



The



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The Premier American Hero — George Washington

If there ever were a time when the American people need heroes, that time is now. Fortunately, we don't have to invent a hero. The man who should be honored as our greatest American is the Father of Our Country, George Washington.

George Washington was history's indispensable man. It's no exaggeration to say that, without his leadership, we would not have a United States of America. George Washington's greatest biographer, Douglas Southall Freeman, was once asked what was the most important single thing he had learned from his lifetime of historical study. He replied, "The influence of personality on history."

Of no person in American history was that more true than of the man whom schoolchildren are (or used to be) taught is "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." The sheer power of his character and personality made him the acknowledged leader among the extraordinary men of intellect, learning, and vision whom we call the Founding Fathers.

Freeman concluded that Washington gave the American cause what it needed most: "patience and determination, inexhaustible and inextinguishable." Some years ago, I ran a national essay contest for junior high school students on George Washington and the winning essayist grasped that same point. "I admire George Washington," the student wrote, "because he never gave up."

Dropping Down the Memory Hole

We live in a strange time when it has become popular to downgrade our country's heroes. Earlier this year, the New Jersey state Department of Education issued new history standards omitting all mention of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. Fortunately, after an uproar in the press, New Jersey's Department of Education backed down and agreed to include those famous names in the state's history standards.

In 1995, a federally tax-funded 271-page book called *National Standards for United States History* was

released to the public. It was so antagonistic to American heroes and history, as well as to Western civilization, that the United States Senate denounced it in a vote of 99 to 1. The authors condescendingly made some cosmetic changes, but the original version was already in the hands of schools and textbook publishers.

The *National Standards* displayed a conscious effort to omit or debunk our country's heroes while teaching schoolchildren about obscure individuals deemed more Politically Correct. Entirely omitted from the *National Standards* were such outstanding Americans as Paul Revere, Thomas Edison, the Wright brothers, and General Robert E. Lee.

The professors who wrote *National Standards* did their best to minimize George Washington's importance. Students were told to construct a *fictional* dialogue between Washington and an Indian leader at the end of the Revolution. Nothing was suggested to be taught about his extraordinary leadership, military skill, presidency of the Constitutional Convention, or service as our nation's first President. Students were instructed to "read selections from the writings of major leaders" such as John Dewey and Margaret Sanger. No such instruction was given about George Washington.

Schoolchildren are no longer taught the famous story about the bulletproof George Washington which scholar David Barton discovered used to be included in most history textbooks. Washington was a 26-year-old officer fighting the battle of Monongahela on July 9, 1755 when the colonial troops were ambushed by the French and Indians who fired from behind trees instead of on an open field as the English commander, General Braddock, was convinced that wars should be fought. Braddock was killed, and 977 out of 1,459 of his men were killed or badly wounded, including 63 out of 86 British and American officers. Washington's physical stature (he was 6' 2-1/2" tall) and majestic bearing in the saddle made him an easy mark for the hidden riflemen, but they could not kill him.

After Washington led the survivors in retreat, he wrote to his brother: "By the all-powerful dispensations

of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability or expectation; for I had four bullets through my coat, and two horses shot under me, yet I escaped unhurt, although death was leveling my companions on every side of me."

In George Orwell's great classic *1984*, the totalitarian government was constantly rewriting history. When the government wanted to pretend that some historical fact or person didn't exist, the government would wipe those events and persons out of the people's memory by dropping them down the Memory Hole. The liberals and the devotees of Political Correctness are now trying to drop some of our essential history and heroes down the Memory Hole. American citizens will have to be vigilant to protect America's great history and heroes.

You can do your part to restore George Washington to his proper place in history by reviewing the history books in your local schools to see if they tell the truth about his greatness.

A Man of Character

Washington's greatness is not just that he led the Revolutionary Army to victory in an apparently hopeless seven-year war against the mightiest military power in the world. It's not just that he presided over the convention that wrote our enduring Constitution which is the fountain-head of our freedom. It's not just that he was uniquely unanimously elected to two terms as our first President. It's not just that he made our young republic a reality when he declined a third term as President and transferred the reins of power to our second President.

Washington's greatness was based on his leadership and character, so acknowledged by the many other great men of his time. Washington is the hero we need today because he is an extraordinary example of a President whose character was above reproach and whom adulmentation did not corrupt. In Daniel Webster's words: "America has furnished to the world the character of Washington, and if our American institutions had done nothing else, that alone would have entitled them to the respect of mankind."

When sensational journalists of his and succeeding generations scraped the countryside for revelations, they did not find even one tale of a tryst behind a haystack or a plundering escapade with the boys. Item-by-item scrutiny of his cash-book and ledger, which were the disclosure records of his generation, do not reveal even one entry that hints of a financial or moral impropriety. His spotless reputation has stood the test of time.

No investigative reporter ever discovered any misdeeds of the kinds that tarnished the reputations of later Presidents. Washington did not have any secret life of womanizing, cheating, building a personal fortune through control of government television licenses, talking in profanities, lying to his supporters as well as his enemies, keeping close friendships with traitors or men of deviant behavior, betraying his campaign promises, making secret deals with foreign countries, accepting campaign donations

that smelled of bribery, conspiring to involve our country in war, or stuffing the ballot box to win elections.

Washington never would have accepted the popular line that the personal lives of public officials are none of the public's business. With Washington, what you saw was what you got; the public man and the private man were one and the same. Representative Richard Henry Lee's eulogy correctly stated: "The purity of his private character gave effulgence to his public virtues."

Washington wanted our nation to be bound by the same rules of honor and honesty that should bind individuals. In his Farewell Address he reminded us: "I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs that honesty is always the best policy."

The famous story about not telling a lie about chopping down the cherry tree has been demoted in modern times to apocryphal status, but we have the record that, as a schoolboy, Washington wrote in his copybook, "Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire — conscience."

With almost no formal education, Washington educated himself by reading. He was not an eloquent speaker, having no special flair with words or his generation's equivalent of the 20th century sound-bite. Nevertheless, all the college-educated Founding Fathers acknowledged him as their leader.

Washington earned the loyalty of the men who served with him not from stirring their emotions but because of his reliable integrity, incorruptible judgment, and persevering zeal. He certainly didn't retain their enthusiasm for the American cause because of a succession of military victories — he lost more battles than he won. His leadership and commanding presence enabled him to lead his ragged, ill-clothed, underpaid troops through defeats and retreats toward an improbable victory.

Washington's total dedication to the duty assigned to him of winning our War of Independence gave him personal peace of mind. His will and self-discipline were his rod and staff; he could persevere in the war against England because he was not at war with himself.

Washington's code of living was built on the principles of conduct he regarded as the code of gentlemen, laboriously handwritten as a teenager in his *110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior*. The gentleman's code was not founded on love and compassion, but on honesty, duty, truth, respect for others, courtesy, and justice, which demanded that he do his utmost and in return receive what he had earned. What he was, he made himself by will, effort, self-discipline, ambition, and perseverance.

One of my treasured possessions is an original sculpture of Washington on horseback at the battle of Monmouth in 1778. It captures a moment during the Revolution when his leadership was put to its severest test. Finding his advance troops in full retreat because of a traitorous officer, Washington galloped through his frightened regiments and saved the day by turning them around and leading them forward to attack the British.

Late in life, Washington himself told an old friend his own explanation of his remarkable success in accomplishing what seemed impossible in the American Revolution. He said he "always had walked on a straight line." As a youth, he acquired a positive love of the right, and he developed an iron will to do always what is right and honorable.

Today, when there seem to be so few heroes, George Washington is a man for all seasons. He had the strength he needed for the long and dangerous journeys of his incredible life because he always walked that "straight line."

Washington's Farewell Address

George Washington's Farewell Address is one of America's most important national treasures. He wrote it to help form our national character based on the morals and civic virtues necessary for self-government. It contains his advice to the nation based on his lifetime of experience and service, and it is just as relevant today as when he gave it upon retiring from the presidency in 1796.

Washington urged us to recognize the primacy of the Constitution which provides "the fundamental maxims of true liberty," and "till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole people, is sacredly obligatory upon all." He described our constitutional Separation of Powers as "the guardian of the public weal," and said that "to preserve them must be as necessary as to institute them."

George Washington warned against allowing politicians or judges to take unconstitutional actions, no matter how well intentioned: "If in the opinion of the people the distribution or modification of the constitutional powers be in any particular wrong, let it be corrected by an amendment in the way which the Constitution designates. But let there be no change by usurpation; for though this, in one instance, may be the instrument of good, it is the customary weapon by which free governments are destroyed."

Washington's advice about the conduct of foreign policy is particularly apt today. He encouraged us to extend our commercial relations with foreign nations, but "to have with them as little *political* connection as possible": "'Tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world."

Explaining further, Washington warned us: "History and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government. . . . A passionate attachment of one nation for another produces a variety of evils. Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest, in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter, without adequate inducement or justification. . . . Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence, she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns."

Washington cautioned us to avoid "the accumulation of debt, not only by shunning occasions of expense, but by vigorous exertions in time of peace to discharge the debts which unavoidable wars have occasioned, not ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burden which we ourselves ought to bear." He warned us to avoid "overgrown military establishments, which under any form of government are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to republican liberty."

The famous command given the night Washington crossed the Delaware River, "Put none but Americans on guard tonight," may be only legend. But we read in the Farewell Address this ringing endorsement of patriotism: "The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation."

In his Fifth Annual Address to Congress in 1793, Washington showed himself a master military strategist. He gave us the most succinct two-part formula for peace: (a) be ready for war and (b) let it be known that we are ready. "There is a rank due to the United States among nations, which will be withheld, if not absolutely lost, by the reputation of weakness. If we desire to avoid insult, we must be able to repel it; if we desire to secure the peace, one of the most powerful instruments of our rising prosperity, it must be known that we are at all times ready for war."

Washington's Religious Faith

George Washington was a man who believed in asking God's help in both our private and public lives. As a boy, he hand-wrote a booklet of his daily prayers. He was a lifetime church-going Episcopalian. In his Farewell Address, he reminded us: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports." He called these "the great pillars of human happiness, the firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. . . . Virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government."

During the terrible times of the Revolutionary War, Washington repeatedly counseled his troops to put their trust in God. Here is one of his messages: "The time is now near at hand which must probably determine whether Americans are to be freemen or slaves; whether they are to have any property they can call their own. . . . The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the courage and conduct of this army. . . . Let us therefore rely on the goodness of the cause and the aid of the Supreme Being, in whose hands victory is, to animate and encourage us to great and noble actions."

By the end of the American Revolution, Washington came to believe that a personal God had intervened to save America and that our Revolutionary cause could not have succeeded without the direct intervention of Divine Providence. Washington's years in public life after the Revolution were filled with references to his deep religious faith and its necessity in our public and private lives.

As president of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 which wrote our great United States Constitution, Washington's leadership held together that assemblage of strong-minded men with conflicting sectional interests. One of the few times he spoke during those four hot months in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, he said: "If to please the people, we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterwards defend our work? Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair; the event is in the hand of God."

When George Washington took the oath as first President of the United States in 1789, he added this four-word prayer of his own: "So help me God." Those words are still used in official oaths by Americans taking public office, in courts of justice, and in other legal proceedings.

In his first Inaugural Address, Washington acknowledged our country's dependence on God: "It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe — who presides in the council of nations."

President Washington is responsible for making Thanksgiving our unique American holiday. His Proclamation in 1789 made the last Thursday in November "a day of public thanksgiving and prayer" on which Americans should thank Almighty God for granting us "an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness."

You can hardly read an important letter or paper written by Washington without a reference to Providence, and the context makes it clear that Washington believed in a God who is actively engaged in granting benefits and blessings to His people. As his biographer Douglas Southall Freeman concluded, "The war convinced him that a Providence intervened to save America from ruin."

Restore Washington's Birthday

By any standard, George Washington is the premier American hero truly worthy of his own national holiday. His birthday was celebrated as early as 1778, and Congress made it a national holiday in 1870. He held that honor until a peculiar mishap deprived him of it in 1971.

In 1968, Congress enacted the Monday Holiday Law (Public Law 90-363, 82 Stat. 250) to go into effect in 1971. Its sole purpose was to give Americans five guaranteed three-day weekends. The law provided that George Washington's Birthday, which had always been celebrated on February 22, should henceforth be observed with a holiday on the third Monday in February. The law did **not** change the name of the holiday.

In 1971, President Richard Nixon issued a proclamation calling the third Monday in February Presidents Day. His unauthorized proclamation has no legal effect. Neither his proclamation nor any subsequent action by any President or Congress has ever changed the name of the holiday. But somehow the name Presidents Day stuck and

many calendars began to use it. This switch coincided with the period when it became popular to debunk our heroes and deemphasize the history of the American Revolution.

You can do your part to maintain George Washington's standing as our greatest American hero by refusing to buy calendars that identify the third Monday of February as Presidents Day instead of by its proper legal name, George Washington's Birthday. The calendar companies should not be allowed to force us to honor all Presidents when there are many of them who don't deserve to be honored.

Rep. Roscoe Bartlett (R-MD) has introduced a bill to require the federal bureaucracy to obey the law and use the term George Washington's Birthday to identify the holiday we observe on the third Monday of February.

However, it's up to the free market to let calendar producers know that we want George Washington restored to his proper day in the year, and that requires action by citizens and organizations.

We know we will be honoring a real hero. Douglas Southall Freeman, who authored a monumental and definitive seven-volume biography of our first President, concluded: "The more I study George Washington, the more am I convinced that the great reputation he enjoyed with his contemporaries and with men of the next generation was entirely justified. He was greater than any of us believed he was."

Recommended books about George Washington:

- ▶ *Washington* by Douglas Southall Freeman, An abridgement in one volume by Richard Harwell of the seven-volume *George Washington* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968).
- ▶ *The Bulletproof George Washington* by David Barton (Wallbuilder Press, P.O. Box 397, Aledo, TX 1990).
- ▶ *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* by Richard Brookhiser (New York, The Free Press, 1996).
- ▶ *A Sacred Union of Citizens: George Washington's Farewell Address and the American Character* by Matthew Spalding and Patrick J. Garrity (Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996).
- ▶ *Patriot Sage, George Washington and the American Political Tradition* by Gary L. Gregg II and Matthew Spalding (Wilmington, DE, ISI Books, 1999).
- ▶ *All Cloudless Glory: The Life of George Washington* by Harrison Clark (Washington, DC, Regnery Publishing Co., Vol. I 1995, Vol II 1996).
- ▶ *The Real George Washington* by W. Cleon Skousen (Washington, DC, National Center for Constitutional Studies, 1991).

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