Andrew Roth's ***The American Tapestry Project,*** Episode #7, on WQLN NPR1 available here.



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End Notes

Photo Credits:** The picture of a young Martha Washington is a recreation by Michael J. Deas of what she might have resembled based on other paintings of her. It was used as the jacket cover for Patricia Brady's ***Martha Washington: An American Life (New York: The Viking Press, 2005). The picture of a young George Washington in his French and Indian War uniform is from https://presidenstory.com/stat_pht.php

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3. See "*A Celebration of America"* at **The Heritage Foundation** available at https://www.heritage.org/celebration-america accessed February 12, 2021.
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