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Madison, Wisconsin: Parallel Press, 2004

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A M E R I C A ' S F O U N D E R S

**GEORGE
WASHINGTON**

"The Man of the Age"

JOHN P. KAMINSKI

A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

A M E R I C A ' S F O U N D E R S

GEORGE WASHINGTON

"The Man of the Age"

JOHN P. KAMINSKI



PARALLEL PRESS • 2004

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ISBN 1-893311-49-x

“America’s Founders” is a chapbook series published by Parallel Press, an imprint of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries, in collaboration with the Center for the Study of the American Constitution, in the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

The subtitle of this chapbook, “The Man of the Age” was taken from: Alexander Hamilton, General Orders, Philadelphia, December 21, 1799, in Harold C. Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (27 vols., New York, 1961–1987), XXIV, 112.

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FIRST EDITION

The America's Founders series is dedicated to the several hundred Mentor Teachers who are the heart and soul of the Center for Civic Education's program "We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution"

This chapbook is dedicated to
TIM MOORE
Heritage Christian High School
West Allis, Wisconsin
and
BETH RATWAY
Wauwatosa East High School
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

PREFACE

THE GESTATION PERIOD FOR THIS FIRST IN A SERIES OF chapbooks ON AMERICA'S FOUNDERS has been exactly half a century. I read my first book on the Founding Generation while in fourth grade at Frederick Funston Elementary School in Chicago in 1954. From that time I was fascinated by the grand events of that generation as well as the innumerable individual dramas that played out in the Revolutionary theater. It was that deep interest in the Revolutionary Era that convinced me to attend graduate school at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and become a student of Merrill Jensen, a great historian of the American Revolution.

For the last thirty-five years I have been editing *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights*—for ten years as associate editor under Professor Jensen and then, since his death in January 1980, as director of the project. During these many years, I have immersed myself in the correspondence and political writings of the most important generation in American history. Half of my daily life I live in the twentieth century, but the other half is spent back in the eighteenth.

For the last five years I have devoted much of my spare time to a new study. As a longtime historical documentary editor, I understood the treasures in American history that were waiting to be discovered in the thousands of documentary volumes published over the last two centuries. Especially important to me were the modern editions of so many of America's Founders sponsored by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and the National Endowment for the Hu-

manities. The great historian Edmund S. Morgan once wrote that the publication of these documentary editions was the single most important contribution to historical scholarship in the twentieth century.

Agreeing whole-heartedly with Professor Morgan, I determined to mine the precious ore that was awaiting discovery, to dig up the nuggets from these many volumes that capture the character, mannerisms, and physical description of America's Founders. Hundreds of volumes have been examined on a page-by-page basis. Tentatively I called my project "The Founding Fathers on the Founding Fathers." It is, however, much broader than the title suggests. In the 5,000-page database, patriots, loyalists, and foreigners describe over 420 individuals. Women as well as men are described, and women provide some of the best descriptions of their contemporaries. Some people have but one or two descriptions, while George Washington and John Adams each have over 300 entries. When an individual has at least fifty entries, a mosaic develops in which friends, enemies, family, acquaintances, and sometimes even the individual themselves reveal the complexities and subtleties that are usually obscured by the fog of time and veneration.

Knowing about my database, Ken Frazier, Director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, asked if I would write a series of chapbook biographies on some of America's Founders. These chapbooks are modeled on a series of poetry chapbooks published over the last decade by Parallel Press, an imprint of the UW-Madison Libraries. But these biographies contain far more intimate descriptions of the subjects than traditional biographies because I could draw on my rich database of contemporaneous word portraits. That is how AMERICA'S FOUNDERS got started.

In some ways, I feel very much like David Humphreys, former aide-de-camp to George Washington and

the General's longtime friend, who, after Washington's death, wrote an amazing condolence letter to Martha Washington. Humphreys, who had once resided with the Washingtons at Mount Vernon for over a year and a half, told the grieving widow that when his

own grief shall become a little moderated, I propose to indulge my melancholy meditations in endeavouring to delineate such features of the deceased father of his country, and such events of his interesting life, as have left the most indelible impressions on my mind. I shall thus procure the double advantage, first for myself, of holding a kind of spiritual intercourse with him; and, next, of exhibiting for others an admirable model for imitation. Could I flatter myself with the expectation of being able to express (in any adequate proportion) what I know and what I feel on a subject which will employ the pens of innumerable writers, I might then hope to do not less justice to his public and private virtues than others. For, conscious I am that few have had opportunities of knowing him better and that none could appreciate more justly his morals and his merits.*

This chapbook is dedicated to Tim Moore of Heritage Christian High School in West Allis and Beth Ratway of Wauwatosa East High School. Both schools are located in southeastern Wisconsin. Tim and Beth attended the first "We the People" summer institute held at Indiana University in 1995, which had a profound im-

*David Humphreys to Martha Washington, Madrid, Spain, February 22, 1800, Joseph E. Fields, comp., *"Worthy Partner": The Papers of Martha Washington* (Westport, Conn., 1994), 354-56.

pact on their teaching. The content, curriculum, and competitive components of the “We the People” program changed them from being very good teachers to being excellent teachers and made their classrooms exciting arenas for the exploration of the history of our country. Not only do they share their knowledge and enthusiasm with their students, but they regularly serve as mentor teachers who train and inspire hundreds of other teachers. They are an inspiration to me.



EARLY LIFE

GEORGE WASHINGTON WAS BORN INTO A MIDDLE gentry family in tidewater Virginia in 1732. His father died when George was only eleven years old. George looked up to his half-brother Lawrence, fourteen years his senior, as a father figure, and as an adolescent George lived with Lawrence at the family estate recently renamed Mount Vernon. The marriage of Lawrence into the wealthy Fairfax family opened opportunities for young George Washington. He regularly visited neighboring Belvoir, the handsome brick Potomac mansion occupied by William Fairfax, Lawrence's father-in-law. It was at Mount Vernon and Belvoir that Washington learned how to carry himself—how to walk, how to eat, how to converse, how to dance. In essence, it was during these formative years that Washington learned to become a Virginia gentleman.

Sometime before he turned sixteen, Washington decided to strive for greatness. His ambition was to become a wealthy tidewater planter with all the accoutrements, power, and privileges of elite Virginia society. Deprived of the “gentleman’s education” that his two half-brothers received in England, Washington made the most of his limited education, first supplied by his father and then by hired tutors. Reading, writing, and basic mathematics came first and were then applied in learning the skill of surveying land. He became obsessed with self-improvement: he copied and learned 110 “Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation” taken from an English translation of the maxims of a fifteenth-century French Jesuit.¹ Fifty years later, at the age of sixty-four, Washing-

1. See Richard Brookhiser, ed., *Rules of Civility: The 110 Precepts that Guided Our First President in War and Peace* (New York, 1997).

ton advised his step grandson, perhaps in a way reminiscent of his own father's advice. "You are now extending into that age of life when good or bad habits are formed. When the mind will be turned to things useful and praiseworthy, or to dissipation and vice. Fix on whichever it may, it will stick by you; for you know it has been said, and truly, 'that as the twig is bent, so it will grow.'"²

Washington grew into an impressive young man. While other Virginia boys stopped growing at about five foot six inches, Washington towered over them at six foot three. He had strong shoulders, powerful arms, a slender waist, and an easy grace. Others readily perceived in him an extraordinary sense of self-assuredness.

Washington's character and bearing impressed Lord Fairfax, who used his influence to have the seventeen-year-old appointed surveyor of Culpeper County on the Virginia frontier. Although, at first glance, this appointment might not seem too important, it proved fortuitous, because in colonial Virginia surveyors were recognized as gentlemen and "were numbered among the colony's practical-minded elite."³ With wealth measured by the acres of good land owned, surveyors were uniquely positioned to assist the wealthy in locating and purchasing choice lands. Surveyors also assisted the many settlers laying claim to more modest tracts of land. An ambitious, hard-working surveyor became locally prominent, made important connections with wealthy investors, and earned sizeable fees. Surveyors often acquired large land holdings themselves and in partnership with others. Within a year, Washington saved enough money to pur-

2. To George Washington Parke Custis, Philadelphia, November 28, 1796, John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799* (39 vols., Washington, D.C., 1931-1944), XXXV, 295.

3. Sarah S. Hughes, *Surveyors and Statesmen: Land Measuring in Colonial Virginia* (Richmond, 1979), 156.

chase 1,500 acres on Bullskin Creek in the Shenandoah Valley—the beginning of his vast property holdings.

In 1753, as tension with the French became critical, Virginia Governor Robert Dinwiddie appointed Washington as an emissary to warn the encroaching French to leave Virginia territory and return to Canada. Washington, who the year before had been commissioned a major in the militia by Dinwiddie, was well qualified for the dangerous assignment. His experience as a surveyor fashioned Washington into a skilled frontiersman with an intimate knowledge of Indians. Traveling for a month during November and December in Indian territory until he reached the French Fort Le Beouf, not far from Lake Erie, Washington delivered his governor's ultimatum. The French responded defiantly. After surviving an Indian ambush and nearly drowning in the icy waters of the Monongahela River, Washington returned to Virginia and became a hero after the publication of his journal. Promoting him to lieutenant colonel and second in command of the Virginia militia, Dinwiddie ordered Washington to build a fort at the Forks of the Ohio River (Pittsburgh). As Washington marched through the frontier, he learned that the French had already constructed Fort Duquesne at the Forks and that a small French force was marching southward. Washington ambushed the French troops, killed ten men, including the commander, and took twenty-two prisoners. The French denounced the attack on what they called a peaceful diplomatic mission. Soon the conflict escalated into a world war—the fourth colonial war of the eighteenth century between Britain and its colonies on one side and France and Spain and their colonies on the other. Washington stayed on the frontier, and although forced to surrender in July 1754 to a superior force at the ill-designed Fort Necessity, Washington returned to Virginia a hero and retired from active military duty.

In 1755 Washington joined British General Edward Braddock's army as an unpaid volunteer. Washington hoped that his services might be rewarded with a commission in the British army. He learned a great deal from Braddock about how to command an army, but unfortunately Braddock did not heed Washington's advice on wilderness warfare. Shortly after Braddock's army crossed the Monongahela River, the French and Indians ambushed them, and, in a battle lasting almost five hours, wounded more than 400 redcoats and killed another 500 (including Braddock). Washington was one of only a handful of officers who escaped unscathed. Two of his horses were killed beneath him, and bullets pierced his coat four times and shot off his hat. He rallied the survivors and led them on a forced retreat. Washington again returned to Virginia a hero. He wrote his younger brother that he heard the bullets whistle and found something charming in the sound.

Named commander-in-chief of the Virginia militia, Washington served another three years until the British regular army relieved the militia on the frontier. Although saddened by the death he saw in war, Washington felt that when the cause is just, "who is there that does not rather Envy, than regret a Death that gives birth to Honour & Glorious memory."⁴ Washington retired from active duty, and although recognized throughout the colonies as a hero, he was disappointed when the British denied him a commission in the regular army.

When he retired from the militia, Washington was described by George Mercer, a fellow officer.

Straight as an Indian, measuring 6 feet 2 inches
in his stockings and weighing 175 pounds. . . .
His frame is padded with well-developed

4. To Sarah Cary Fairfax, Camp at Rays Town, September 25, 1758, Donald Jackson et al., eds, *The Papers of George Washington* (Charlottesville, Va., 1976-), Col. Series, VI, 42.

muscles, indicating great strength. His bones and joints are large, as are his hands and feet. He is wide shouldered but has not a deep or round chest; is neat waisted, but is broad across the hips and has rather long legs and arms. His head is well-shaped, though not large, but is gracefully poised on a superb neck. A large and straight rather than a prominent nose; blue grey penetrating eyes which are widely separated and overhung by a heavy brow. His face is long rather than broad, with high round cheek bones, and terminates in a good firm chin. He has a clear though rather colorless pale skin which burns with the sun. A pleasing and benevolent though a commanding countenance, dark brown hair [actually it was more reddish] which he wears in a cue. His mouth is large and generally firmly closed, but which from time to time discloses some defective teeth. His features are regular and placid with all the muscles of his face under perfect control, though flexible and expressive of deep feeling when moved by emotions. In conversation, he looks you full in the face, is deliberate, deferential, and engaging. His demeanor [is] at all times composed and dignified. His movements and gestures are graceful, his walk majestic, and he is a splendid horseman.⁵

Washington's exploits in the French and Indian War won him fame throughout the colonies. Other than Benjamin Franklin, Washington was the single most known American. Mount Vernon had started to attract many visitors. Charles Willson Peale, already a well-respected portrait artist, traveled to Virginia to paint Colonel Washington. Peale described the leisure activities of some of the young visitors to Mount Vernon as they pitched the

5. *GW Papers*, Col. Series, VI, 192-93.

bar to see who was the strongest among them. Suddenly the colonel appeared and asked to be shown the pegs that marked the furthest throws. "Smiling, and without putting off his coat," Washington held out his hand. As soon as the heavy lead weight felt the grasp of his hand, according to Peale, "it lost the power of gravitation, and whizzed through the air, striking the ground far, very far, beyond our utmost limits." The young men stood astonished as Washington walked away, saying "When you beat my pitch, young gentlemen, I'll try again."⁶

In 1770 when Washington toured his lands in the Ohio Country, a party of Indians led by an old chief rode to see him. An interpreter told Washington that the chief had been at Braddock's defeat in 1755. He and other Indians had repeatedly fired at Washington unsuccessfully. After two hours the Indians sensed that the Great Spirit would not allow the young officer to be killed in battle so they fired elsewhere. When the chief heard that Washington was nearby, he wanted to pay homage to "the Great Knife," the name Indians had given Washington,⁷ the brave warrior who had been so divinely protected.⁸

In January 1759 Washington married Martha Dandridge Custis, the widow of Daniel Parke Custis, a wealthy planter. It was a pivotal event in Washington's life. Although born into a similar social class as Washington, Martha Dandridge had married into wealth and high society. She brought to Washington thousands of acres of land, a couple hundred slaves, and access to elite Virginia society. She also brought two small children—

6. Charles Willson Peale: Recollection of December 28, 1773, *Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington, By His Adopted Son, George Washington Parke Custis* (New York, 1860), 519.

7. Robert Stewart to George Washington, Camp Pittsburgh, September 28, 1759, *GW Papers*, Col. Series, VI, 361.

8. For the Indian prophecy, see Frank E. Grizzard, Jr., *George Washington: A Biographical Companion* (Santa Barbara, Calif., 2002), 157-58.

John Parke Custis (Jackie) and Martha Parke Custis (Patsy). The Washingtons never had children themselves, but their forty-one-year marriage seems to have been happy. After twenty-five years of marriage, Washington wrote that he “always considered Marriage as the most interesting event of one’s life. The foundation of happiness or misery.”⁹ He felt that “more permanent and genuine happiness is to be found in the sequestered walks of connubial life than in the giddy rounds of promiscuous pleasure.”¹⁰ Washington described Martha as “A quiet wife, a quiet soul.” Martha, who always was plagued with nagging illnesses, said that she enjoyed “the pleasant duties of an old fashioned Virginia house-keeper, steady as a clock, busy as a bee, and as cheerful as a cricket.”¹¹ Throughout their lives together, Martha served as the perfect hostess to the innumerable guests that visited Mount Vernon. In all the accounts of these visits, no person ever spoke ill of her and everyone commented on her graciousness.

After retiring from the militia, Washington threw himself into the role of a Virginia planter. He inherited Mount Vernon when his brother’s widow died and added to the estate when he married Martha. Repeated purchases of land increased Washington’s holdings and he enlarged the mansion house in several stages. Washington abandoned the cultivation of tobacco when it became obvious that it was not only extremely labor intensive and hard on the land, but that it placed planters at the economic mercy of the Scottish factors who domi-

9. To Burwell Bassett, Mount Vernon, May 23, 1785, *GW Papers*, Conf. Series, III, 10.

10. To Charles Armand-Tuffin, Mount Vernon, August 10, 1786, *GW Papers*, Conf. Series, IV, 203.

11. Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, Mount Vernon, February 25, 1788, and to Lucy Knox, post May 1797, Joseph E. Fields, comp., “*Worthy Partner*”: *The Papers of Martha Washington* (Westport, Conn., 1994), 206, 304.

nated the British tobacco trade. Instead, Washington concentrated on grains that were marketable at home as well as in the Caribbean. For the rest of his life, Washington was an experimental farmer, always searching for a better crop or a more productive method of farming. He was happy farming after the Revolution; he wrote that "Agriculture has ever been amongst the most favorite amusements of my life."¹² "The life of a Husbandman of all others," he wrote, "is the most delectable. It is honorable—It is amusing—and, with Judicious management, it is profitable. To see plants rise from the earth and flourish by the superior skill, and bounty of the labourer fills a contemplative mind with ideas which are more easy to be conceived than expressed."¹³ Even more than that, farming was also patriotic. "I know of no pursuit in which more real and important service can be rendered to any country than by improving its agriculture."¹⁴

THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT

When the imperial crisis first developed between Britain and its American colonies, Washington could best be described as a reluctant rebel. For his whole life he had aspired to become a country gentleman. Now with that goal realized, Parliament's policies and the violent American reaction placed him in an awkward position. Despite his reluctance to oppose British law, Washington never hesitated to support the constitutional rights of his country. In 1769, he condemned the policies of "our lordly Masters in Great Britain," who would "be satis-

12. To Arthur Young, Mount Vernon, August 6, 1786, *GW Papers*, Conf. Series, IV, 196.

13. To Alexander Spotswood, Mount Vernon, February 13, 1788, *ibid.*, VI, III.

14. To John Sinclair, Philadelphia, July 20, 1794, *Fitzpatrick, Writings*, XXXIII, 437.

fied with nothing less than the deprivation of American freedom." He knew that something had to be done to protect that freedom and "maintain the liberty which we have derived from our Ancestors; but the manner of doing it to answer the purpose effectually is the point in question." However reluctant he was to use violence, Washington believed "That no man shou'd scruple, or hesitate a moment to use arms in defence of so valuable a blessing, on which all the good and evil of life depends." But arms, he felt, "should be the last resource." Petitioning the king and Parliament had already failed. Economic boycotts should be the next tactic.¹⁵ When in 1774 the British overreacted to the dumping of privately owned tea in Boston harbor, Washington vowed in the House of Burgesses to raise and lead 1,000 men at his own expense to relieve Massachusetts from the oppression of British power. He saw "as clear as the sun in its meridian brightness," that Parliament was attempting to enslave Americans by wresting the taxing power from colonial assemblies.¹⁶ The ministry was "pursuing a regular Plan at the expence of Law & justice, to overthrow our Constitutional Rights & liberties . . . as Englishmen, we could not be deprived of this essential, & valuable part of our Constitution." By opposing British policy, Americans were merely "claiming a Right which by the Law of Nature & our Constitution we are . . . indubitably entitled to."¹⁷ For his part, Washington did "not undertake to say where the Line between Great Britain and the Colonies should be drawn, but I am clearly of opinion that one ought to be drawn; & our Rights clearly ascertained." He wished "that the dispute had been left to Posterity to

15. Washington to George Mason, Mount Vernon, April 5, 1769, *GW Papers*, Col. Series, VIII, 178.

16. To Bryan Fairfax, Mount Vernon, July 4, 1774, *ibid.*, X, 109.

17. To Bryan Fairfax, Mount Vernon, July 20, 1774, *ibid.*, X, 129-30.

determine, but the Crisis is arrived when we must assert our Rights, or Submit to every Imposition that can be heap'd upon us; till custom and use, will make us as tame, & abject Slaves, as the Blacks we Rule over with such arbitrary Sway."¹⁸ According to Washington, it was not the wish of Americans to become independent of Great Britain, but he was sure "that none of them will ever submit to the loss of those valuable rights & priviledges which are essential to the happiness of every free State, and without which, Life, Liberty & property are rendered totally insecure." It was "the ardent wish of the warmest advocates for liberty, that peace & tranquility, upon Constitutional grounds, may be restored, & the horrors of civil discord prevented." But if the British failed to alter their policies, "more blood will be spilt on this occasion . . . than history has ever yet furnished instances of in the annals of North America."¹⁹

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

In 1774 Washington served in the First Continental Congress and supported the Continental Association that provided for an economic boycott of Britain in the hopes of getting Parliament to change its policies. Elected to the Second Continental Congress, he arrived in Philadelphia in May 1775 wearing the uniform of a Virginia militia colonel—the only delegate attired in a military uniform. He impressed the delegates with his modesty and with his manner of speaking in a "cool but determined Style & Accent."²⁰ Washington seemed to be the

18. To Bryan Fairfax, Mount Vernon, August 24, 1774, *ibid.*, X, 155.

19. To Robert McKenzie, Philadelphia, October 9, 1774, *ibid.*, X, 172.

20. Silas Deane to Elizabeth Deane, Philadelphia, September 10, 1774, Paul H. Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789* (26 vols., Washington, D.C., 1976-2000), I, 61-62.

natural choice to command a Continental military force. He had but one challenger—President of Congress John Hancock of Massachusetts. To assure his own selection, Hancock arranged for fellow Massachusetts delegates John and Samuel Adams to nominate the commander. In his nominating speech John Adams called for a man of independent wealth, who could not be bribed by the British and who would willingly go home after the hostilities ended rather than usurp power as was done by Oliver Cromwell after the English Civil War in the 1640s. Hancock, the heir of a huge estate, was one of the wealthiest men in the colonies. Adams suggested that the commander-in-chief should be a man of excellent accomplishments. Hancock felt that his position as president of Congress proved his worth. And finally, Adams called for the commander-in-chief to be a man of impeccable character. Fixing his eyes upon Washington, Adams then said, we need a man from Virginia. We need George Washington. Stunned, Hancock nearly fell off his chair. Samuel Adams took the floor and seconded Washington's nomination. Washington immediately left the hall, and the delegates unanimously elected him as commander-in-chief. Knowing the difficulties ahead, Washington accepted the appointment with humility and refused to accept a salary. Shortly after his appointment, Washington met with Virginia Congressman Patrick Henry and with tears in his eyes told him that "From the day I enter upon the command of the American armies, I date my fall, and the ruin of my reputation."²¹ Washington wrote to his wife telling her of his appointment which "destiny . . . has thrown upon me." He explained that "it was utterly out of my power to refuse this appointment without exposing my Character to such censures as would have reflected dishonour upon myself, and given pain to

21. George W. Coner, ed., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush* (Princeton, N.J., 1948), 113.

my friends." Surely, he wrote, she would not have wanted him to decline the appointment and if he had, it would "have lessen'd me considerably in my own esteem." Uncertain of the future, "common prudence" dictated that he have his will drafted and he sent it to her.²²

Wherever Washington went he inspired confidence. John Adams wrote his wife Abigail that "Congress have made Choice of the modest and virtuous, the amiable, generous and brave George Washington Esqr. to be the General of the American Army. . . . This Appointment will have a great Effect, in cementing and securing the Union of these Colonies. . . . The Liberties of America depend upon him, in a great Degree."²³ Connecticut delegate Eliphalet Dyer saw that Washington's appointment put Southern delegates to Congress at ease by removing their fear that a successful "Enterprising eastern New England General . . . might with his Victorious Army give law to the Southern & Western Gentry. . . . He is Clever, & if anything too modest. He seems discrete & Virtuous, no harum Starum ranting Swearing fellow, but Sober, steady, & Calm."²⁴ Even John Hancock had to admit that Washington "is a fine man."²⁵ A young officer delivered a letter to Washington "and was deeply impressed with an awe I cannot describe in contemplating that great man, his august person, his majestic mien, his dignified and commanding deportment."²⁶ Abigail Adams wrote her husband about her impressions of the general. "You had prepared me to entertain a favorable opinion of him, but I thought the one half was not told me. Dignity with ease, and complacency, the Gentleman

22. Philadelphia, June 18, 1775, *GW Papers*, Rev. Series, I, 3-4.

23. Philadelphia, June 17, 1775, *ibid.*, I, 497.

24. To Joseph Trumbull, Philadelphia, June 17, 1775, *ibid.*, I, 499-500.

25. To Elbridge Gerry, Philadelphia, June 18, 1775, *ibid.*, I, 507.

26. Elkanah Watson, *Memoirs 1775*, Winslow C. Watson, ed., *Men and Times of The Revolution; or Memoirs of Elkanah Watson* (New York, 1856), 243-44.

and Soldier look agreeably blended in him. Modesty marks every line and feature of his face.”²⁷ Philadelphian Benjamin Rush suggested that Washington “seems to be one of those illustrious heroes whom providence raises up once in three or four hundred years to save a nation from ruin. . . . he has so much martial dignity in his deportment that you would distinguish him to be a general and a soldier from among ten thousand people. There is not a king in Europe that would not look like a valet de chambre by his side.”²⁸

On his way to take command of the New England army then laying siege to the British army in Boston, Washington stopped in New York City where he was feted at a dinner by the provincial congress. The New Yorkers asked Washington if he and his fellow officers would promise to surrender their commissions at the end of the hostilities. Somewhat taken aback, Washington thoughtfully responded that when he and his fellow officers put on their uniforms, they never ceased to be citizens. They were citizens first and soldiers second. They would assuredly surrender their commissions at the end of the hostilities.²⁹

Washington’s initial actions as commander-in-chief were quite successful. He appeared outside of Boston and looked every part the general. Virginia Congressman Richard Henry Lee praised Washington for “the discipline you have introduced into the Camp, while John Hancock told the general “that under your Directions, an undisciplined Band of Husbandmen, in the Course

27. To John Adams, Braintree, July 16, 1775, L. H. Butterfield et al., eds., *The Adams Papers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962-), Adams Family Correspondence, I, 246.

28. To Thomas Ruston, Philadelphia, October 29, 1775, L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Rush* (2 vols., Princeton, N.J., 1951), I, 92.

29. George Washington, Address to the New York Provincial Congress, New York, June 26, 1775, *GW Papers*, Rev. Series, I, 41.

of a few Months became Soldiers.”³⁰ The emplacement of captured cannon from Fort Ticonderoga on Dorchester Heights forced the British army to evacuate Boston, never to return.

In April 1776, Washington moved his army south to New York to defend against an expected British attack. With too many strategic locations to defend, Washington unwisely spread thin his 19,000-man army composed of inexperienced Continentals and untrained militia. He had no artillery, no cavalry, and no naval support. In late June the British started arriving with an army of 30,000, thirty major naval vessels armed with 1,200 cannon, and 10,000 sailors. The British easily defeated the American forces in every engagement, forcing Washington to abandon New York City and then retreat across the Hudson River into New Jersey, and finally across the Delaware into Pennsylvania. Miraculously Washington always managed to escape keeping an army intact and the struggle alive. But by December 1776 he had only 2,300 men left, many of whom were militiamen whose time of service was up at the end of the year. On December 20, he wrote President Hancock that “ten days more will put an end to the existence of our Army.” At the same time, the enemy was “gathering strength from the disaffected. This strength, like a Snowball by rolling, will increase, unless some means can be devised to check effectually, the progress of the Enemy’s Arms.”³¹ It was one of the lowest points of the Revolution, especially for the commander-in-chief. Second-in-command General Charles Lee and his supporters indiscreetly conspired to replace Washington. Disgruntled congressmen refused to sup-

30. Lee to Washington, Philadelphia, September 26, 1775, and Hancock to Washington, Philadelphia, April 2, 1776, *GW Papers*, Rev. Series, II, 52; IV, 16.

31. To John Hancock, Camp above Trenton Falls, December 20, 1776, *ibid.*, VII, 382.

ply the army adequately with men, food and clothing, and materiel, yet they complained about Washington's ignominious retreat across New Jersey. Congressman John Adams suggested that had he been a commander, even if outnumbered, he would attack and run, attack and run, provoking and winning these on-going skirmishes. "Defeat," he suggested, "appears to be preferable to total Inaction."³² Discouraged, Washington wrote that it appeared as if "the game is pretty near up."³³

But then, in perhaps the most important two-week period of the entire war, American fortunes reversed. The commander-in-chief, faced with the prospect of losing his entire army during a long winter encampment, hatched a bold and extremely dangerous plan to attack several isolated New Jersey settlements occupied by both British redcoats and German mercenaries. In November, Washington had ordered Thomas Paine to leave the army and write something that would inspire the army and the American people. Pennsylvania General Thomas Mifflin was ordered to go on a whirlwind recruitment tour which raised Washington's forces up to 6,000. Paine responded with the first number of his *American Crisis* series, which was read to Washington's troops on the banks of the Delaware on December 23, 1776. "These are the times that try men's souls," wrote Paine in some of the greatest rhetoric of the Revolution. "The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman."³⁴

32. To Mercy Otis Warren, Philadelphia, November 25, 1775, and Braintree, January 8, 1776, *Adams Papers*, Papers of John Adams, III, 319, 399.

33. To Samuel Washington, Camp near the Falls of Trenton, December 18, 1776, *GW Papers*, Rev. Series, VII, 370.

34. *The American Crisis* I, December 19, 1776, Eric Foner, ed., *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings* (New York, 1995), 91.

On December 24, Pennsylvania Congressman Dr. Benjamin Rush spent over an hour in private with the general. "He appeared much depressed, and lamented the ragged and dissolving state of his army in affecting terms." Rush assured Washington that Congress supported him. While they were talking, Rush noticed that Washington was doodling on several small pieces of paper. "One of them by accident fell upon the floor near my feet. I was struck with the inscription upon it. It was 'Victory or Death.'"³⁵

On December 25, beginning at 11:00 P.M., Washington with 2,400 men crossed the ice-choked Delaware and then marched nine long miles to Trenton through a storm of wind, rain, hail, and snow. Surprising the 1,200 Hessians at about 8:00 A.M., the Americans won a decisive victory. Only a handful of Americans were wounded and but four died from freezing. The Hessians lost 106 killed and wounded and over 900 captured. The American troops used the phrase, "Victory or Death" as their countersign.³⁶ Washington retreated back across the Delaware, but a few days later again crossed the river and won another victory at Princeton. Other American victories occurred at Bordentown and Burlington before Washington's rejuvenated army went into winter encampment at Morristown. These victories were really quite inconsequential militarily; for morale, they were monumental. They allowed the American cause to continue. They brought in new recruits and a new confidence in the commander-in-chief. Abigail Adams wrote that she believed "that our late misfortunes have called out the hidden Excellencies of our Commander in chief—'affliction is the good man's shining time.' The critical state of our affairs has shown him to great advantage."³⁷ Thomas

35. *Autobiography of Rush*, 124.

36. *Ibid.*, 125.

37. To Mercy Otis Warren, January 1777, *Adams Papers*, Adams Family Papers, II, 151.

Paine wrote of Washington that "There is a natural firmness in some minds which cannot be unlocked by trifles, but which, when unlocked, discovers a cabinet of fortitude."³⁸ Congressman William Hooper of North Carolina marveled at "how often America has been rescued from ruin by the mere strength of [Washington's] genius, conduct & courage encountering every obstacle that want of money, men, arms, Ammunition could throw in his way; an impartial World will say with you that he is the Greatest Man on Earth. Misfortunes are the Element in which he shines."³⁹

But there were pessimists. John Adams told Congress that he was "distressed to see some members disposed to idolise an image which their own hands have molten. I speak here of the superstitious veneration that is sometimes paid to General Washington. Altho' I honour him for his good qualities, yet in this house I feel myself his Superior. In private life I shall always acknowledge that he is mine. It becomes us to attend early to the restraining our army."⁴⁰ Benjamin Rush predicted that Washington would not "Close the present war with G. Britain," because revolutions usually do not end with those they begin with, because his talents were better suited to unite the people against Britain "than to give them Afterwards a national complexion," because "his talents are unequal" to the task, and because "he is idolized by the people of America."⁴¹ These fears seemed justified when Congress conferred dictatorial powers on Washington. Congressman Charles Carroll of Maryland hoped that Washington would use these new powers

38. *The American Crisis* I, December 19, 1776, Foner, *Paine: Writings*, 94.

39. To Robert Morris, Baltimore, February 1, 1777, Smith, *Letters*, VI, 191.

40. Benjamin Rush: Notes of Debates in Congress, February 19, 1777, *ibid.*, VI, 324-25.

41. *Ibid.*, April 8, 1777, VI, 558.

wisely because “unless he does, our affairs will never go well.” Carroll’s concern was that Washington would not use these new powers because “he is so humane & delicate.”⁴²

When General Horatio Gates accepted the surrender of British General John Burgoyne at Saratoga in October 1777, and Washington failed to defeat the British at Brandywine and Germantown, the conspiracies and cabals revived. Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant savaged the commander. “We are so attached to this Man that I fear we shall rather sink with than throw him off our Shoulders. And sink we must under his Management.”⁴³ None of these cabals amounted to much, however, because Washington’s supporters in Congress were always dominant and because he always maintained the loyalty of his soldiers. President of Congress Henry Laurens, a South Carolina planter, wrote the Marquis de Lafayette not to worry. The commander “is out of the reach of his Enemies.” The cabals against him amounted “to little more than tittle tattle.”⁴⁴ To others, Laurens acknowledged that there was unjustified criticism of Washington, but that the general understood how important it was to the country for him to continue in command. “This great & virtuous Man has not acted the *half patriot*, by a hasty resignation . . . he will not take a Step which may greatly injure thirteen United States. . . . No internal Enemy can hurt him without his own consent.”⁴⁵

Washington was not a brilliant military strategist, nor did he generally take risks when the likelihood of success was uncertain. He told President of Congress Hancock, “We should on all occasions avoid a general

42. Charles Carroll of Carrollton to Charles Carroll, Sr., *ibid.*, VIII, 11.

43. To James Lovell, Lancaster, Pa., November 20, 1777, *ibid.*, VIII, 296.

44. York, Pa., January 12, 1778, *ibid.*, VIII, 571.

45. To Isaac Motte, York, Pa., January 26, 1778, *ibid.*, VIII, 654.

action or put anything to the risk unless compelled by a necessity, into which we ought never to be drawn.”⁴⁶ He, unlike his subordinate generals, could not afford the luxury of being captured. His capture would probably end the Revolution.

Washington continually had to be diplomatic with both Congress and his own generals as well as with the enemy. In 1776, Washington refused to accept letters from British naval commander Admiral Sir Richard Howe and from British commander-in-chief General Sir William Howe. The letters were addressed to “George Washington, Esq.” and were sent to his camp where the commander-in-chief’s pennant was flying, clearly indicating that the general was in residence. When General Howe’s aide arrived and personally presented another letter to Washington again without his military rank indicated, Washington once again refused to accept the letter and told the aide that he would never accept a “letter directed to him as a private Person when it related to his publick Station.”⁴⁷ Finally, General Howe understood and addressed his next letter to “General George Washington, Esq.,” and it was accepted. Until this time, British forces had considered the Americans as rebels, and captured American soldiers were treated accordingly. Washington wanted to make it clear that the war was no longer a colonial rebellion. The former colonies were an independent nation. Captured American soldiers should be treated as captured British soldiers were treated—as prisoners of war.

Washington’s understanding of psychology was again displayed on the eve of the Battle of Germantown. General Howe had recently captured Philadelphia, and the two armies prepared to fight what was expected to be the climactic battle of the war. Reinforcements flooded in to

46. New York, September 8, 1776, *GW Papers*, Rev. Series, VI, 249.

47. Memorandum of an Interview with Lieutenant Colonel James Paterson, New York, July 20, 1776, *ibid.*, V, 399.

both armies. At this critical juncture on the morning of October 6, 1777, Washington wrote a card to General Howe informing him that the Americans had in their possession a dog with a collar inscribed General William Howe. The card and the dog were delivered to Howe. Later that day, Washington wrote a letter to Howe asking the British commander to control his troops in the ensuing battle. In previous engagements, British and Hessian soldiers had raped, killed, pillaged, and burned. Washington asked that the civilian population of Philadelphia be spared. By showing Howe humanity in returning the general's dog, Washington was now asking Howe in return to show humanity toward Philadelphia's civilians.⁴⁸

On occasion Washington upset his officers and men by endangering himself. Samuel Shaw wrote that "Our army love our General very much, but yet they have *one thing against him*, which is the little care he takes of himself in any action. His personal bravery, and the desire he has of animating his troops by example, make him fearless of any danger. This, while it makes him appear great, occasions us much uneasiness. But Heaven, who has hitherto been his shield, I hope will still continue to guard so valuable a life."⁴⁹

Probably the most dramatic case of Washington's disregard for his own personal safety occurred during the Battle of Monmouth in central New Jersey in July 1778. General Charles Lee was assigned command of American forces sent to attack General Howe's troops as they evacuated Philadelphia and marched toward New York City. Soon the engagement became a rout as the Americans, including Lee, ran from the counter-attacking British. Washington rode down amid the confusion, ordered

48. Washington to General William Howe, October 6, 1777, *GW Papers*, XI, 409-10.

49. To Francis Shaw, Morristown N.J., January 7, 1777, Josiah Quincy, ed., *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw* (Boston, 1847), 29-30.

the insubordinate Lee to the rear, and restored order among the troops. The day ended with a standoff as the British slipped away at night. Alexander Hamilton, Washington's aide-de-camp, described the scene to New Jersey Congressman Elias Boudinot.

As we approached the supposed place of action we heard some flying rumors of what had happened in consequence of which the General rode forward and found the troops retiring in the greatest disorder and the enemy pressing upon their rear. I never saw the general to so much advantage. His coolness and firmness were admirable. He instantly took measures for checking the enemy's form and make a proper disposition. He then rode back and had the troops formed on a very advantageous piece of ground. . . . The sequel is, we beat the enemy and killed and wounded at least a thousand of their best troops. America owes a great deal to General Washington for this day's work; a general rout, dismay and disgrace would have attended the whole army in any other hands but his. By his own good sense and fortitude he turned the fate of the day. Other officers have great merit in performing their parts well; but he directed the whole with the skill of a Master workman. He did not hug himself at a distance and leave an Arnold to win laurels for him [an indirect, although not too subtle, reference to Horatio Gates, who stood back while Benedict Arnold led the American attack at Saratoga]; but by his own presence, he brought order out of confusion, animated his troops and led them to success.⁵⁰

50. New Brunswick, N.J., July 5, 1778, Harold C. Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (27 vols., New York, 1961-1987), I, 511.

Boudinot responded that “The General I always revered & loved ever since I knew him, but in this Instance he has rose superior to himself. Every Lip dwells on his Praise.”⁵¹ A year later, Lafayette, back briefly in France, asked Washington’s forgiveness for what he was about to say. “I can’t help reminding you that a commander in chief should never too much expose himself, that in case General Washington was killed, Nay was seriously wounded, there is no officer in the army who might fill that place.” If such a calamity occurred, not only would a battle be lost, but the entire army and “the American cause itself would perhaps be entirely Ruined.”⁵²

Only once was it rumored that large portions of the army had become disaffected from Washington. In the beginning of 1783, with the war all but over as the peace negotiators in Paris were finishing the peace treaty, the officers and the army encamped at Newburgh, N.Y., were upset with Congress’ failure to pay them and deliver on pension promises to the officers made in the depths of the war in 1780. The soldiers and officers knew that Washington would not support any “unlawful proceeding” against Congress.⁵³ Mutiny was in the air. Washington might have to be replaced with a commanding officer willing to stand against Congress.

Washington sensed the danger. “The predicament in which I stand as Citizen & Soldier, is as critical and delicate as can well be conceived. It has been the subject of many contemplative hours. The sufferings of a com-

51. To Alexander Hamilton, Philadelphia, July 8, 1778, Smith, *Letters*, X, 238.

52. To Washington, St. Jean d’Angely, near Rochefort Harbor, France, June 12, 1779, Stanley J. Idzerda, ed., *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution* (5 vols., Ithaca, N.Y., 1977-1983), II, 277.

53. James Madison: Notes of Debates in Congress, February 20, 1783, Smith, *Letters*, XIX, 719.

plaining army on one hand, and the inability of Congress and tardiness of the States on the other, are the forebodings of evil; & may be productive of events which are more to be deprecated than prevented.”⁵⁴ To forestall the officers from passing resolutions blackmailing Congress, Washington took extraordinary action. He ordered the officers to assemble and then, contrary to custom, he personally attended the meeting of the 500 officers. Washington asked them to be patient—to trust him to intervene for them with Congress. The nation, he said, owed them a debt—not an ordinary debt, but a debt of honor that the officers had paid with their blood. He would go to Congress and plead their case. He was confident Congress would fulfill its promises. After his formal address, which had not yet convinced the hostile officers to put their trust in him, Washington asked to read a letter he had just received from a reassuring member of Congress. As he started to read the letter, he stumbled. Washington was not a good public speaker. He paused, and then pulled from his coat pocket a pair of spectacles. No one had previously seen him wear glasses in public. He asked the officers’ forbearance: “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.”⁵⁵ According to one observer, “There was something so natural, so unaffected, in this appeal, as rendered it superior to the most studied oratory; it forced its way to the heart, and you might see sensibility moisten every eye.”⁵⁶ The reporter of these events, Samuel Shaw, praised the patriotism of both the army and its leader.

54. Washington to Alexander Hamilton, Newburgh, N.Y., March 4, 1783, Syrett, *Hamilton*, III, 278.

55. Quoted in James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (Boston, 1969), 174.

56. Samuel Shaw to the Rev. Eliot, April 1783, Quincy, *Shaw*, 104.

I rejoice, [he wrote,] in the opportunities I have had of seeing this great man in a variety of situations—calm and intrepid where the battle raged, patient and persevering under the pressure of misfortune, moderate and possessing himself in the full career of victory. Great as these qualifications deservedly render him, he never appeared to me more truly so, than at the assembly we have been speaking of. On other occasions he has been supported by the exertions of an army and the countenance of his friends; but in this he stood single and alone. There was no saying where the passions of an army, which were not a little inflamed, might lead; but it was generally allowed that longer forbearance was dangerous, and moderation had ceased to be a virtue. Under these circumstances he appeared, not at the head of his troops, but as it were in opposition to them; and for a dreadful moment the interests of the army and its General seemed to be in competition! He spoke—every doubt was dispelled, and the tide of patriotism rolled again in its wonted course. Illustrious man! what he says of the army may with equal justice be applied to his own character. “Had this day been wanting, the world had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining.”⁵⁷

Shortly after the conspiracy at Newburgh was stifled, Washington received word of the peace. He shed tears and said that “it was the happiest hour of his life.”⁵⁸

57. *Ibid.*, 104-5.

58. Chavalier de la Luzerne to Comte de Vergennes, March 29, 1783, George Bancroft, ed., *History of the Formation of the Constitution of the United States of America* (2 vols., New York, 1882-1883), I, 301.

Washington became immortal in the eyes of his countrymen in June 1783 when in a circular letter to the states he announced his resignation. As soon as the peace treaty was accepted, he planned to retire to Mount Vernon, never again to serve in public office. But before retiring, he offered his countrymen one last piece of advice. Washington suggested that America was at a crossroads. The winning of independence alone would not guarantee greatness.

There is, [he said,] an option still left to the United States of America, whether they will be respectable and prosperous, or contemptible and miserable as a nation: This is the time of their political probation; this is the moment, when the eyes of the whole world are turned upon them, this is the moment to establish or ruin their national character forever; this is the favorable moment to give such a tone to the federal government, as will enable it to answer the ends of its institution; or this may be the ill-fated moment for relaxing the powers of the union, annihilating the cement of the confederation, and exposing us to become the sport of European politics, which may play one State against another, to prevent their growing importance, and to serve their own interested purposes. For, according to the system of policy the States shall adopt at this moment, they will stand or fall; and, by their conformation or lapse, it is yet to be decided, whether the revolution must ultimately be considered as a blessing or a curse; not to the present age alone, for with our fate will the destiny of unborn millions be involved.⁵⁹

59. John P. Kaminski and Jill Adair McCaughan, eds., *A Great and Good Man: George Washington in the Eyes of His Contemporaries* (Madison, Wis., 1989), 4-16.

Four things, Washington said, must be done to make America great. First, the Union must be maintained and the powers of Congress strengthened. Second, public justice had to be preserved by which he meant that the public creditors—domestic and foreign—must be paid, the army and its officers must be paid, and the widows and orphans of those who died in the war must be provided for. Third, a proper peacetime military establishment must be created. The war had shown the ineffectiveness of the militia system. A standing army of sorts had to be established. Finally, Washington stressed that after twenty years of fighting against British despotism, Americans should “cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to government.” Americans should also reject the spirit of sectionalism that had developed and “entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another.” This advice should “be considered as the legacy of one who has ardently wished, on all occasions, to be useful to his country.”⁶⁰

The war continued for another five months. The British finally evacuated New York City on November 25, 1783. General Washington and New York Governor George Clinton rode into the city after nearly seven years of British occupation. Residents, returning refugees, and the army celebrated. When it came time for Washington to depart, he called his officers together at Fraunces Tavern to say farewell. He raised a glass of wine to toast them. With a heart filled with love and gratitude, he hoped that their latter years would be as happy and prosperous as their former ones were honorable and glorious. He could not go to each officer individually, but he asked them to come and take him by the hand. With that comment, General Henry Knox, who was standing next to him, turned to Washington, embraced him and kissed him on the cheek. The other officers followed the ex-

60. *Ibid.*

ample and they all wept knowing, in all likelihood, that they would never see their “father general” again.⁶¹

Washington left New York with but one last official act to perform. He stopped on the way home to surrender his commission to Congress then meeting in Annapolis, Maryland. On Monday, December 22, Congress honored Washington with a dinner. Between 200 and 300 attended. After the obligatory thirteen toasts, Washington made a final additional toast. “Competent powers to Congress for general purposes.” That evening the governor of Maryland hosted a ball at the statehouse. “The General danced every set, that all the ladies might have the pleasure of dancing with him, or as it has since been handsomely expressed, *get a touch of him*.”⁶²

The formal ceremony surrendering Washington’s commission was held on Tuesday morning, December 23. Congressman James McHenry, a former aide-de-camp to Washington, described the scene to his fiancée.

Today my love the General at a public audience made a deposit of his commission and in a very pathetic [that is, emotional] manner took leave of Congress. It was a Solemn and affecting spectacle; such an one as history does not present. The spectators all wept, and there was hardly a member of Congress who did not drop tears. The General’s hand which held the address shook as he read it. When he spoke of the officers who had composed his family, and recommended those who had continued in it to the present moment to the favorable notice of Congress he was obliged to support the paper with both

61. Stanley Weintraub, *General Washington’s Christmas Farewell: A Mount Vernon Homecoming, 1783* (New York, 2003), 85.

62. James Tilton to Gunning Bedford, Jr., Annapolis, December 25, 1783, Smith, *Letters*, XXI, 232.

hands. But when he commended the interests of his dearest country to almighty God, and those who had the superintendence of them to his holy keeping, his voice faltered and sunk, and the whole house felt his agitations. After the pause which was necessary for him to recover himself, he proceeded to say in the most penetrating manner, "Having now finished the work assigned me I retire from the great theater 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." So saying he drew out from his bosom his commission and delivered it up to the president of Congress. . . . This, [McHenry continued,] is only a sketch of the scene. But, were I to write you a long letter I could not convey to you the whole. So many circumstances crowded into view and gave rise to so many affecting emotions. The events of the revolution just accomplished—the new situation into which it had thrown the affairs of the world—the great man who had borne so conspicuous a figure in it, in the act of relinquishing all public employments to return to private life—the past—the present—the future—the manner—the occasion—all conspired to render it a spectacle inexpressibly solemn and affecting.⁶³

The next day, Washington was home to spend the first Christmas at Mount Vernon in eight years.

63. To Margaret Caldwell, Annapolis, December 23, 1783, *ibid.*, XXI, 221–22.

A PRIVATE CITIZEN

Washington was delighted to be back home as “a private citizen on the banks of the Potomac . . . free from the bustle of a camp & the busy scenes of public life.” He was now free to pursue the “tranquil enjoyments” unattainable by the soldier pursuing his own fame or the statesman advancing the welfare of his country. Not only was he retired from all public employments, but he was retiring within himself. He was “Envious of none.” His aim was but to repair the damage suffered by his plantation during his long absence. He was content to “move gently down the stream of life, until I sleep with my Father.”⁶⁴

Despite his withdrawal from public life, the public did not withdraw from Washington. He remained the most popular person in the country, and a stream of visitors daily paraded to Mount Vernon. During the more than five years he spent at home between his retirement from the army and his inauguration as president, there were only a few days when Martha and her husband did not entertain guests. Sometimes guests stopped for only a few hours or a day, but more typically they would stay for several days at a time. David Humphreys, a former aide-de-camp, stayed for a year and a half! Washington enjoyed the company of his friends—“their visits,” he wrote, “can never be unseasonable.”⁶⁵ One condition, however, that Washington always insisted upon was that his guests allow him to do his work on the plantation.

Washington’s daily schedule remained fairly constant while at home, devoting mornings to business and afternoons to guests. He rose at sunrise. Late in life he ad-

64. To Lafayette, Mount Vernon, February 1, 1784, *GW Papers*, Conf. Series, I, 87-88.

65. Washington to Lee Massey, Mount Vernon, July 10, 1784, *ibid.*, I, 494.

vised his step grandson to "Rise early, that by habit it may become familiar, agreeable, healthy, and profitable. It may for a while be irksome to do this, but that will wear off and the practice will produce a rich harvest forever thereafter."⁶⁶ He dressed and went out briefly checking with various "hirelings," whom he expected also to rise with the sun. After two hours, he was back home at around seven for breakfast. At this time he would answer some of his voluminous correspondence and read some of the dozen newspapers and magazines he subscribed to. He would then "mount my horse and ride round my farms."⁶⁷ Between two and three in the afternoon he would return to the house and briefly chat with his visitors and family, which included his two young step grandchildren. He then excused himself, changed for dinner, powdered his hair, which he tied neatly in a long queue, and returned to his company. After dinner they enjoyed a glass of Madeira and talked about the events of the Revolution, the latest state, national or international news, or new developments in canal building or farming techniques. Again the general would go off to his study to read and answer correspondence. At 7:00 P.M. he would rejoin his guests for tea and conversation until 9:00 when he would retire to his bedroom where again he would read and write until the candle burned low.

In the summer of 1784, Washington greatly enjoyed a visit from the Marquis de Lafayette, who, during the war, had become almost an adopted son of Washington's. The Frenchman described the sublime simplicity of Washington—"he is as completely involved with all the details of his lands and house as if he had always lived

66. To George Washington Parke Custis, Mount Vernon, January 7, 1798, *ibid.*, Ret. Series, II, 5.

67. Washington to James McHenry, Mount Vernon, May 29, 1797, *ibid.*, I, 160.

here.”⁶⁸ Washington was saddened when his dear friend left, expecting that they would never see each other again. He remembered his own youthful days that “had long since fled to return no more.” He realized that he “was now descending the hill, I had been 52 years climbing.” Knowing that his family was not blessed with long life, he soon expected “to be entombed in the dreary mansions of my father’s.” These brief somber periods always vanished because of his busy schedule. He vowed not to repine. But he thought: “I have had my day.”⁶⁹

Visitors to Mount Vernon often came not knowing what to expect. They always left sensing that they had been in the presence of greatness, but, at the same time, found that this great man was a kind, thoughtful person. Their experience would never be forgotten—they would record it in their diaries and tell their grandchildren.

Elkanah Watson of New York was typical. Armed with several letters of recommendation from friends of Washington, Watson described his feelings as he neared Mount Vernon. “No pilgrim ever approached Mecca with deeper enthusiasm. . . . I trembled with awe as I came into the presence of this great man. . . . He soon put me at ease, by unbending, in a free and affable conversation. . . . I observed a peculiarity in his smile, which seemed to illuminate his eye; his whole countenance beamed with intelligence, while it commanded confidence and respect. . . . I remained alone in the enjoyment of the society of Washington, for two of the richest days of my life.” Watson remembered that he and Washington sat alone at the table uninterrupted for an hour. Unfortunately, Watson was sick with a cold and coughed excessively. Washington offered various remedies but Watson de-

68. Lafayette to Adrienne de Noailles de Lafayette, Mount Vernon, August 20, 1784, Idzerda, *Lafayette*, V, 237.

69. To Lafayette, Mount Vernon, December 8, 1784, *GW Papers*, Conf. Series, II, 175.

clined. When he retired for the night, Watson's cough worsened. After a while, a knock on the door caused Watson to pull back his bed curtains. To his "utter astonishment, I beheld Washington himself, standing at my bedside, with a bowl of hot tea in his hand." Watson was stunned. Such an act of kindness might be expected "with an ordinary man, . . . but as a trait of the benevolence and private virtue of Washington, deserves to be recorded."⁷⁰

Painters often visited Mount Vernon hoping to capture Washington on canvas. Initially Washington was impatient in sitting for portraits, but in time he resigned himself to this inconvenience. He wrote "I am so hackneyed to the touches of the painter's pencil, that I am *now* altogether at their beck, and sit like patience on a Monument whilst they are delineating the lines of my face. It is a proof among many others, of what habit & custom can effect. At first I was as impatient at the request, and as restive under the operation, as a Colt is of the Saddle—The next time, I submitted very reluctantly, but with less flouncing. Now, no dray moves more readily to the Thill, [the two shafts between which a horse is hitched to a wagon] than I do to the painters Chair."⁷¹

After his retirement, the country had still not heeded Washington's advice in his 1783 circular to the states. Congress seemed impotent, state politics became increasingly partisan and virulent, the wartime debt largely went unpaid, calls for separate confederacies were openly and increasingly discussed, and a nascent desire for the restoration of monarchy surfaced. A deep economic depression gripped the country and animosity between debtors and creditors escalated in every state. Violence flared in most states. Debtor farmers in western Massachusetts

70. Watson: *Memoirs*, January 23-25, 1785, pp. 243-44.

71. To Francis Hopkinson, Mount Vernon, May 16, 1785, *GW Papers*, Conf. Series, II, 561-62.

shut down the civil courts to stop foreclosure proceedings, while in backcountry Virginia debtors burned courthouses thereby destroying tax records and obliterating their obligations. Every attempt to strengthen Congress and to amend the Articles of Confederation had failed. Washington wrote that there were combustibles in every state ready to be ignited by a single spark.⁷² Although he advocated radical change, Washington cautioned against monarchy. “Admitting the utility—nay necessity of the form—yet that the period is not arrived for adopting the change without shaking the Peace of this Country to its foundation.”⁷³ In this explosive situation, with the very principles of the Revolution at stake, Washington wholeheartedly supported calling a general convention to address the crisis. Washington wrote to James Madison that the proposed convention should “adopt no temporising expedient, but probe the defects of the Constitution [the Articles of Confederation] to the bottom, and provide radical cures, whether they are agreed to or not. A conduct like this, will stamp wisdom and dignity on the proceedings, and be looked to as a luminary, which sooner or later will shed its influence.”⁷⁴

COMING OUT OF RETIREMENT

In December 1786 the Virginia legislature elected Washington a delegate to the general convention, which was to meet in Philadelphia in May 1787. He declined the appointment, alluding to his promise never to serve in public office again. He had other concerns also. Suffering from rheumatism, he wasn't feeling well. His mother and sister were both seriously ill. Another major concern was

72. To Henry Knox, Mount Vernon, December 26, 1786, *ibid.*, IV, 482.

73. To James Madison, Mount Vernon, March 31, 1787, *ibid.*, V, 115.

74. *Ibid.*, 116.

the Society of the Cincinnati. This fraternal order of former military officers established in 1784 had elected Washington as its president. The Society scheduled its triennial convention for Philadelphia in the spring of 1787. Washington, who did not wish to be president of the Society, declined an invitation to attend its convention. Now to accept an appointment to the federal convention in the same city at the same time would seem to be an insult to his fellow former officers.

Many of Washington's friends, whose advice he sought and respected, pleaded with him to attend the Philadelphia convention. Virginia Governor Edmund Randolph told him that the country's gloomy prospects admitted "one ray of hope, that those, who began, carried on & consummated the revolution, can yet rescue America from the impending ruin."⁷⁵ James Madison told Washington "it was the opinion of every judicious friend whom I consulted that your name could not be spared from the Deputation to the Meeting."⁷⁶ Two weeks later Madison again pleaded with Washington that the "dark and menacing" clouds that threatened "our national existence or safety" superseded all of Washington's reasons for not returning to public life.⁷⁷ Writing more bluntly than anyone else would dare, Secretary for Foreign Affairs John Jay told Washington well before a convention was ever called that he must "favor your country with your counsels on such an important & single occasion." Jay had told Washington that "altho' you have wisely retired from public Employment, and calmly view from the Temple of Fame, the various Exertions of the Sovereignty and Independence which Providence has enabled You to be so greatly & gloriously instrumental in securing to

75. Richmond, December 6, 1786, *ibid.*, IV, 445.

76. Richmond, December 7, 1786, *ibid.*, IV, 448.

77. Richmond, December 24, 1786, *ibid.*, IV, 474-75.

your country; yet I am persuaded you cannot view them with the Eye of an unconcerned Spectator.”⁷⁸

Unsure of what to do, Washington sought the advice of two of his most trusted advisers—David Humphreys of Connecticut and Henry Knox of Massachusetts, then serving in New York City as the Confederation’s secretary at war. Washington was especially worried that if he refused to attend the convention, it would be “considered as a dereliction to republicanism,” or worse, he might be accused of wanting the convention to fail so that he could become king.⁷⁹ Humphreys, “disclosing the very sentiments of my soul without reservation,” advised Washington not to attend the convention. It was doomed to fail, and, if it did, Washington’s “character would be materially affected.” When the convention failed, Humphreys wrote, Washington’s “personal influence & character” would be “justly considered, the last stake which America has to play.” Rhetorically, Humphreys asked Washington: “Should you not reserve yourself for the united call of a Continent entire?” The army, Humphreys implied, with Washington at its head, would use “compulsion” to make necessary changes.⁸⁰

Knox agreed that Washington should not attend the convention if “only amendments and patch work” revision of the Articles of Confederation were expected. Washington’s “reputation would in a degree suffer” from such halfway measures. But if Washington attended the convention, he would certainly be elected its president. And if the convention proposed “an energetic, and judicious system to be proposed under Your signature,” you would have doubly earned “the glorious republican epi-

78. New York, March 16, 1786, *ibid.*, III, 601.

79. Washington to Knox, Mount Vernon, March 8, 1787, *ibid.*, V, 75.

80. New Haven, January 20, 1787, *ibid.*, IV, 526, 529.

thet—THE FATHER OF YOUR COUNTRY.”⁸¹ Washington could not refuse; he would attend the convention.

Washington was indeed elected president of the convention. But most of the time during the first six weeks of the convention he did not preside, since the delegates sat as a committee of the whole. Even so, he did not participate in the debates. His mere presence, however, cast an aura over the proceedings—within the convention, in Philadelphia, and throughout the country.

Early in the convention’s proceedings, as Washington was about to convene the session, a delegate came forward and handed him a sheet of paper with the notes of the convention’s debate that had been found on the floor. Washington said nothing about this breach of the convention’s rule of secrecy until the day’s session ended. Before adjourning the meeting, Washington stood and said: “Gentlemen, I am sorry to find that some one member of this Body, has been so neglectful of the secrets of the Convention as to drop in the State House a copy of their proceedings, which by accident was picked up and delivered to me this Morning. I must entreat Gentlemen to be more careful, lest our transactions get into the News Papers, and disturb the public repose by premature speculations. I know not whose Paper it is, but there it is (throwing it down on the table), let him who owns it take it.” According to William Pierce, a delegate from Georgia, Washington bowed, picked up his hat and left the room “with a dignity so severe that every Person seemed alarmed.”

Several delegates, among them Pierce (who recorded and preserved this anecdote), anxiously fumbled through their papers to see if their notes were missing. Unable to find his notes, Pierce timidly approached the table to claim the lost paper. He was relieved, however, to find

81. Knox to Washington, New York, March 19, 1787, *ibid.*, V, 96.

that the handwriting was not his. Greatly relieved, Pierce left the convention and found his missing notes in the pocket of another coat left in his boarding house. All of the delegates felt the power and intensity of Washington's earnestness, and no one ever claimed the paper.⁸²

Washington's presence in the convention instilled confidence. The popular feeling was that this convention, with General Washington and Benjamin Franklin as members, would succeed in recommending desperately needed changes to the Articles of Confederation when all previous attempts had failed. The *Massachusetts Centinel*, April 14, 1787, reported that it was reasonable to expect that the convention led by Washington and Franklin "cannot but produce the most salutary measures." The names of these two patriots affixed to the convention's recommendations "will stamp a confidence in them, which the narrow-soul'd, antifederal politicians in the several States, who, by their influence, have hitherto damn'd us a nation, will not dare to attack, or endeavour to nullify."⁸³ The Petersburg *Virginia Gazette*, July 26, 1787, wrote that "The Grand Foederal Convention it is hoped will act wisely, for on their determination alone, and our acquiescence, depends our future happiness and prosperity; and if there lives a man equal to so arduous a task, it is a WASHINGTON!"⁸⁴

Some people, however, saw that Washington's role in the convention had resulted in a dangerous situation. Thomas Jefferson, serving as America's minister to France, and "Federal Farmer," perhaps the most successful writer opposed to the Constitution, suggested that the Constitution gave great powers to the president only because

82. William Pierce's Notes, Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787* (rev. ed. in four volumes, New Haven, Conn., 1966), III, 86-87.

83. Reprinted thirteen times from Vermont to New York.

84. Reprinted seven times from Massachusetts to South Carolina.

the convention expected that Washington would be the first to fill that office. Washington would never violate the public trust, but what would happen after Washington stepped down? What would happen under President Slushington?⁸⁵

Washington kept busy during his four months in Philadelphia while the convention sat. He visited factories, inspected militia units, and attended concerts, museums, and plays. Evenings were spent with fellow delegates or friends except for two nights a week. On these evenings Washington sequestered himself and wrote letters that would go out the following day in the stage-coach mail. When the convention recessed for ten days to allow the Committee of Detail to arrange the agreed upon resolutions in the form of a draft constitution, Washington abandoned his usual schedule and accepted an invitation from Pennsylvania delegate Gouverneur Morris to go fishing. Though an avid fisherman, Washington at first rejected Morris' invitation because of previous commitments. Morris enticed Washington with descriptions of a well-stocked trout stream on his brother-in-law's farm, but still Washington declined. But when Morris told Washington that the farm and stream were near Valley Forge, he could not refuse. On the first day of their trip, Washington recorded that he and Morris fished with little success. The next day Morris went fishing alone, while Washington spent the entire day at the camp ruins recalling the awful hardships endured during that bitter winter a decade earlier.⁸⁶

85. John P. Kaminski and Gaspare J. Saladino, eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution* (18 vols. to date, Madison, Wis., 1976-), XVII, 330; Hugh Ledlie to John Lamb, Hartford, January 15, 1788, *ibid.*, XX, 610. Hereafter cited as DHROC.

86. Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., *The Diaries of George Washington* (6 vols., Charlottesville, Va., 1976-1979), V, 179.

On his way back to the farmhouse, Washington saw several farmers in a field. Dismounting his white stallion, he jumped over a fence and introduced himself, asking what they were doing. The astonished farmers told Washington they were planting buckwheat. He asked them for details about sowing, tending, and harvesting the crop. That night, Washington wrote to his nephew George Augustus Washington, who was overseeing Mount Vernon in the general's absence, relating all he had learned about buckwheat and instructing him to plant this new crop. That same evening, the farmers must have enjoyed telling their incredulous wives and friends of their encounter with the great man.

The convention approved the Constitution on September 17, 1787. Washington signed as president of the convention and as a Virginia delegate. He also signed a letter prepared by the convention to explain the convention's actions: "In all our deliberations we kept steadily in our view, that which appears to us the greatest interest of every true American, the consolidation of our Union, in which is involved our prosperity, felicity, safety, perhaps our national existence. This important consideration, seriously and deeply impressed on our minds, led each State in the Convention to be less rigid on points of inferior magnitude, than might have been otherwise expected; and thus the Constitution, which we now present, is the result of a spirit of amity, and of that mutual deference and concession which the peculiarity of our political situation rendered indispensable." The Constitution would not satisfy every state completely. But the delegates believed that it would "promote the lasting welfare of that country so dear to us all, and secure her freedom and happiness."⁸⁷ Although Washington, as much as possible, refrained from public participation in

87. DHROC, XIII, 211-21.

the debate over ratifying the Constitution, this letter under Washington's signature was printed repeatedly along with the new Constitution throughout the country in newspapers, broadsides, pamphlets, magazines, and almanacs. The letter strongly supported a powerful argument made by those who supported the Constitution: "If Washington supports the Constitution, who are you to oppose it?" It was a difficult question to answer.

THE PRESIDENCY

Everyone presumed Washington would be elected the first president under the Constitution. But, would he accept the position? He preferred retirement but his friends and advisers told him he must accept the call of his country. Alexander Hamilton said that by attending the Constitutional Convention he had made a commitment to the new plan of government and that he was, in essence, "*pledged*" to assume the presidency.⁸⁸ General Anthony Wayne wrote to Lafayette on July 4, 1788 that the Constitution had been ratified and that "our Illustrious friend *Genl. Washington*" would be elected president. Wayne ended his letter, "I wish he had a *son*."⁸⁹ In April 1789, with Washington still uncommitted, Wayne wrote the general that he must accept the presidency. The task would be arduous, but he was capable. "The unbounded confidence placed in you, by every class of Citizens (which no other man could expect or hope for) will contribute to render it less difficult—in fact—it is a Crisis that requires a Washington!"⁹⁰

Perhaps the most convincing argument came from Gouverneur Morris early in the debate over ratifying the

88. Hamilton to Washington, New York, September 1788, Syrett, *Hamilton*, V, 220-21.

89. DHROC, XVIII, 221.

90. Richmond, Ga., April 6, 1789, *GW Papers*, Pres. Series, II, 37.

Constitution. Morris was certain that Washington's attendance at the Philadelphia convention had "been of infinite Service" in gaining supporters. But,

should the Idea prevail that you would not accept of the Presidency it would prove fatal in many Parts. Truth is, that your great and decided Superiority leads Men willingly to put you in a Place which will not add to your personal Dignity, nor raise you higher than you already stand: but they would not willingly put any other Person in the same Situation because they feel the Elevation of others as operating (by Comparison) the Degradation of themselves. And however absurd this Idea, you will agree with me that Men must be treated as Men and not as Machines, much less as Philosophers, & least of all Things as reasonable Creatures. . . .

Thus much for the public Opinion on these Subjects, which must not be neglected in a Country where Opinion is every Thing. . . . You are best fitted to fill that Office. Your cool steady Temper is indispensibly necessary to give a firm and manly Tone to the new Government. To constitute a well poised political Machine is the Task of no common Workman; but to set it in Motion requires still greater Qualities. When once a-going, it will proceed a long Time from the original Impulse. Time gives to primary Institutions the mighty Power of Habit, and Custom, the Law both of Wise Men and Fools serves as the great Commentator of human Establishments, and like other Commentators as frequently obscures as it explains the Text. No Constitution is the same on Paper and in Life. The Exercise of Authority depends on personal Character; and the Whip and Reins by which an able

Charioteer governs unruly Steeds will only hurl the unskillful Presumer with more speedy & headlong Violence to the Earth. The Horses once trained may be managed by a Woman or a Child; not so when they first feel the Bit. And indeed among these thirteen Horses now about to be coupled together there are some of every Race and Character. They will listen to your Voice, and submit to your Control; you therefore must, I say must, mount the Seat.

Morris understood Washington's reluctance to serve. He knew that Washington's service would be more important to the country than pleasant for himself. But Morris assured Washington that his continued public service would provide "that interior Satisfaction & Self Approbation which the World cannot give, and you will have in every possible Event the Applause of those who know you enough to respect you properly."⁹¹

Washington knew that becoming president would be the popular thing for him to do. But he did not seek popularity. "Though I prize, as I ought, the good opinion of my fellow Citizens; yet if I know myself, I would not seek or retain popularity at the expence of one social duty or moral virtue." He would follow his conscience "as it respected my God, my Country and myself. . . . And certain I am, whensoever I shall be convinced the good of my Country requires my reputation to be put in risque, regard for my own fame will not come in competition with an object of so much magnitude." Although Martha Washington objected to her husband becoming President—"it was much too late for him to go into publick life again"—she realized that "it was not to be

91. Morris to Washington, Philadelphia, October 30, 1787, DHROC, XIII, 513-14.

avoided.”⁹² When the time came, Washington decided that duty required him to accept the presidency.

Washington asked his old friend David Humphreys, on a protracted visit to Mount Vernon, to draft his inaugural address. Several friends advised Washington not to deliver it. Washington agreed that it was too magisterial for the occasion. He asked James Madison to write another draft, outlining to him the things that should be included. Among other things, Washington advocated that the new Congress propose a bill of rights to the Constitution to ameliorate the fear expressed by Antifederalists during the ratification struggle.

Washington, clad in a dark brown suit of Connecticut broadcloth, white silk stockings, and a sword, delivered his inaugural address to a joint session of Congress in the Senate chambers on April 30, 1789.⁹³ Massachusetts Congressman Fisher Ames sat close to Washington at the ceremony. “Time,” Ames wrote, “has made havoc upon his face.” The speech itself was dramatic. “His aspect grave, almost to sadness; his modesty, actually shaking; his voice deep, a little tremulous, and so low as to call for close attention . . . produced emotions of the most affecting kind upon the members. I . . . sat entranced. It seemed to me an allegory in which virtue was personified.”⁹⁴

Committees of each house of Congress responded favorably to the speech. The House committee, chaired by James Madison, said that the House would pay particular attention to Washington’s request for a bill of rights. The Senate rejoiced with all Americans “that, in Obedience to the Call of our common Country, you have

92. Washington to Henry Lee, Mount Vernon, September 22, 1788, *GW Papers*, Conf. Series, VI, 530-31; and Marth Washington to John Dandridge, Mount Vernon, April 20, 1789, Fields, *Worthy Partner*, 213.

93. *GW Papers*, Pres. Series, II, 156-57.

94. To George Richards Minot, New York, May 3, 1789, Seth Ames, ed., *Works of Fisher Ames* (2 vols., Boston, 1854), I, 34.

returned once more to public life.” They told Washington that “in you all Interests unite; and we have no doubt that your past Services, great as they have been, will be equalled by your future Exertions; and that your Prudence and Sagacity as a statesman will tend to avert the Dangers to which we were exposed, to give stability to the present Government, and Dignity and Splendor to that country, which your Skill and Valor as a Soldier, so eminently contributed to raise to independence and Empire.”⁹⁵ The Senate promised to work with the President “in every Measure, which may strengthen the Union, conduce to the Happiness, or secure and perpetuate the Liberties of this great confederated Republic.”⁹⁶ Washington thanked each house for the warm remarks and wrote that he would “readily engage” with them “in the arduous, but pleasing, task, of attempting to make a Nation happy.”⁹⁷

Washington hoped to serve only two years as president, but his advisers pleaded with him to finish his four-year term. With war raging in Europe, no one else, they told him, could lead the country through such perilous times. He agreed to finish the term, and asked James Madison to draft a farewell address. As the term neared completion, his advisers again argued that the country could not afford to lose him—no successor could unite the different sections of the country. He must stay on for another term. He alone, “as the Atlas of the New Government,” could preserve the Union.⁹⁸ Archibald Stuart of Virginia captured the sense of the country. “I never

95. May 16, 1789, *GW Papers*, Pres. Series, II, 310.

96. *Ibid.*, II, 311.

97. Washington to the U.S. Senate, New York, May 18, 1789, *ibid.*, II, 324.

98. William Ellery to Benjamin Huntington, Newport, July 21, 1789, Thomas C. Bright Autograph Collection, Jervis Library, Rome, N.Y.

knew the Minds of men so much disposed to acquiesce in public Measures as at present. Their Language is all is well. While G. Washington lives he will crush both men & Measures that would abridge either our happiness or Liberty. In short we are all in the same State of Security with Passengers on board a Vessel navigated by an Able captain & skillful Mariners.”⁹⁹ Abigail Adams, the vice president’s wife, felt that no one else “could rule over this great peopl[e] & consolidate them into one mighty Empire.” She described Washington as having “so happy a faculty of appearing to accommodate & yet carrying his point, that if he was not really one of the best intentioned men in the world he might be a very dangerous one. He is polite with dignity, affable without familiarity, distant without Haughtyness, Grave without Austerity, Modest, wise & Good. These are traits in his Character which peculiarly fit him for the exalted station he holds, and God Grant that he may Hold it with the same applause & universal satisfaction for many many years.”¹⁰⁰

On several occasions during his presidency Washington was gravely ill. The fear of his death gripped everyone. Early in the administration, Madison told Edmund Randolph that Washington’s “death at the present moment would have brought on another crisis in our affairs.”¹⁰¹ A year later again the president was ill. Georgia Congressman Abraham Baldwin said that he had never seen Washington “more emaciated. . . . It is so important to us to keep him alive as long as he can live, that we must let him cruise as he pleases, if he will only

99. To James Madison, Staunton, Va., July 31, 1789, Charles F. Hobson and Robert A. Rutland, eds., *The Papers of James Madison* (Charlottesville, Va., 1979), XII, 320.

100. To Mary Cranch, New York, January 5, 1790, Stewart Mitchell, ed., *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801* (Boston, 1847), 35.

101. New York, June 24, 1789, *Madison Papers*, XII, 258.

live and let us know it.”¹⁰² Postmaster General Samuel Osgood told Secretary of War Henry Knox that everyone was upset over the president’s illness. “He must not, he shall not die, at least not for 10 years. God knows where our troubles would end. . . . He alone has the confidence of the People. In Him they believe and through him they remain United.”¹⁰³ Abigail Adams astutely understood the importance of Washington’s life. “It appears to me that the union of the states, and consequently the permanency of the Government depend under Providence upon his Life. At this early day when neither our Finances are arranged nor our Government sufficiently cemented to promise duration, His death would I fear have had most disastrous consequences. I feared a thousand things which I pray I never may be called to experience.”¹⁰⁴ Vice President John Adams agreed that Washington’s “life is of vast importance to us.”¹⁰⁵ The Marquis de Lafayette wrote Washington that “Your preservation is the life of Your friends, the Sallvation of Your Country—it is for You a Relligious duty, Not to Neglect Any thing that May Concern Your Health.”¹⁰⁶

Washington survived his illnesses and he even agreed to serve a second term, but he required a promise from his closest advisers. If he should die in office, these friends were to inform posterity that he did not seek this continuation. He was not a Cromwell. He had wanted to retire to the peace and serenity of his beloved Mount Vernon. But, even more, he wanted to give the young republic a chance to survive in a hostile world. Only with

102. To Joel Barlow, New York, May 8, 1790, Yale University Library.

103. May 22, 1790.

104. To Mary Cranch, New York, May 30, 1790, Mitchell, *New Letters*, 49.

105. To Thomas Brand-Hollis, New York, June 1, 1790, John Disney, ed., *Memoirs of Thomas Brand-Hollis* (London, 1808), 36.

106. Paris, August 23, 1790, *GW Papers*, Pres. Series, VI, 315-16.

this purpose in mind did Washington agree to a second term as president.

Despite all the dangers facing the country, Washington's two terms as president were highly successful. Through the force of his own personality he maintained American neutrality while all of Europe flamed with war and destruction. The financial policies of his secretary of the treasury restored solvency to the formerly bankrupt confederation. A bill of rights, staunchly advocated by James Madison and seconded by Washington, assured former Antifederalists that the new Constitution would not be oppressive. Thoughtful appointments—especially to the federal judiciary—instilled confidence in the new government. Treaties with peaceful southern Indians and forceful measures against the powerful hostile tribes in the Northwest Territory opened new lands for settlement. A treaty with Great Britain kept the peace and obtained the evacuation of British troops from nearly a dozen Revolutionary-war forts on American soil near the Canadian border. His every act created precedent to be followed by his successors. His eight years in office saw the formation of two political parties that under any other person might have divided America into two or more competing countries. But, as Gouverneur Morris had predicted, the able charioteer guided and tamed the wild horses and made them manageable for his successors.

In his farewell address, revised for him by Alexander Hamilton, Washington addressed the American people. "Citizens by birth or choice, of a common country, that country has a right to concentrate your affections.—The name of AMERICAN, which belongs to you, in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism, more than any appellation derived from local discriminations." He cautioned against being drawn into the treacherous affairs of European politics. "Observe good faith & justice towards all Nations. Cultivate peace

& harmony with all," but "steer clear of permanent Alliances, with any portion of the foreign world."

He warned against the growing hostility of the contentious political parties at home that could start "a fire not to be quenched." He urged respect and allegiance to the new government under the Constitution as the culmination of the Revolutionary era.

This government, the offspring of our own choice uninfluenced and unawed, adopted upon full investigation & mature deliberation, completely free in its principles, in the distribution of its powers, uniting security with energy, and containing within itself a provision for its own amendment, has a just claim to your confidence and your support.—Respect for its authority, compliance with its Laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true Liberty.—The basis of our political systems is the right of the people to make and to alter their Constitutions of Government.—But the Constitution which at any time exists, 'till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole people, is sacredly obligatory upon all.—The very idea of power and the right of the People to establish Government presupposes the duty of every Individual to obey the established Government.¹⁰⁷

The American Revolution was over. The new institutions of government were solidly established. It was time for Washington to go home. He had done his duty.

107. *A Great and Good Man*, 216-35.

THE END

The Washingtons happily returned to their private lives at Mount Vernon. They left dear friends behind in Philadelphia and found that many old Virginia friends had passed away. "Our circle of *friends* of course is contracted without any disposition on our part to enter into *new friendships*, though we have an abundance of acquaintances and a variety of visitors."¹⁰⁸

Rumors of Washington's illness and death amused the former President. Martha now endearingly referred to her husband as "the withered Proprietor."¹⁰⁹ He jokingly said that he was "glad to hear before hand, what will be said of him" after his death. He and Robert Morris and several other men had entered into an agreement "not to quit the theatre of this world before the year 1800." Washington was committed "that no breach of contract shall be laid to him on that account."¹¹⁰ But in the summer of 1799, Washington had a dream that he would soon die leaving Martha a widow. The dream so deeply affected Washington that he put his will and other papers in final order.¹¹¹ On December 14, 1799, after only four days of catching a severe cold that worsened into a condition in which he could not breathe, Washington died.¹¹²

Innumerable eulogies praised the dead hero. Typically Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College, wrote that "To his conduct, both military and political, may, with exact propriety, be applied the observation, which has been often made concerning his courage; that in the

108. Martha Washington to David Humphreys, Mount Vernon, June 26, 1797, Fields, *Worthy Partner*, 312.

109. Elizabeth Powel to Martha Washington, Philadelphia, January 7, 1798, *ibid.*, 304.

110. Martha Washington to Elizabeth Powel, Mount Vernon, December 18, 1797, *ibid.*, 310.

111. From Martha Washington, September 18, 1799, *ibid.*, 321.

112. For Tobias Lear's account of Washington's death, see *GW Papers*, Retirement Series, IV, 542-55.

most hazardous situations no man ever saw his countenance change." In describing the aura about Washington, Dwight said that "wherever he appeared, an instinctive awe and veneration attended him on the part of all men. Every man, however great in his own opinion, or in reality, shrunk in his presence, and became conscious of an inferiority, which he never felt before. Whilst he encouraged every man, particularly every stranger, and peculiarly every diffident man, and raised him to self-possession, no sober person, however secure he might think himself of his esteem, ever presumed to draw too near him."¹¹³

No eulogy, however, captured the uniqueness and the importance of Washington as well as Jefferson's. "Never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great." It was Washington's "singular destiny and merit, of leading the armies of his country successfully through an arduous war, for the establishment of its independence; of conducting its councils through the birth of a government, new in its forms and principles, until it had settled down into a quiet and orderly train; and of scrupulously obeying the laws through the whole of his career, civil and military, of which the history of the world furnishes no other example." Jefferson remembered that Washington had often told him "that he considered our new constitution as an experiment on the practicability of republican government, and with what dose of liberty man could be trusted for his own good." Washington "was determined the experiment should have a fair trial, and would lose the last drop of his blood in support of it."¹¹⁴ The experiment succeeded to a great measure thanks to George Washington.

113. *A Discourse, Delivered at New-Haven, Feb. 22, 1800; On the Character of George Washington, Esq. at the Request of the Citizens* (New Haven, 1800), 28, 27.

114. Jefferson to Walter Jones, Monticello, January 2, 1814, Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York, 1984), 1319-20.



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ISBN 1-893311-49-X