

"Quotable George Washington": Seeking Relevance in Words

George Washington was a person who was as complex as his persona in his written legacy was vague. This particular assignment asked the question of not only who was the man George Washington, but what within this history do we see as valuable. Working with quotations has allowed me to delve deeper into the contextual conversations that have circulated in class and I believe what I have discovered was that George Washington was human. Once a person in history is no longer myth, I believe that then he becomes accessible to everyone, regardless of political alignment or age. I cautiously add that it is his character and maybe his silence that permits me to learn so much from a person with whom I originally was unsure of his relation to me. The quotes that I have used as the examples of my understanding of George Washington add light to him as a rebel, a leader, and a man whose character was continually conflicted with tensions in his life and with in the fragility of life in a struggling new country. These are the qualities that are unexpected in the mythic George Washington; yet resonate in a modern interpretation of a man of his time.

Quotations:

On Revolt

"...the cause of Boston is now and ever will be considered as the cause of America."

-Jones, page 35

A common misunderstanding I had of George Washington is that he was a distant in his leadership and in this interpretation was not necessarily a Patrick Henry or Samuel Adams of his day. That is what I love about this quote, that before the Declaration of Independence, George Washington was a leader in his commitment to the revolt against Britain. Maybe this was caused by the sacrifice of the army and as and yet this quote expresses two key ideas: one is that he was very much interested in the politics of the day as they adhere to the Boston Tea Party in this particular reference, but show that he too was caught by the rebellion as a just and noble cause of the colonists. He shows amazing audacity in that he takes a stand much earlier than other people in the colonies, but more importantly, than the politicians with whom Washington shared time with at various levels of leadership.

On the Justification of Revolt, an aristocratic notion:

The right of self-taxation and, "as Englishmen, we could not be deprived of this essential and valuable part of a constitution."

-Jones, page 35

This is fascinating in that it, again, highlights that Washington was a man of his time in using the Rights of Man to give credence to his belief in the revolt of the colonists; however, what is most fascinating is that there are undertones of entitlement in this judgement. Although Washington was not of the upper echelons of society, he was a member of the upper class and, in that, believed in the notion of *Englishmen* in the sense what one was entitled to, without the line of heredity. In essence, that they had just as much right as their wealthy counterparts in England to exercise themselves in government affairs. This type of leadership ideology was crucial to the pulling away of the colonies; however, it is seeped in the righteousness of people, like Washington, who believed that their position within society was justified, even without formal nobility titles; moreover, that they had the right to elevate their social status as they developed their personal capital and wealth. Although this is an evolved notion of the rights of man, it is still also an example of power that seems to come particularly out of a class that is founded upon in wealth and reputation instead of title.

On Urging Revolution and, indirectly, Slavery

"...the crisis is arrived when we must assert our rights, or submit to every imposition that can be heaped upon us, till custom and use shall make us tame and abject slaves, as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary

sway."

Jones, page 35

On Slavery, specifically

"There is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it."

-taken from the quotations provided in reading packet

I like will speak to these two quotes together because what they highlight are three key components of George Washington: one that he saw the rebellion as an ideological struggle, second that he was conflicted on the issue of slavery, and thirdly and most importantly, that he was someone who learned from experiences. I really have engaged in Washington's character on this last issue, that our heroes are fallible and human. It is this process of analysis of our belief systems and the grappling of what is 'right' *en face* of what we experience is such a human quality that one cannot ignore this amazing characteristic of Washington. The fact that he was able to learn from his experience of African American soldiers that led him to change his view on slavery says that he is somewhat able to transcend the confines of his time and become the first president to release his slaves, even if it was after his death. In conjunction to this, it is this trait that pushes him to not only evolve his leadership skills, but also provides him with amazing humility that ultimately leads him to graciously become a reluctant leader who was passionate about the ideology for which he, and other Americans, fought for.

It also cannot be ignored that George Washington's goal of nationalist unity is also reflected in these two quotes. Knowing that he privately came to see the hypocrisy of slavery shows Washington's commitment to the Union by way of never making it a political issue. He knew that it would tear apart the unity of this country, and still tears at the fabric today; however, Washington's preservation of the nation superseded his eventual personal resolve against slavery. I think that this also says something about his character and of the complexity of the tensions that he had to navigate as a president, hero, and leader of this country.