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**NEH Seminar**  
**Summer, 2005**

### **Proposal for a Seminar in American Political Theory**

Title: Liberty and Responsibility in the Writings of George Washington General Statement:

Gouverneur Morris, at a gathering at the time of the Constitutional Convention, approached George Washington on a dare. Alexander Hamilton had offered dinner with the best wine for twelve if Morris would gently slap the General on the shoulder, and say "My dear General, how happy I am to see you look so well." Morris completed the dare only to have Washington icily remove Morris's hand and step away. Morris retreated abashed into the crowd. He later stated that the stem look Washington gave him was the worst rebuke of his life.

Many anecdotes about George Washington tell us to keep our distance. Since the 1970s, however, a wide range of historians and biographers from Garry Wills to Joseph Ellis, from Don Higgenbotham to David Hackett Fischer, have lessened that distance a good deal. And while George Washington occupies a special place in our national pantheon of heroes, he is in some ways less understood than either Franklin or Jefferson. Neither as cosmopolitan as the former nor as intelligent as the latter, Washington has occasionally suffered by comparison to his counterparts.

Some biographers have emphasized his Stoic nature, and his devotion to self-mastery and responsibility along with his desire to achieve a certain kind of inward serenity and external recognition and applause. In politics, he became a republican who believed that there was an active conspiracy to deny the colonists their inherent rights as Englishmen. Eventually, he viewed the Articles of Confederation as too weak to effectively guide the new nation, and he called for stronger, more vigorous government. As president, with the memory of Shays' Rebellion still fresh in his mind, he put down the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion. Concerned with foreign entanglements during the Anglo-French Wars, he advocated both isolation and neutrality for the United States. As Edmund Morgan, author of *The Genius of George Washington* points out, a strong government could help establish a strong national character, which in Washington's mind meant reputation.

We will read primary sources drawn from John Rhodehamel (ed.), *George Washington: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1997) and W. B. Allen (ed.), *George Washington: A Collection* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund: 1988). Our major focus would concern Washington's view of liberty and responsibility over his lifetime. How well did he adhere to *The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*? What does his military service tell us about his character? Did Washington's concept of liberty rest upon a balance between internal and external factors and forces? How did events of the 1790s challenge his concepts of ordered liberty, and how did he deal with them? Did his vision of responsibility in personal matters flow into his political vision as well? What can we learn from Washington's understanding of power? What is his meaning to us as a nation?

By examining these themes and others, we can learn more about the man who was grappling with these eternal values. Perhaps in the process, we can lessen some of that famous distance between George Washington and the people who wish to understand him.

## **QUESTIONS:**

### **Session L• Youth and Revolution:**

- Questions: How did The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior guide Washington in his early life? In his letters to Robert Dinwiddie and others, what understanding do we gain of his attitude toward responsibility and reputation? What political and economic factors pushed Washington toward republicanism?

### **Session IL Revolution and War:**

- Questions: How did influences from Washington's pre-Revolutionary military service affect his leadership of the Continental Army? Did his view of liberty change over the course of fighting the British from 1775 until 1783? Is there a connection between Washington's internal opinions of rights and responsibilities and his external approach of commanding his forces and dealing with dissent among his troops?

### **Session III: Resignation and Private Citizen:**

- Questions: What was Washington's vision of the American future? Why did Washington advocate the need for a stronger central government? How would a more vigorous government protect rights and ensure responsibility?

### **Session IV: The Constitution:**

Questions: What were Washington's sentiments toward monarchical government? How did he think the new Constitution would promote Union and prevent tyranny? Does his definition of virtue show a continuing influence of The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior?

### **Session V: The Presidency (Part I):**

- Questions: What vision of government does Washington provide for us in his First Inaugural Address? From 1789-1794, how did various events, domestic and foreign, challenge his understanding of rights and responsibilities? Did the realities of office-holding change his attitude toward human liberty?

### **Session VI: The Presidency (Part II), Retirement, and Religion:**

- Final Questions: What does The Farewell Address tell us about Washington's vision for the United States? How does Washington's religious vision inform his sense of rights and responsibilities? Does his Last Will and Testament show an adherence to The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior? What were Washington's lasting contributions to his country?

## **READINGS:**

### **Session I: Youth and Revolution: (48 pages)**

From W.B. Allen, George Washington: A Collection

- "The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation" (pages 6-13)
- "Address to his Command" (page 19)
- "To Bryan Fairfax" (pages 33-34)

From John Rhodehamel, George Washington: Writings

- "To John Augustine Washington" (pages 59-60)
- "To Mary Ball Washington" (page 60)
- "To Christopher Gist" (page 62)
- "To Robert Dinwiddie" (pages 62-65)
- "To Robert Dinwiddie" (pages 82-88)
- "To Robert Dinwiddie" (pages 91-93)
- "To Robert Cary and Company" (pages 113-117)
- "To George Mason" (pages 129-132)
- "To George William Fairfax" (pages 148-151)
- "To Bryan Fairfax" (pages 153-156)

### **Session II: Revolution and War: (45 pages)**

From W.B. Allen, George Washington: A Collection

- "To Joseph Reed" (pages 65-68)
- "To Benjamin Harrison" (pages 116-119)
- "To Colonel Lewis Niccola" (pages 203-204)
- "To Governor Benjamin Harrison" (pages 210-211)

From John Rhodehamel, George Washington: Writings

- "Address to the Continental Congress" (page 167)
- "To Martha Washington" (pages 167-169)
- "To William Woodford" (pages 189-190)
- "To John Hancock" (pages 208-211)
- "General Orders": (pages 225-227)
- "To Robert Morris, George Clymer, and George Walton" (pages 264-266)
- "To John Banister" (pages 298-305)
- "To John Price Posey" (pages 469-471)
- "Speech to the Officers of the Army" (pages 496-500)

- "General Orders" (pages 512-514)
- "Circular to the State Governments" (pages 516-526)

### **Session III: Resignation and Private Citizen (48 pages)**

From W.B. Allen, George Washington: A Collection

- "Circular to the States" (pages 239-249)
- "To John Augustine Washington" (page 255-256)
- "To the Reverend William Gordon" (pages 257-260)
- "Address to Congress on Resigning His Commission" (pages 272-273)
- "To Robert Morris" (pages 318-319)
- "To John Jay" (pages 333-335)
- "To James Madison" (pages 339-340)
- "To Henry Knox" (pages 348-350)
- "To David Humphreys" (pages 350-353)

From John Rhodehamel, George Washington: Writings

- "To Benjamin Harrison" (pages 551-553)
- "To James McHenry" (pages 587-590)
- "To James Warren" (pages 591-593)
- "To John Jay" (pages 599-600)
- "To Henry Lee" (pages 608-610)
- "To James Madison" (pages 624-627)
- "To Henry Knox" (pages 628-630)

### **Session IV: The Constitution (36 pages)**

From W.B. Allen, George Washington: A Collection

- "To the Secretary of Foreign Affairs" (pages 357-359)
- "To James Madison" (pages 360-363)
- "To Bushrod Washington" (pages 371-374)
- "To Marquis de Lafayette" (pages 382-385)
- "To John Armstrong" (pages 386-389)
- "To Marquis de Lafayette" (pages 389- 393)
- "To the Marquis de Lafayette" (pages 400-403)
- "To Alexander Hamilton" (pages 416-417)
- "To Benjamin Lincoln" (pages 423-426)
- "To George Steptoe Washington" (pages 431-434)

From John Rhodehamel, George Washington: writing

- "To David Humphreys" (pages 631-634)
- "To Henry Knox" (pages 640-642)
- "To John Jay" (pages 642-644)

### **Session V: The Presidency-Part I(45 pages)**

From W.B. Allen, George Washington: A Collection

- "The First Inaugural Speech" (pages 460-467)
- "The First Annual Message" (pages 467-470)
- "To the United Baptist Churches in Virginia" (pages 531-532)
- "To the Annual Meeting of Quakers" (pages 533-534)
- "Thanksgiving Proclamation" (pages 534-535)
- "To Catherine Macaulay Graham" (pages 537-539)
- "To the Roman Catholics in the United States of America" (pages 546-547)
- "To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport" (pages 547-548)
- "To Marquis de Lafayette" (pages 570-572)
- "To the Secretary of the Treasury" (pages 579-581)
- "To Governor Henry Lee" (pages 586-588)
- "Proclamation" (page 588-589)
- "Proclamation" (pages 589-592)
- "To Governor Henry Lee" (593-596)
- "Proclamation" (pages 598-600)

From John Rhodehamel, George Washington: Writings

- "To Alexander Hamilton" (pages 809-813)
- "To Thomas Jefferson" (825-826)
- "To Eleanor Parke Custis" (pages 900-902)

## **Session VI: The Presidency (Part II) and Retirement (48 pages)**

From W.B. Allen, George Washington: A Collection

- "To Alexander Hamilton" (pages 609-610)
- "To the House of Representatives" (pages 622-625)
- "To Marquis de Lafayette" (pages 655-660)
- "To Patrick Henry" (pages 660-663)

From John Rhodehamel, George Washington: Writings

- " To Alexander Hamilton" (pages 914-916)
- " Farewell Address" (pages 962-977)
- " To Alexander Spotswood" (pages 1015-1016)
- " Last Will and Testament" (pages 1022-middle of 1036)