

George Washington- Patriot King for the Republican Age

In his chapter entitled, “Fame” from his book Cincinnatus- George Washington and the Enlightenment, Garry Wills emphasizes the importance of hero worship to the Enlightenment of the 18th Century, particularly in the early US which had achieved, “the first and most successful revolution inspired by that age’s ideals. (pg. 130)” He describes a generation hungering for models of virtue. The models for the highest virtues came less from the traditional source of the Bible and more from a secular pantheon of mortals, many from the classical tradition who embodied the essential qualities of the age and inspired emulation. It was believed that the study and celebration of exemplars of virtue would have a contagious effect on the public spirit and breed a virtuous citizenry in the present and future generations. The American Revolution and “experiment” in democratic republicanism and federalism were considered radical for their time in trying to create a new paradigm for power and leadership in the world away from absolutism. Not only was the new US Constitution potentially radical as a new exemplar to the world, it was also fragile and in the eyes of its many monarchists and detractors, expected to fail. Thus, it was considered vital by those concerned for the future of the US to find and promote heroes who reflected the values fundamental to the new federal republic and who commanded respect at home as well as abroad.

No figure fulfilled this role better than George Washington. As the highest decorated colonial officer in the British Army during the French and Indian War and close friend to the Marquis de Lafayette of France, he commanded international prestige. As Virginia planter and member of the House of Burgesses who commanded the ragged Continental Army against the British, he represented the bridge between the elite class and common soldier as well as a vital unifying force to the nation, having traveled and served with citizens from all thirteen states. And as first president of the United States, he served as a substitute for a king figure while serving as an exemplar and setting many precedents for how the chief executive was not to act as a king. It could also be argued that he was the first and last president who was able to stay above party politics while in office. And after his death, writers and artists used Washington as a subject for mythmaking and hero worship to define the new character of the nation and inspire future generations of citizens and leaders in the US to follow his example. As Wills asserts, “Washington did not create the republic. The republic created him. It called for him and asked him to live up to its expectations (pg. 130.)”

As the leaders of the revolutionary generation from war with Great Britain to the writing of the US Constitution struggled to define the new nation and its principles of government, they searched for

models of successful republics and selfless defenders of representative government against tyranny from history. They found such role models in classical antiquity, particularly the Roman Republic. A canon of classical tomes of Greek and Roman literature, history, philosophy, and rhetoric formed the core of most public and private school education in the eighteenth century. As Carl Richard notes in his book, *The Founders and the Classics*, “Grammar school students commonly studied the classics every morning from eight to eleven and every afternoon from one until dark (p. 13)” He notes that only the poorest areas of the country lacked grammar schools at this time. The entrance exams of the nation’s leading universities from coast to coast, from the College of William and Mary to King’s College to Harvard College were rooted in a firm knowledge of Greek and Latin language and core writers. This was continued in the rigorous curricula and cultures of the colleges, including the secret societies of schools such as Princeton in which each student was assigned the name of a classical hero whose qualities he was supposed to emulate.

It was expected that such continuous reinforcement of the classical virtues would lead to emulation by the students and the creation of a noble national character that was driven by public duty. Garry Wills characterizes the eighteenth century Enlightenment culture as striving to be a hero factory. This also shows the influence of classical culture as Roman writers and educators sought to use the study of history and literature not to promote an accurate and critical understanding of the past so much as to inspire civic pride and model the essential virtues of honor and service to the state that were vital to its success. Plutarch’s Lives, a collection of biographies of leading Greek and Roman heroes and statesmen was created for just this purpose in the Roman Empire and it served a similar purpose for the founding generation of the United States. Thomas Jefferson drew inspiration from Plutarch’s biographies throughout his life. He and other elite Americans such as Charles Wilson Peale even created collections of busts of noble exemplars from antiquity whose example should be followed. Greek and Roman history also served to provide powerful anti-models, examples of power hungry demagogues and conspirators eager to threaten the republic for their own gain. This can be seen in the conflicts of ideology and personalities among the revolutionary leadership. Jefferson equated Hamilton’s Federalist sentiments with Caesarism, and the duel between Hamilton and Aaron Burr was sparked in part by Hamilton’s statements equating Burr with the conspiratorial Catiline.

George Washington understood this common classical vocabulary and used it to shape his public image as the executive who commanded the respect of a king but was distinctly not. This can be seen in his careful and seamless identification with the reluctant Roman dictator Cincinnatus and his reverence for Joseph Addison’s play Cato, which he quoted throughout his life (although it is doubted he ever read it but memorized lines from performances he had seen.) He even understood its

motivational value and public appeal when he had the play performed before the Continental Army during the dark days at Valley Forge (Whether it achieved its desired effect on the troops is unknown...) The Roman ideal of the republican leader was vital for Washington in establishing precedents for the office of president against all monarchical expectations. He would leave after two terms rather than die in office. He would have himself portrayed in portraits wearing civilian clothes rather than a military uniform or any sort of royal regalia. Even after his death, artists would often portray him wearing a toga handing back his sheathed sword in the spirit of Cincinnatus.

Another key to Washington's vital role as first leader of the new US republic was his strong ties to the American and international realms which gave him dual credibility as well as a keen understanding of the concerns and eccentricities of both. His distinguished status as the most senior colonial officer for the British during the French and Indian War and collaboration with the French officers during the revolutionary war accorded him a grudging respect from the leaders of both nations. More importantly, having served with both countries and fought against both countries, Washington gained valuable insights into the nature of real politics, which he used later as president to delicately navigate the US through the stormy seas stirred up by England and France in the 1790s. As Washington stated in a letter to Henry Laurens in 1778, "It is a maxim founded on the universal experience of mankind that no nation is to be trusted farther than it is bound by its interest." This wisdom and savvy acquired through the experience of dealing with both countries may have been what compelled Washington to place his bets on the English through the Jay Treaty which would have long term positive consequences for the US.

Yet while Washington showed an astute understanding of international relations, he had stronger ties to his native land than many of the founding brothers. He was born in the US and never traveled outside of it, with the exception of Barbados. He had not been educated abroad and thus, did not have a deferential view of Europe. Additionally, his earliest job as land surveyor enabled him to invest in the best land and envision the boundless potential of westward expansion. This early insight into the untapped gold mine of the western territories may have been a reason for Washington's early unflappable support for an independent United States and refusal to accept the many attempts by the British to negotiate a compromise. His interaction with the western lands also gave him valuable experience dealing with the Native American population and insights into the dilemmas of future relations and peaceful coexistence. All of this combined with his height and athleticism may have been at the root of contemporary comparisons of Washington to an Indian. As one artist described him, "Had he been born in the forests, he would have been the fiercest man among the savage tribes." (Brookhiser, *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1996, pg. 52) Additionally, having commanded the

Continental Army and fought the British throughout the country, no one understood the land nor saw more of it or its people than Washington.

It may have been Washington's unique understanding of the fragility of the nation's unity and its precarious position between the Scylla and Charybdis of England and France that compelled him to accept the invitation to preside over the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 and ultimately, serve as the first president. As president, Washington realizes that all the eyes of the nation and world were on him and that he must walk a delicate line between the monarchical traditions of Europe and the need for new precedents that set the US president apart from most kings. His understanding of himself as a figurehead of the new nation, as the first and only republican king may have been why he supported having his face on the earliest coins of the new nation or the naming of the US capital after himself. He understood the need for some pomp and ceremony to elevate the status of the president and that is why he supported the use of six white steeds to drive the presidential coach. It was his equivalent of the presidential limo. Washington understood himself to be the crucial bridge from the old world to the new- he needed to command the prestige of a king to bring the weight of stability, tradition, and the respect of the old world to the new US nation and then he had to give it all up to remove all doubt that the US was not like the old world and that the president of the U.S. was no king.

To remove all doubt about his intentions, Washington went back to the classical hero of Cincinnatus. It is clear by the care with which Washington cultivated his public image, kept his diaries, and even revised his earlier writings, that he was aware that he would be subjected to intense scrutiny by present and future generations. At every step of the way, he carefully created the image of himself as the reluctant ascetic leader. Even his personal diary shows this careful construction as he chose not to make note of his inauguration as president on the day it happened, a fairly historic event, while noting that he went to church right afterwards. Just like Caesar Augustus after he restored order to the Roman Empire after 50 years of civil war, only through Washington's affected reluctance as commander of the Continental Army and first president could he avoid accusations of Caesarism and monarchism. And this Cincinnatus legacy of Washington was continued after his death by mythmakers like Parson Weems and artists like Houdon and Greenough in the hopes of creating a new hero for the republican age while linking him back to the appropriate classical traditions. Washington's association with Cincinnatus showed that he did not start from scratch but was part of a long legacy of selfless duty bound leaders whose only desired reward was respect through the ages for their role in making their respective nations great. And through this, Washington succeeded in his necessary role as the "father of his country."

Sources Consulted

- 1) Richard Brookhiser, "A Man on Horseback," Atlantic Monthly, January 1996, pgs. 50-64
- 2) Jones, Robert F., George Washington, Ordinary Man, Extraordinary Leader, Fordham University Press, New York, 2002
- 3) Richard, Carl J., The Founders and the Classics- Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London, England, 1994
- 4) Wills, Garry, Cincinnatus- George Washington and the Enlightenment, Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1984.