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**NEH Seminar George Washington and His Legacy:**  
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### George Washington's Legacy

Celebrity is a fleeting concept in American society. Like a loaf of bread - what is fresh today is most oftentimes stale tomorrow. All one has to do is survey the cornucopia of reality television/cable shows starring former icons of television, music, and film - some of which have only been out of the limelight for a couple of years. Invariably, they fail in their attempts to recapture their former glory. Does this same type of celebrity apply to historical figures? Are they quickly forgotten once their time is past? A Google search for George Washington, as of this writing, resulted in over forty-eight million references (current President George W. Bush had roughly half this amount). Washington receives a great deal of attention. His likeness is nearly everywhere. Yet, what is he remembered for? Too often, students beginning in elementary school are serenaded by stories about his wooden teeth and the cherry tree - untrue yet enduring fallacies of Washington's life originated by well-intentioned but flawed early biographers. We are presented with Washington's "mixed" legacy as a Founding Father - a slave owner, an aristocrat, and commander-in-chief of the country's armed forces. Socrates stated "the unexamined life is not worth living." Examining Washington's life, his idiosyncrasies as well as his strengths of character, is beneficial in understanding what makes us Americans because, like it or not, Washington was and arguably still is the embodiment of America.

From his early twenties as a Captain in the French and Indian War, Washington exhibited maturity and leadership. Historian Samuel Eliot Morison once stated that Washington was the "last person you would ever suspect of having been a young man." He was not born wealthy and, due to his father's untimely death when he was young, did not have the opportunity to attend college. He was largely self-schooled and, with an early interest in real estate and agriculture, he began his career as a surveyor in order to

support himself. He later married and settled into a life as a planter after leading a Virginia regiment as Captain on behalf of the British in the French and Indian War. It is not clear whether he wanted to forgo this life for the command of the American army but he was nominated to do so after the Battle of Lexington and Concord in April, 1775. Massachusetts delegate John Adams, highlighting Washington's service in the French and Indian War, stated "There is but one man in my mind for this important command. The gentleman I have in mind is from Virginia." Adams continued, arguing "His skill as an officer, his great talents and universal character would command the respect of America and unite the Colonies better than any other person alive." In a response to fellow Virginian Patrick Henry and others who heaped great praise and accolades upon him, Washington would display great modesty, saying "Remember, Mr. Henry, what I now tell you: From the day I enter upon the command of the American armies, I date ... the ruin of my reputation."

As a military field commander, Washington's early strategies were questionable as he lost twice as many battles as he won. While the Declaration of Independence called the new nation to arms against its former sovereign, the new government under the Articles of Confederation (which would not be ratified until 1781) lacked the coercive powers of a more centralized government. Washington's army consistently lacked the men, training, and supplies needed for battle against the world's most formidable military power. Personal accounts from Washington and others highlight the often hopeless conditions which existed during the army's winter residence at Valley Forge in 1777-78 (and subsequently at Morristown in 1779-1780). Washington would take no pay for his services (his expenses, however, were paid). Additionally, he had to contend with Generals' Conway (Conway Cabal), Gates, Lee, and others who vied for his post during the Revolution. Through it all, while the British replaced their top commanders several times, Washington led from beginning to end, winning the respect of his men as he overcame the rigors of war. At the Battle of Monmouth, the Marquis de Lafayette marveled at Washington's stoicism, stating "His graceful bearing on horseback, his calmed deportment which still retained a trace of displeasure... were all calculated to inspire the highest degree of enthusiasm... I thought then as now that I had never beheld so superb a man." Even his nemesis, King George III remarked that Washington was "in

a light the most distinguished of any man living” and continued by stating that he was “the greatest character of the age.” High praise from a monarch who would likely have had Washington hanged for treason if the Revolution had ended in a different fashion. At the conclusion of the War, Washington’s humble desire for a return to private life did not surprise many who had served with him. In a letter from James McHenry to Margaret Caldwell dated the 23rd of December, 1783, McHenry stated “The events of the revolution accomplished - the new situation into which it had thrown the affairs of the world - the great man who had born so conspicuous a figure in it, in the act of relinquishing all public employment to return to private life - the past - the present - the future - the manner - the occasion - all conspired to render it a spectacle inexpressibly solemn and affecting.”

Washington retired to Virginia to farm his land for a time. What led him out of his short-lived retirement beginning in 1785 had less to do with war than with internal rebellion. Under the Articles of Confederation, individual states were taking responsibility only for their own debts, thus disregarding national prewar debts owed to England and other European countries. Furthermore, armed conflicts and uprisings such as Shay’s Rebellion had taken place in several states. Although Thomas Jefferson was noted to have written James Madison in 1787 that “A little rebellion now and then is a good thing”, Washington and other Federalists did not feel the same way. After hosting a meeting of Virginia and Maryland representatives at his house in 1785, the Virginia legislature encouraged states to attend the Annapolis Convention in September, 1786 to strengthen the coercive powers of the government. This Convention ultimately led into the Constitutional Convention.<sup>1</sup> Washington’s yet again enlisted into public service.

Washington may have been spurred on to the presidency due to his intense desire to be loved by his countrymen. As many historians have argued, in his book *George Washington: Ordinary Man, Extraordinary Leader*, historian Robert F. Jones states “This public acclaim was especially appropriate, for it was the only compensation Washington desired.”<sup>2</sup> Washington would go on to serve two terms as the country’s first president.

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<sup>1</sup> Gillon, Steve M., et al. *The American Experiment: A History of the United States*. New York: Houghten Mifflin Company.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, Robert F., p.91.

Finally, after more than forty years in service to his country, Washington would finally retire to private life, although he accepted the title of Commander-in-Chief of the American forces until his death in 1799. Even in the last year of his life, Washington could not be removed from the politics of his day. Washington subsequently rejected pleas from Federalists that he come out of retirement to again run for the presidency in the 1800 election. In a letter to Connecticut's Governor Jonathan Trumbull written in 1799, Washington writes on the growing existence of political factions "...I am thoroughly convinced I should not draw a single vote from the Antifederal side..." After his death in December of 1799, the United States was in mourning for more than a year - one could not access black cloth of any kind for nearly the same amount of time. At Washington's funeral, then Congressman Richard Henry Lee stated that Washington was "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." In a show of respect for Washington's legacy, the British reportedly fired off a thirty-gun salute upon hearing of his death.

When Socrates argued for the "examination" of one's life, he was not aware of how "public" the life of a celebrity could become. While American society is keenly interested in the exploits of their favorite stars, they are just as interested in the sordid details of their lives (aka their "dirty laundry"). Historical figures are fair game for this century as well. For example, the firestorm surrounding Thomas Jefferson's sexual relationship with Sally Hemings, one of his female slaves, has severely weakened his historical stature. While it has never been proven that Washington did the same thing, he was a slave owner his entire life. From our present day vantage point, how can a man of character have enslaved others? Can Washington still be a hero, despite this perceived blight on his record?

In 1796, Washington received a letter from prominent English antislavery advocate Edward Rushton. Rushton writes "... a man who not withstanding his hatred of oppression and his ardent love of liberty holds at this moment hundreds of his fellow being in a state of abject bondage..."<sup>3</sup> It is not clear how much influence Rushton and others had on Washington's decision to ultimately free his slaves upon his death. In his last Will and Testament, Washington writes "...Upon the decease of my wife, it is my

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<sup>3</sup> Higginbotham, Don, p. 115.

Will and desire, that all the slaves which I hold in my own right, shall receive their freedom.” Washington continues in the document, concluding that all are to be clothed, “be taught to read and write, & to be brought up to some useful occupation.” He also implies that any infirmed slaves are to be cared for. Washington made no indication in the document about his thought processes. Unlike the other Founding Fathers of his time such as Adams, Franklin, Hamilton, and Jefferson, Washington likely did not perceive himself an intellectual. Therefore, he would have avoided public debate on such matters as slavery. As historian Dorothy Twohig states in her essay entitled *That Species of Property: Washington’s Role in the Controversy over Slavery*, “Publicly, no comments came from him on slavery. For Washington, as for most of the other founders, when the fate of the new Republic was balanced against his own essentially conservative opposition to slavery, there was really no contest.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 126

## Sources

- 1.) Gillon, Steven M., et al. (2002). *The American Experiment: A History of the United States*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- 2.) Higginbotham, Don. (2001). *George Washington Reconsidered*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- 3.) Jones, Robert F. (2002). *George Washington: Ordinary Man, Extraordinary Leader*. New York: Fordham University Press