

Reflections on the George Washington Institute

by
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In preparation for coming to the Institute, I had read the five books as required in the syllabus. I arrived the Institute with the belief that George Washington was, despite his fame and well known accomplishments, something of a cipher. After three weeks of immersing myself in the artistic representations and the literature by and about Washington, I leave the Institute resigned to the fact that he must remain enigmatic. Unlike John Adams, whose writings reveal a great deal of his inner feelings and thoughts. Washington was discreet and careful not to render much of his interior life. Adams once remarked that Washington had "the gift of silence." While he must remain enigmatic, however, I do leave with a deeper and more profound admiration for his accomplishments and the staggering obstacles which had to be overcome in order to achieve them. Among the many traits and qualities that have come to define the man, two have impressed me the most: his tendency to take the "long view" in so many of his important political, military and personal decisions, and his perseverance under enormous pressure. Along the way I discovered aspects to his life and career I had not known about and developed a deeper understanding and admiration for those I had

come across earlier.

One of the most surprising things that I discovered about Washington is that, aside from his military and political feats, he was also one of the leading agriculturists of the 18th century. Jefferson, not surprisingly, perhaps, simply has overshadowed him in that respect. No activity pleased him more: "Agriculture has ever been the most favorite amusements of my life." He loved Mt. Vernon above all and devoted much of his life to making it flourish. Even during the Revolution, with the entire enterprise resting on his shoulders, he often found the time to write scores of letters to his step-son Lund who was managing Mt. Vernon for him. Inquiries and instructions flowed into Mt. Vernon throughout the conflict.

From early on, Washington was keenly interested in agriculture and particularly interested in finding new methods and innovations in all aspects of plantation life. The Virginia that Washington was born into had been dominated by tobacco. He was well aware that, while profitable, "the weed" was also very risky. Prices were often unstable and Virginia had become dangerously dependent on this staple crop by the mid 17th century. Thus, Washington was one of the first to diversify his crops. He turned some of his fields over to a winter wheat crop. According to Unger, Washington experimented tirelessly with sixty different crops to find the best combinations for each of his fields. Tobacco fields that would otherwise have been left empty, could now produce additional revenue as well as help replenish the soil. In addition, corn, barley and oats were planted. He also pioneered the raising of mules in this country, which "had more strength and stamina than workhorses and consumed less food." Ever interested in

cutting costs, he set up a weaving plant and converted his flax crop into clothing for his slaves and servants when the price of imported English cloth began to suddenly rise. His taste for brandy had been a costly expenditure until he purchased his own still and began to produce that spirit in such copious quantities that he had enough not only for his own use but a surplus which he sold at a profit. He became the largest producer of spirits in Virginia. He even perfected a new plow which combined tilling, seeding and harrowing in a single tool.

Washington's gaze into the future extended far beyond the borders of his own plantation. He was capable of envisioning projects of enormous, even continental, scope. One of these visions was for a great canal that would connect the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay to the Great Lakes and the Ohio and Mississippi rivers of the interior. Through such an inland waterway would funnel the wealth of the continent: furs from Detroit and lumber from the great Northwest could be shipped to Alexandria, significantly magnifying the economic sinews of the Upper South and Washington's plantation in particular. In pursuit of this project, Washington wrote to the the Governor of Maryland seeking his assistance in the project and predicted that "the opening of the Potomack will ... end in amazing advantages to these two Colonies (Maryland and Virginia)." Under Washington's leadership, the Potomac Company was founded in 1784 and the Virginia and Maryland legislatures appropriated funds for the project. In Unger's words, Washington "had succeeded in organizing the greatest public works project in North American history." Jefferson, writing to Madison, noted "the earnestness with which he espouses the undertaking is hardly to be described, and shows that a mind

like his, capable of grand views and which has long been occupied with them, cannot bear a vacancy." This ambitious project was envisioned a full forty years before the Erie Canal would finally provide the route by which the riches of the interior would funnel from the interior of the continent to the Atlantic Ocean.

Unfortunately, the project never came to fruition: its scope and scale proved to be beyond the reach of its backers. This failure, however, should in no way diminish our admiration for Washington's business sense and grand vision. In spite of this failure, Washington was, as Unger says, "the ultimate entrepreneur." In this respect, Washington joins the list of great Americans, such as DeWitt Clinton, Alexander Hamilton, Andrew Carnegie and Robert Moses who had bold visions for the future and dreamed of vast projects far beyond the vision of more ordinary men. This aspect of Washington's career and interests had been previously unknown to me.

As mentioned above, one of Washington's greatest traits was his ability to focus on the long view. Another was his courage and fortitude under pressure. He would need them both in wrestling with the most vexing foreign policy matter of his administration: Jay's Treaty. In the words of Joseph Ellis "it was his most besieged and finest hour."

Since the end of the Revolution, resentment had been heating up against England. By 1794 it had reached a boiling point. For one, in violation of an agreement under the Treaty of Paris, 1783, England had failed to evacuate the forts it held on American soil. Even more troubling were England's abuses of America's maritime rights. The cry for war was rising, led by the pro-French Republican Party. It was a central belief of Washington that the new nation must avoid war with European powers at all

costs. In a letter to LaFayette, he observed that, "however unimportant America may be considered at present....there will come a day when this country will have some weight in the scale of empires." It is equally clear that Washington believed that day had not yet come. For he says elsewhere that, "America cannot afford to risk war with the British army or navy for at least a generation." He well understood that a war with Britain might well destroy the new nation's economy as well as tear it apart politically.

In an effort to avoid war, Washington sent Chief Justice John Jay on a diplomatic mission to London in an effort to get England to comply with the terms of the Treaty and abandon their forts on American territory. He was also instructed to strike as good a commercial treaty as he could get. Unfortunately, Jay was playing a weak hand and the Treaty he eventually signed was full of American concessions to the English but contained few, if any, concessions by the English to the American demands. No doubt disappointed in the outcome of the Treaty, Washington was inclined to sign it in the interests of his larger goal: avoid war. He would have to do so, however, in the face of the most stinging criticism and abuse of his career.

When the details of Jay's Treaty were leaked in the press, the public outrage was deafening. Republican newspapers accused him of "trying to substitute a monarchic for a republican ally." Washington himself observed that "the public outcry against the Treaty is like that against a mad dog: and everyone, in a manner, seems engaged in running it down." Vice-president Adams reported that the presidential mansion was "surrounded by innumerable multitudes, from day to day... buzzing, demanding war with England, cursing Washington and crying success to the French patriots and virtuous

Republicans." Jay wrote that he "could have walked the entire eastern seaboard at night and had his way illuminated by protestors burning his effigy."

Washington's decision to sign Jay's Treaty was ultimately a wise decision. It was clearly in the best interests of the country for it did indeed avoid a costly and inadvisable war with England for, ironically, about a generation. When war did come, in 1812, the young nation was still woefully unprepared, but managed to hold its own during its second conflict with Great Britain.

As so often in his career, he had seen the wiser path and had chosen it. But it came with a heavy price. Historian Joseph Ellis notes that "what no British musket or cannon had been able to do on the battlefield, the Republican press managed to accomplish on the political one. Washington had been wounded, struck in the spot he cared about most passionately, his reputation as the "singular figure" who embodied the American Revolution in its most elevated and transcendent form. The partisan character of the debate over Jay's Treaty rendered all claims to transcendence obsolete.

Washington could neither accept that fact nor ignore the wounds that this new form of politics had inflicted on him and on his legacy." If Washington had entertained any notions about a third term, Jay's Treaty unquestionably convinced him it was time to return to Mt. Vernon and the occupation he loved more than all others: tending his "vine and fig tree".

Washington's penchant for favoring the "long run" over political expediency and short term gain was indicative of the age of the founders. It seems to me to stand in stark contrast to our own times where politicians, business leaders and the media

routinely make decisions with only the next election or next quarter's profits in mind. The Revolutionary generation acted with an eye toward "generations yet unborn" and what they were bequeathing to them. Our present leaders would do well to recall the example of the founders. Among that impressive assemblage, they need look no further than George Washington.

In conclusion, it has often been stated that among the founders, George Washington was not the most intellectually gifted: he was no scientist like Franklin, not a writer of lyrical power like Jefferson, nor was he a political scientist of the order of Adams who penned the state constitution of Massachusetts, the oldest functioning written constitution in the world. Neither was he one of History's greatest tactical generals in the manner of a Hannibal, Caesar or Napoleon: his record on the battlefield was 3 wins and 7 defeats. In the words of one of our guest speakers, Peter Henriques, if the Earth were suddenly to be attacked by an armada of alien monsters from outer space, as in the film "Independence Day", you would not summon Washington to take command. Yet, in the final analysis, Washington was more important than all the other leaders of the Revolutionary Age. He was, as historian James Thomas Flexner referred to him, the "Indispensable Man": not unlike the keystone at the apex of an arch, which, if removed, inevitably brings the entire edifice tumbling to the earth. It is difficult to see how any of the other leaders of the age could have kept either the Revolutionary War going for eight long years or steer the Constitutional Convention to a successful conclusion and ultimate ratification. In both cases, Washington's role was critical and decisive.

What was it that Washington possessed which allowed him to play the key role in the founding era? Washington's genius was in the strength of his character; he possessed an aura to which all the other leaders, ambitious and vain to a man, were willing to defer. To fully comprehend Washington's character it would be necessary to explore a large number of traits which he possessed. This paper has taken a closer, if all too brief, look at two of the key aspects of that character: his preference for the "long view" of political, economic and agricultural development, and a stunning tenacity: the ability to endure under the most trying of conditions and, to emerge in the end, as George III is reputed to have referred to him, as "the greatest man in the world."