

George Washington Today

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July 14, 2005

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In the Summer 2005 George Washington Institute we have discussed multiple aspects of George Washington, the man, and numerous details surrounding his life as a Virginia planter, Revolutionary general, and President of the United States. The purpose of these discussions has been to determine how best to present an eighteenth-century hero to modern-day students and make him relevant to today's world. Certainly, today's students are less likely to accept past explanations that relied on his accomplishments without regard to his transgressions. Justifying the actions of historical figures who did not share today's more enlightened ideas of personal rights and liberties is a rather difficult task. It is altogether too easy to dismiss their important contributions to those same rights and liberties in the face of their own human frailties. It becomes imperative that we examine them, not only in the proper historical context, but also by considering the possibilities that might have occurred without those accomplishments.

In the nineteenth century, Parson Weems used Washington to inspire and motivate schoolchildren and to enrich himself personally. His own avarice led him to sanitize and invent a Washington that came close to human perfection. While his desire to inspire young children to be honest, trust-worthy, responsible, and hard-working was not necessarily a bad thing, his motivation and means today seem dishonest. Indeed, Washington's own sense of his future place in history and his desire to be admired and revered led him to clean up some of his own correspondence. Idealism seems to have little place in today's world, and today's students are quick to question and quick to dismiss that which does not measure up to their own ideas of honesty and fairness. It becomes

important for the historian and teacher to remind students that everyone, leaders and ordinary citizens alike, is subject to the vices and imperfections of humankind and that the good that they do must be weighed against those imperfections lest we all be found wanting.

Washington, in his own time, was criticized and vilified by the press, though his personal life was perhaps not examined as thoroughly as politicians today experience. Recent revelations by the press have exposed presidents who lied, stole, and committed adultery, yet people are still able to recognize their contributions to our nation. It seems as though we are more willing to forgive contemporary sins than historical ones. If we can recognize the worth of these presidents we should be able to admit the contributions of a past president who made the existence of such a tolerant society possible. If we, as a nation, can recognize and apologize for past mistakes, can we not also forgive those whose mistakes were made when weighed against the greater good.

Today's culture of political correctness demands inclusion for all, something that was not believed to be necessary or good in Washington's time. His times were very aware of distinct classes and many accepted slavery without question. Washington was not one of those who accepted it without question. It became an issue that he pondered and struggled with and in the end made a very difficult decision to focus on the creation of a viable nation over the dissolution of an institution that had always existed and, in fact, continues to exist.

Perhaps if we examine a contemporary problem that we could all help to remedy and choose not to, largely for the sake of convenience, we could be more understanding and accepting of Washington's failure to take a stronger position against slavery.

One of the major concerns of conservationists and environmentalists is the overuse and eventual depletion of our natural resources. Many of us have made attempts to conserve water, recycle plastics, and carpool or utilize public transportation to conserve these resources. Most of our attempts are half-hearted, short-lived, or non-existent because it is an inconvenience to do these things. It could also be argued that our failure to take these conservation measures seriously has led us to disregard or dismiss the fact that future generations could face hardships because of our failures or even that we are engaging in a war at the present time, not just because of terrorism, but because of our desire for plentiful, cheap oil. We, as a nation, are the world's largest consumer of natural resources, and as such have become a target of less privileged and wealthy nations. We are more prepared to sacrifice our young men than we are to be inconvenienced. These are not just problems that we as a society face; these are moral and ethical issues. Perhaps we should consider how historians two hundred years from now will judge our actions and decisions, or more importantly, what consequences future generations may face because of the things we do or do not do today.

George Washington's moral dilemma over the issue of slavery was one similar to this. He came to be convinced that it was the wrong thing to do, but for reasons both economic and political, and because of the constraints of the society in which he lived, he chose to ensure the preservation of the nation over the abolition of slavery. His personal choice concerning the fate of his own slaves was a different problem. He resolved it by freeing and providing for them upon his death and that of his wife. Will today's leaders be able to show that their private struggles were resolved as honorably as Washington's and that their public decisions were made with the best interests of the majority of the people

considered? Because that is his legacy to us. He made it possible for us to have a nation that despite all of our imperfections, we are able to discuss and deal with such issues as a nation and to participate as individuals. If we chose not to participate, then we bear the same responsibility as those who do.