

Final Paper - NEH - George Washington

First in war, first in peace and last in the American League. Two out of three is not bad when reflecting about the legacy of George Washington. All kidding aside, to be remembered as being first in the three major spheres of one's life which were played out on an international and national stage is a marvelous summation of one's life. After almost three weeks of studying the man Washington I thought I would put down some reflections that will help me make sense of the experience.

When a lad Richard Nixon said that he listened at night to the wail of a locomotive off in the distance and he imagined where the train was going to and what it would be like to be a passenger on that means of escape from what he knew to go to a place he could only dream about. So to with Washington - what was he dreaming about in all those solitary nights out on the Western frontier as a teenager? Was Frederick Jackson Turner right - the frontier was the defining experience for the United States? It certainly seems to have been for the young Washington. I had never placed Washington on that frontier before this seminar. As he sat by the campfire, as he trekked across a wilderness what was his mind conjuring up for his future? Left without a father at an early age, left with a Mother who was "difficult," to be kind, taken under the wing of a half brother who gave him by his example some notion of the "good life," I have to see the young man using the frontier as the formative battleground of his adolescence and early adulthood. There was no wealth to fall back on, his inheritance would be a pittance compared to others of his class and station, he's almost a rustic Dickens character deciding that life would not get the best of him.

But he does have some things going for him - he was robust, he had survived a

Denis Cleary

small pox epidemic that would feed an adolescent notion that he was being saved for something special. He was athletic not in a twenty-first century depiction of athleticism but in a eighteenth as a natural horseman with extraordinary physical strength. He was large - in an era when men were five foot six or seven, he was six two. He had the confidence that comes from a comfort with one's body especially compared to his peers. Teaching high school the student athletes who can combine physical grace with good, not necessarily great intelligence, are so much more endowed with good fortune than even a young intellectual genius. Those who have played team sports and been successful look down their noses at peers who have not been capable of enjoying the camaraderie and intensity of a successful competitive enterprise. I get this impression with Washington - he had chosen a military life, a life of physical challenge and the company of warriors and found in the French and Indian War that he was equal to the challenge. He was a member of the Special Forces before there was such a designation. At the House of Burgesses or especially the Continental Congress he was surrounded by intellectual leaders, brilliant men in the drawing room - intimidating and condescending to the less gifted intellectually or educationally but George had battled the elements, Indians, the French and found the experience exhilarating. He had taken the measure of the people around him and found them wanting in the types of experiences he craved.

Now I get to the part of the paper that really intrigues me - it is not clear why he fought in the American Revolution. A good marriage had set him up financially. He had the respect of the community of Virginia planters; his exploits on the battlefield made him a man beyond others. What were the British doing that so unnerved him? There is no evidence that before the Revolution he was particularly concerned with equality and

the "Rights of Man." The Proclamation of 1763 thwarted his desire to go claim more land in the West but would that justify his taking up arms at the risk of losing all he had? His factors in England sent him shoddy goods and he was prey to their evil designs on his tobacco but

Denis Cleary

enough to kill? The British closed the port of Boston and the town meetings in Massachusetts after the Boston Tea Party but he does not strike me as one who would be naturally inclined to favor the rambunctious and rabble rousing Sons of Liberty. He cannot have been inspired by their attempt to burn down the Governor Thomas Hutchinson's house in Massachusetts. Where is the outrage, where is the run up to his dramatic participation? He is willing to lose all - his life, his wealth, his station in life for precisely what? Could it be that he was nursing a grudge from the days he did not receive a regular's commission, or did he feel he had hit a glass ceiling of status by the control of Britain in America's affairs from afar, or was it boredom - as lovely as Martha was, domestic life, even his beloved Mount Vernon was not as exciting as the company of men in a concerted project that just might bring more fame, glory and land on the heads of those associated with its success? *Are* these any good reasons to take a leadership position in a cause that would wreak havoc upon the people of America, killing 25,000 before it was finished? I think not.

Yet here we have been for the last three weeks singing the praises of this admittedly interesting personage. I look for analogies - what if NEH offered a month long seminar studying the life of a Southern gentleman, fatherless from early on, taken under the wing by an older brother, having cut his teeth in military action in a limited war like the French and Indian only it was called the Mexican, called by his community to provide leadership to a minority protesting the harsh impositions of a far away

Denis Cleary

government that was perceived to be denying these people life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness while legitimizing the ownership of other human beings, ascribing to the Jeffersonian nostrum that one had a duty to rebel if one's fundamental rights were infringed upon - now let's say that at Gettysburg Lee had followed Longstreet's ideas about a defensive battle and the South had turned the tide on Meade's armies, taken Gettysburg, marched on Washington and taken the capital from an ineffective Lincoln? Would we celebrate the life and times of Jeff Davis? In my reading of his life he and his contemporaries saw the similarities between his life story and Washington's. And where would Lee be today in the hearts and minds of a grateful nation had he been instrumental in defeating that "woeful, awful, ass" from Illinois?

So is Washington beloved for his victory and as Jackson said "to the victors go the spoils" even as to the writing of history? Is he a fortunate son for whom Providence, the Fates, Destiny had reserved a special place? Did he always want to go back home because he feared he might have outlived his luck, his good fortune? He knew better than all his contemporaries how close a game was the Revolution - it does not rain in March 1775 and he leads a foolish attack upon the British in Boston, he does not escape from Brooklyn Heights in the NYC "campaign," British regulars come early to Monmouth - the list could go on.

Yet he does have extraordinary steadfastness once he is engaged. Is that so surprising? If he loses what is his fate? He cannot go home without expecting to be picked up, court martialed and executed. Is he to be praised for wanting to save his own neck - does he expend other men's hopes and dreams in continuing the war so that he might be able to slip the noose? I have always wondered about Lee - after Gettysburg he

Denis Cleary

knew the South would lose the Civil War so why continue - how many men had to be sacrificed to put an exclamation point on the defeat? But Lee held on all the time remembering the example of Washington in his moment of peril - one of the horrible uses of the "lessons of history."

I come away from my NEH experience having been intellectually engaged by the person of Washington and his times. Being the son of an Irish immigrant I have harbored no great love for British colonial control yet it has always been a real challenge proving to skeptical students that the American Revolution was a response to outrageous British policy. Foolhardy perhaps but outrageous, never. Even as a child there was something fishy about the **Son** of Liberty tarring and feathering fellow Bostonians or throwing someone else's property into the Harbor and calling it a "Party," And yet I am so glad that we defined a place for ourselves among the community of nations. I was struck by Howard Zinn's presentation - was there another way this could have been accomplished without the bloodshed - it might have taken years more to finish the project but it was coming. Monarchy was on the way out, representative democracy would have expanded, we were far enough away from England that we were developing a distinctive lifestyle all our own.

I'll be interested in your comments, Peter - thanks so much for all your time, thought, preparation, inspiration and perspiration on this project I have enjoyed myself thoroughly.