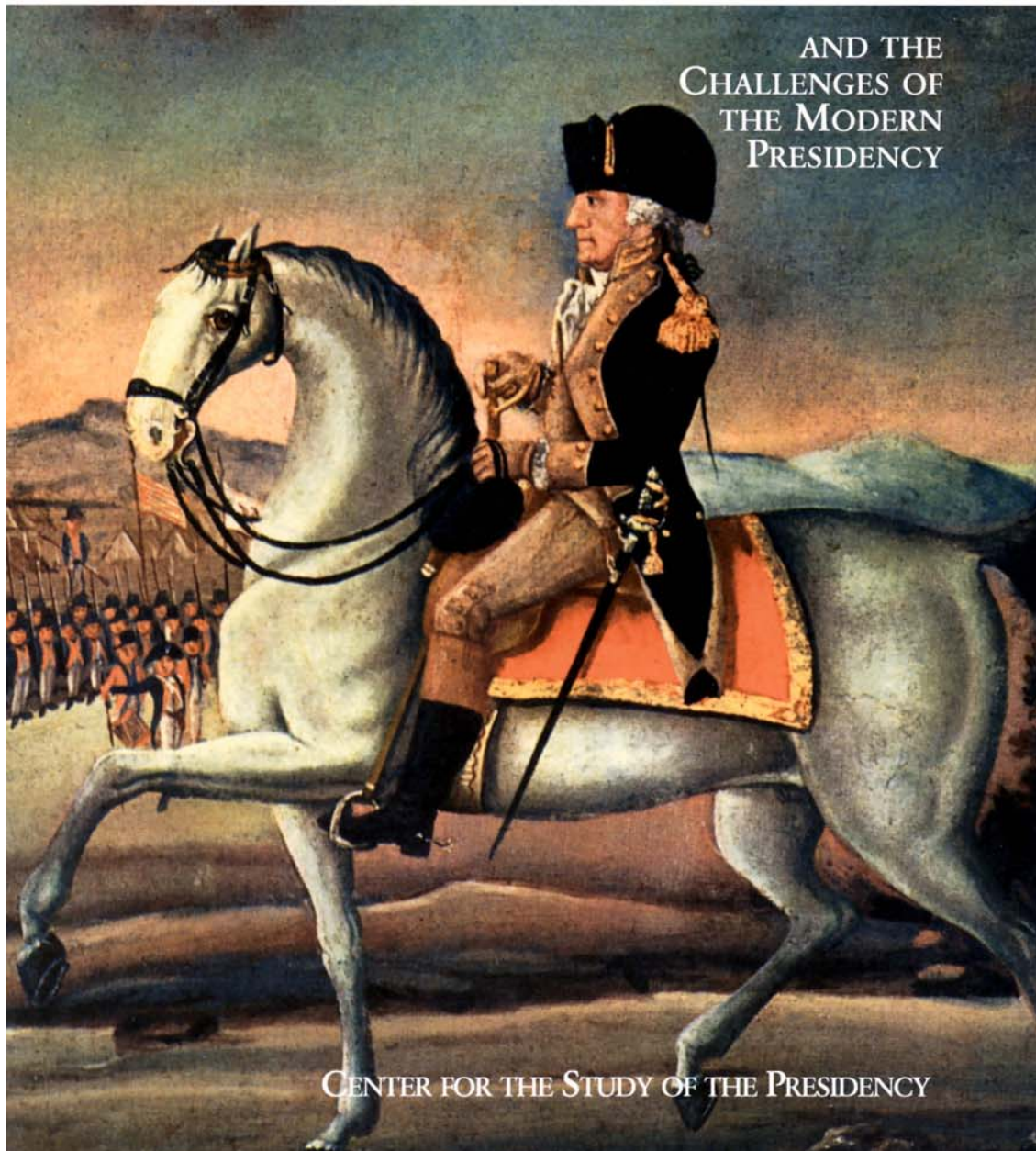


David Abshire


THE CHARACTER OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

AND THE
CHALLENGES OF
THE MODERN
PRESIDENCY



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE PRESIDENCY

*Cover: At Fort Cumberland, Maryland, in mid-October, 1794,
President George Washington donned his general's uniform to
review troops dispatched to quell the Whiskey Rebellion.
The artist was Frederick Kemmelmeyer, who witnessed the event.*



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Remarks Given by

David Abshire

Co-Founder and Vice Chairman

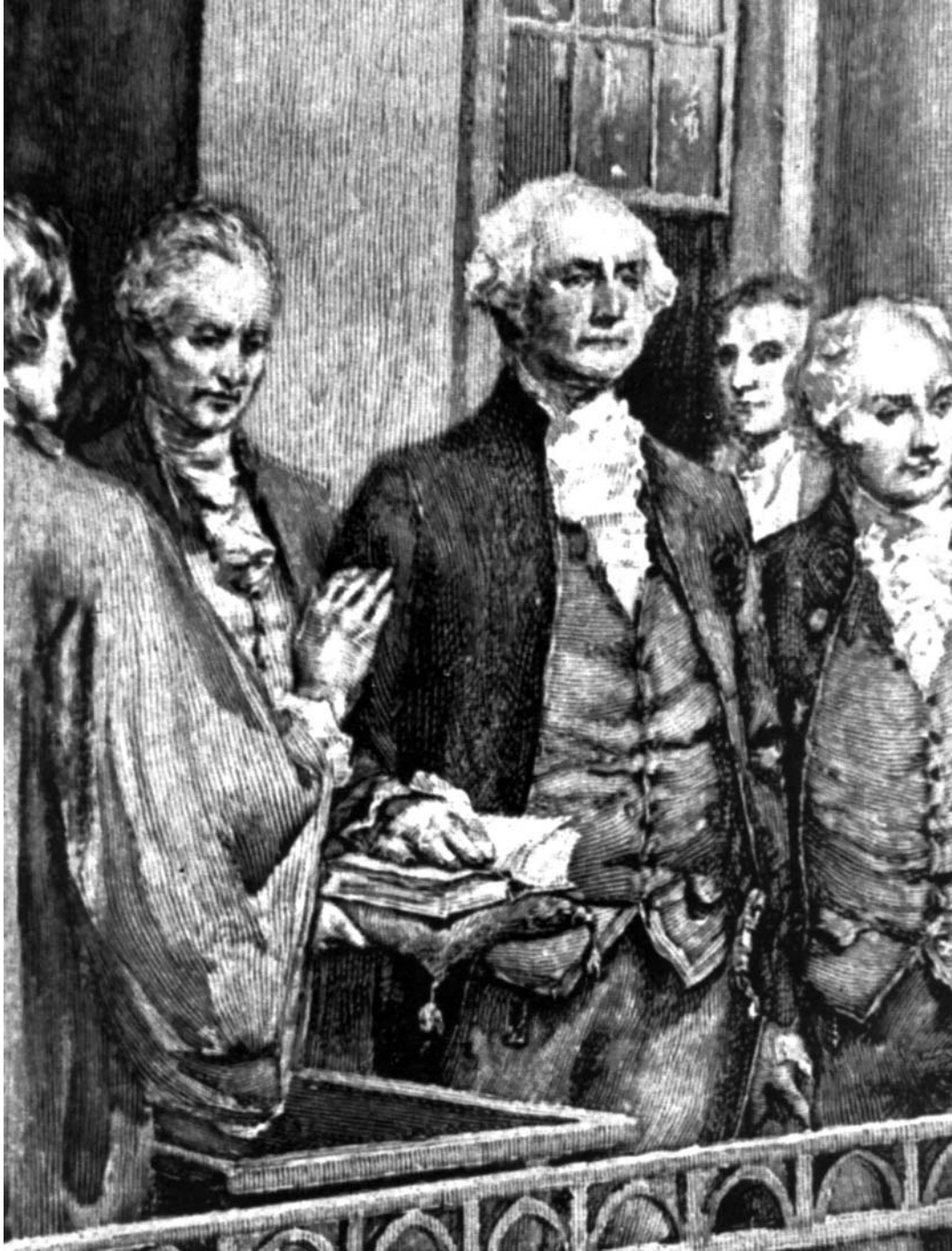
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Foreword

IN HIS RECENT BOOK ON THE PRESIDENCY, historian Forrest McDonald concluded that “the caliber of the people who have served as chief executive has declined erratically but persistently from the day George Washington left office.” Admirers of Lincoln and even Franklin Roosevelt might certainly disagree, but at a time when politics has sunk in public repute and people are craving more heroes, there is no question that a Washington revival is underway. Two hundred years after his death in 1799, plans for bicentennial celebrations are proceeding briskly, historians and others are churning out popular new biographies, and students of leadership are discovering that Washington offers a treasure trove of lessons.

What made Washington the most revered leader in the country for decades after his death? Some say it was his steadfast commitment to the creation of a free, independent republic on American soil. Through a lifetime of public service, both in war and in peace, he devoted himself to that dream. Others say it was his willingness to give up power for himself. Retiring from both the army and the presidency, had Washington not played the role of Cincinnatus, the legendary savior of Rome, who laid down his plow in its defense and just as swiftly returned to his farm after the war, the republic could not have taken root. Still others say that Washington intentionally became a model for future generations to follow, even to the point of freeing his slaves upon his death in hopes that others in the southern gentry would soon do the same.

In this splendid essay, first presented as a speech to the Center for the Study of the Presidency, David Abshire focuses on an element of Washington that is even more pertinent for today: his character. For Washington, as Abshire points out, the distinction we make in the 1990s between the private behavior of a president and his public leadership is a false one. Who a man is when no one else is looking and what he does on the public stage were the same, in Washington’s eyes, and both should meet rigorous standards. Winning control over his volcanic temper was no easier for Washington than whipping the British; both demanded long struggles with regular setbacks. But in overcoming both, Washington established the moral authority that made him a great leader.

For those seeking to understand leadership in the American context, there is no better place to start than with Washington and no better essay to read than this one. My students at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government know first-hand: it’s on their required reading list.

David Gergen

George Washington took the oath of office as President of the United States on Thursday, April 30, 1789, on the balcony of the Senate Chamber at Federal Hall, New York City.

THE CURRENT PRESIDENTIAL CRISIS has presented our country with an opportunity. A debate about the nature of leadership — usually the purview of think tanks like the one that gathers us here tonight — is taking place on a national level. Abstract questions are rarely considered so publicly as has been the well-trod debate over private versus public character, and the relative importance of each. All of America, from corridors of power to main street cafes, has, during the last eleven months, been considering the issue of the President as moral leader: the importance of what he is versus what he does; the degree to which a leader's personal standards of morality and its closely related (but somewhat different) cousin, character, make a difference. The kindling of this debate may be a lasting legacy of this Presidency.

In a nationwide poll conducted in September, 1999 only 21 percent of the public agreed that it is important that Presidents serve as moral role models; 65 percent agreed that it is more important that Presidents do their job well. In the context of the late 1990's, competence trumps character.

Further, competence is often trumped by gross popularity. Today, the celebrity has replaced the hero, rendering popularity the final arbiter of a public figure's personal worth in favor of any consideration of that figure's substance. Typically associated with the sports and entertainment industries, the celebrity phenomenon has taken root in our evaluation of all public figures: the perception of whether one's star is rising or falling is more important than one's accomplishments, character or integrity. Thus, the question is begged: why does the President need to be a moral leader at all? If a President has public character, why worry about private character?

But if we go back to the first President, the American icon George Washington, and consider who he was and what he did, the answer to those two questions defy the very terms of our current debate. We may be surprised by how much of what he did was based upon what he was; how irrelevant would our debate be in his situation. For George Washington, who he was, and what he did were the same; who he was and what he did made the republic possible through the war; who he was and what he did made the birth of the United States of America possible, through the successful inception of its Constitution. Who he was and what he did institutionalized the first presidency.

Indeed, as historian Michael Beschloss has noted, the Founders decided that our "President should be not only a partisan political leader, but also a chief of state. As a result, American voters tend to evaluate Presidential candidates . . . as a model . . . in the tradition of George Washington." At least that is the historical ideal.

We are convened here by the Center for the Study of the Presidency. Most of your studies are about leadership. Our theme this evening will be this: The heart of Washington's leadership was pure character. It sustained the troops

at Valley Forge. It made the ratification of the Constitution possible. His character was defined by maturity and a capacity for growth. This is unique, and apparently all too rare in American Presidents.



SEVERAL TIMES DURING ITS PRE- AND EARLY HISTORY, the American experiment came close to irrevocable failure and extinction. The course of human events was really altered on the narrowest of probabilities. To use Lord Kenneth Clark's phrase about the barely avoided demise of civilization in the Dark Ages, it was only "by the skin of their teeth" that they escaped total failure. During the long and seemingly hopeless campaigns of the Revolutionary War and again during the intractable stalemates of the Constitutional Convention, we pulled through by the skin of our teeth. And Washington was vital to preventing the collapse of the whole endeavor. How did he do it? He lacked the generalship of a Napoleon or a Robert E. Lee. But in the aftermath of General Braddock's defeat in the French and Indian War, the image of young Colonel Washington with four bullet holes in his coat and nary a scratch on his person is a fitting metaphor of how he led his country through the near-fatal trials of Revolution and the Constitutional Convention.

A common reaction to Washington is that he was born too perfect to be true. For school children, he is an aloof and stuffy picture on the wall, or a stoic and impassive marble bust in a museum. Parson Weems sought to infuse his straight-laced persona with some humanity by fabricating such stories as Washington's chopping down the cherry tree. Either he had some flaw, or he was too divinely pure to be of much use as a role model for us today. But consider that our mythical figure did face very humanizing challenges.

He in fact was not born too good to be true. This is the first lesson in his remarkable growth in character. As a young man he exhibited a quick temper and a sometimes unseemly ambition. He shrewdly accumulated land as a surveyor, arriving at self-made greatness from poor origins through ambition, vitality, ceaseless drive, and considerable skill at capitalizing upon good luck. As a young, overzealous officer in the colonial service, he constantly harangued his boss, Virginia Lieutenant Governor Dinwiddie about his pay being unequal to that of the British regulars. He was a pain in the neck!

In his first command, he engaged the French against orders, resulting in the controversial death of a French diplomat, and was defeated and surrendered to the French at the battle of Fort Mifflin. As a result, this vain young officer received terrible press back in London as a failure. A young officer in today's "up or out" military service would find his or her career over after similar misfortune, especially under such media scrutiny. But there was room



for error then, and Washington was allowed to grow, to learn from his mistakes and mature. This resilience, learned in the face of significant setbacks, would prepare him for the grinding years of so many defeats that lay ahead, and also a new style of warfare.



A YEAR LATER IN GENERAL BRADDOCK'S CAMPAIGN into Pennsylvania during the French and Indian War, Colonel Washington tried to warn Braddock of the potential for the catastrophic defeat that would befall him and his expedition in facing an enemy, like the Indians, who often hid behind trees. Braddock's defeat was Washington's vindication, and also a great lesson. "I trust the experience of error will enable us to act better in the future." From this experience, Washington learned and later helped craft the frontier-style guerilla warfare that could best wear down the staid European regulars. He also, according to James Thomas Flexner, learned the value of the superior mobility that would be critical to the survival of the Continental Army since it often had to be in retreat. In the Braddock defeat, the unwillingness of the well-trained regulars to flee without the orders of officers would be central to their demise.

If learning from mistakes was one key element of the character development of the young Washington, another was restraint of his passions. Young Washington found himself rocked and challenged by his fierce emotions. He fell in love with beautiful Sally Fairfax, two years older than he and married to one of his in-laws. Yet despite a close and, indeed, for him a very emotional friendship, with many exchanges of letters, there is no evidence that he ever did transgress that line to an affair. He learned self-restraint, the greatest mark of a mature character.

After the French and Indian War, Colonel Washington returned to the civilian life of a planter. Among other things, he grew intellectually as he consumed many books. Though not a giant intellect by any means (no match for his contemporaries, Mason, Hamilton or Jefferson), he exemplified Harry Truman's aphorism that, "Not every reader can be a leader, but every leader must be a reader."

As manager of his plantation and his various businesses, he grew in his skill with people. He would become much loved and admired, and that would be central to his ability to lead.

Colonel George Washington of the Virginia Militia.

To Washington, slaves were also people. He treated his slaves with benevolence. He decided that he wished to free his slaves, and see to the care of the old and infirm among them, but was vexed by the problem of how to live without them at his beloved Mount Vernon. Unable to find a solution practical to the context of 18th century Virginia, he decided to set his slaves free upon his wife's death. Their liberation might seem to some like a "deathbed conversion": too little, too late. Yet while the bitter experience of slavery in America would persist for so many years to come, this act stands as a remarkable sort of conscientious objection for the times. Though sentimentally attached to his way of life, through his travels and experiences he arrived at the prescient conclusion that, according to a friend, "I can clearly foresee that nothing but the rooting out of slavery can perpetuate the existence of our union."

The complex operation of Mount Vernon became a very maturing experience, not only in the growth in his humanity toward his slaves. This ambitious, at times quarrelsome individual changed to become an even-handed manager of his business enterprises, a man of neighborly acts, a conciliator, an individual with great patience and understanding for others. As Douglas Southall Freeman wrote, "It may well be asked whether history has not vindicated in Washington the doctrine that, ...whosoever would be first among you, shall be the servant of all." In modern parlance, this is called "servant leadership." The young major who had argued with Governor Dinwiddie had undergone quite a transformation. Humility now became his word, so that when, in June 1775, the Congress unanimously voted him to be their General and Commander-in-Chief, Washington replied, "I do not think myself equal to the command I am honored with." He even declared that he would serve without pay. How shocked Governor Dinwiddie would have been if he had been around. No, Washington was not born too good to be true, but he was born to grow, deal with setbacks, learn self-control, and to offer servant leadership.



HOW MANY OF OUR PRESIDENTS in recent times have had personal crises because they never put away childish things, never grew out of their hang-ups, never learned from mistakes, never quite put the nation ahead of themselves? Colonel Washington had learned all this by the time he took command in the Revolution.

Facing the overwhelming odds of the Revolutionary War, General George Washington, by necessity, would adopt what I would call a Fabian

strategy, Fabius being the Roman general who confounded a superior Hannibal. Through delaying tactics, Fabius out-maneuvered, harassed and exhausted the Carthaginian armies. A Roman successor reversed this strategy to one of direct engagement, and this led to Hannibal's classic victory at the Battle of Cannae. Knowing full well that a traditional continental conflict would be disastrous to his lesser-trained, lesser-numbered army, Washington the Fabian learned to masterfully feint and parry across the middle colonies, biding his time, and only engaging the enemy when necessary, or when conditions were opportune, thereby avoiding a Cannae. This strategy would come at some cost to his carefully groomed and preciously tended reputation. In the three years leading up to Valley Forge, Washington led the army to seven major battles. Five of those seven were sound defeats. As a result, he had many critics, including many in the Congress, and some of his most vocal critics were his own generals. (It is worth noting that similar criticism was made of Fabius!)

After Washington's defeat at Brandywine and mistakes at Germantown, his focus moved to Valley Forge for a terrible winter where his troops could be characterized as ragged, sometimes half-clothed, shivering and hungry, ill fed by an incompetent quartermaster general. Washington wrote that, without food, his tattered troops might "starve, dissolve or disperse." Conniving generals such as Horatio Gates, the victor of Saratoga, maneuvered to force Washington's resignation. What preserved this distressed body of men?

The short answer is that it was George Washington's presence, a product of his character that earned him such ethos amongst his troops. Americans seem to have always sought personal bearing as much as a record of accomplishment in their leaders. In June 1778, his presence, vesseled in a six-foot three-inch frame, mounted on horseback, successfully halted the retreat at Monmouth Court House, this time rallying the rabble of troops fleeing because of the treacherous incompetence of General Charles Lee. In the words of the Marquis de Lafayette, "General Washington seemed to arrest fortune with one glance... His presence stopped the retreat... I thought then as now that I had never beheld so superb a man." Douglas Southall Freeman was to write, "never had he appeared to such advantage as a combat leader."

Even after the tide began to turn, he would end up having lost more battles than he won. His strategy of a "people's war," to inspire the fervor and popular support of his soldiers and countrymen, riskily relied on the hope that the people would not turn on him for lack of apparent victories. But his presence kept the men reenlisting without many incentives to do so. If not for their belief in, and admiration for, George Washington, the war effort would likely have suffered crippling attrition in enlisted personnel.

Despite grumbling about indecisiveness, constant retreat, and an overly democratic reliance on the counsel of his generals, there is no arguing against the fact that, when opportunity presented itself at Yorktown, with the cooperation of the French fleet, Washington acted swiftly and decisively to seize his advantage and leverage it into a crushing victory.



NAPOLEON BONAPARTE, THE BRILLIANT VICTOR of Marengo and Austerlitz, still far outshone General Washington as a tactician and strategist. But Napoleon, so brilliant in so many fields beyond even the military, suffered from a character that was notoriously short on restraint, and he was extremely self-centered. Ultimately, this lack of self-discipline would lead him into Russia and the eventual needless destruction of thousands of his men and of himself. Napoleon's path spiraled downward to Waterloo and a nation's defeat, while Washington, the lesser general, ascended to Yorktown and a nation's birth.

If at Monmouth Washington so shone as a combat leader, at Newburgh he shone as a mover of men in different circumstances.

Just as the war got over, Washington's character and presence would head off a military revolt over the government's failure to pay its soldiers: there was a threat that they would take matters into their own hands. In March of 1783, at Newburgh, New York, Washington had a meeting with his officers, many of whom expected him to be on their side, or at least not to interfere. There was a strident unsigned paper to go to the Congress. Here is a group of resentful, angry officers, among them a cabal calling for rebellion. Washington came to address them. After some time spent on arguments and rhetoric which failed to inspire, Washington played his last card by pulling out a letter from a member of Congress. As he fumbled with the paper, his officers became nervous. Beginning to show the enfeebling effects of age, the victor of Yorktown says, "Gentleman, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country." Washington dramatically left the church, mounted his horse and galloped away, leaving the troops awed, deeply moved and in tears. Mutiny and civil war were avoided. Yes, in passing this test of loyalty, he employed charisma, and a bit of flair for the dramatic, but he used it for a great purpose. Flexner writes: "Americans can never be adequately grateful that George Washington possessed the power and the will to intervene effectively in what may well have been the most dangerous

hour the United States has ever known.” I add: by the skin of our teeth.

Washington’s appetite for power was tested by his willingness to walk away from it.

King George III had been the official enemy of George Washington and the Revolution. In its latter days, the painter Jonathan Trumbull, who had just returned from America, was asked by the King what Washington would do after the war. To the King’s astonishment, Trumbull responded: “Go back to his farm.”

“If he does that,” retorted the surprised King, “he would be the greatest man in the world.”

And like the Roman Cincinnatus, he withdrew. Our founding fathers were deeply read in Greek and Roman history. Cincinnatus was the heroic Roman citizen-soldier, the small farmer who came to the defense of his countrymen and was victorious, arriving in Rome in triumph, only to voluntarily return to his small farm. Whereas Washington returned to a big farm, officers of the Revolution formed the society of the Cincinnati with Washington as the first President General. The spirit of General Washington’s restraint, at Newburgh and elsewhere, became the hallmark of American civil-military relations to this day. He demonstrated restraint and humility in marked contrast to his lack of restraint and humility during the French and Indian War. He would show maturity and the effect of the slowly gathering forces of character by this simple act of withdrawal after two terms. The more he showed such self-limitations, the more the American public idolized him. Is it possible that our modern day Presidents could ever learn from this example? Perhaps the most popular man in America, Colin Powell, has his standing because he is a Cincinnatus, a reluctant candidate, a true patriot marked by demonstrating restraint when power was his for the taking.

We again passed a near-fatal trial by the skin of our teeth when the Constitutional Convention, where Washington was unanimously chosen as presiding officer, almost ended in failure. As at Newburgh, only the character of Washington saved it. The commander-in-chief and Presidency sections were written with Washington in mind. “Many of the members,” said Pierce Butler, a delegate of Maryland, “cast their eyes towards George Washington as President, and shaped their ideas of the powers to be given to a President by their opinions of his virtue.”

The delegates would never have invested the Chief Executive with such power without Washington waiting in the wings, ready to fill the role that was tailor-made for him. Having arrived in his full dress uniform, the choice for Chief Executive was obvious. The Constitution would be ratified in the summer of 1788, and George Washington was unanimously elected the first

President. He would be elected again four years later. “Be assured,” Monroe said, “his influence carried the government.”



SO WASHINGTON WAS NOT ALLOWED TO STAY on his farm but was reluctantly brought back to serve as the President of the United States. Dinwiddie should have been around again, for President Washington refused to take any pay. In Seymour Martin Lipset's brilliant essay *George Washington and the Founding of Democracy*, he notes that the post-independence experience of the entire non-British-ruled ex-colonial world and much of the former British Empire as well, is a story of succession, military coups, and dictatorships — the problems of “weak legitimacy.” Washington's character, presence and restraint forged the exception to that experience.

Max Farrand writes: “The Presidency was frankly an experiment, the success of which would largely depend upon the first elections. It was the hero of the Revolution by his presence, by his character, public and private, who built the legitimacy of the Presidency, who made the experiment successful.” Clinton Rossiter calls his gifts to the Presidency “dignity, authority, and constitutionalism.” Unlike some of our modern presidents, he was, as Jefferson put it, “scrupulously obeying the laws throughout his public career.”

Note that he also established the style of the Presidency to include a grand carriage drawn by six cream-colored horses and large dinners with exquisite pomp of entry. He never lost that certain charisma, but it was a charisma deployed for the promotion of the office, not of self.



AFTER SUCH HEADY TALK, we must bring ourselves back down to earth and ask, “Where have the heroes gone?” There have been echoes of greatness. Though perhaps no other President bettered the almost mystical stature of Washington, Lincoln may have met it. Abraham Lincoln's hero was Washington. In certain areas his talent exceeded that of this Founding Father's. His private and public character was one. Teddy Roosevelt, the great idealist, in the origination of the progressive movement may share qualities in common with Washington. Eisenhower, the leader of the crusade against Hitler, displayed character in his honesty and conduct.

In terms of capacity to grow, Harry Truman became a “near great,” in that he truly grew up to his job. He was successful enough for journalist Eric Sevareid to say that Truman was defined by “character, just sheer character.” Arleigh Burke, the legendary war hero and Chief of Naval Operations, co-founded CSIS with me back in 1962. As a young Rear Admiral during the Truman Administration, there had been a so-called “revolt of the admirals” against the President’s budget. Arleigh Burke was placed under house arrest. After the incident, he ironically became an intense admirer of his jailer, Harry Truman, who later became his friend. During the Watergate crisis, an aging Burke said to me,

“You know Truman had a bit of a checkered career — Pendergast gang and all that — before he became President. But once there, he looked up at that Great Seal of the President, and said to himself, ‘Harry, how can you ever grow up to that?’ Nixon, on the other hand, looked at the great seal and thought that it, indeed, was him; in defending himself in a cover-up, he thought he was defending the Presidency.”

Truman also held Washington as a role model, and he seems to have gotten the point. Later in life he reflected, “I’ve said it before, the President is the only person in the government who represents the whole people... and when there’s a moral issue involved, the President has to be the moral leader of the country.”



ISERVED IN THE FIRST NIXON ADMINISTRATION. Richard Nixon was brilliant, more so than Washington in many respects. He inherited an attrition war in Asia where 500,000 Americans were committed. With Henry Kissinger he reordered the balance of power through the opening to China, he opened new relations with the Soviet Union, and his domestic policy was largely successful. But when Watergate broke, he lacked the character to tell the truth, to come clean under such a test.

In January of 1973, after my service in Nixon’s first administration as Assistant Secretary of State, Admiral Burke, who was tending the shop at CSIS, served me an ultimatum to return to the Center so he could retire. Across the globe, the Christmas bombing of North Vietnam had just transpired in the wake of the breakdown of Kissinger’s negotiations. Nixon called me to the White House to offer me other positions in the administration, but agreed that I should follow the revered Admiral’s command. As I was leaving, he asked me what kind of doctorate I held. I replied, “History.” Immediately his eyes lit up and he said, “That is what I read. I care about history.” With his popularity brought low by the Christmas bombings, he

professed not to care about what people thought of him then, but rather to be concerned with how he would be viewed 100 years in the future. As we spoke, Nixon's infamous tapes were rolling to record what he hoped would be his greatness in history. In a stroke of Shakespearean irony, however, the tapes would actually produce his downfall, recording for all of history the difference between his private and public characters.

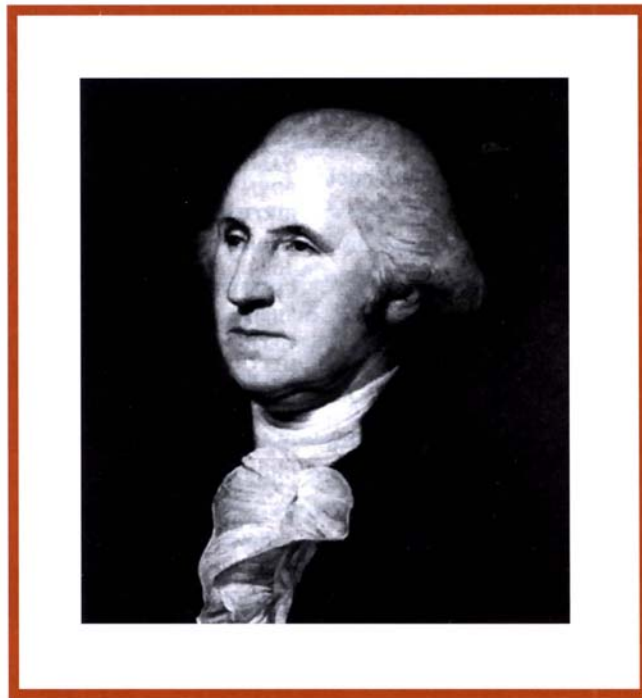
I drew a contrast to Truman, so let us here draw a contrast to Reagan, who, mired in an Iran-Contra cover-up-in-progress that was orchestrated by his National Security Advisor and others, phoned me in Brussels to come back to Washington and join his cabinet for several months as Special Counselor with a mandate to "get it all out." He gave me special authorities to do so. Had Nixon set up a Counselor to the president with special powers to avoid a cover up, Watergate would hardly be a footnote in history. However embarrassing, had Bill Clinton decided to get it all out on his affair eight months ago, we would not be facing impeachment. Just a little bit of George Washington could have spared these brilliant presidencies.



WE HAVE DISCUSSED THE PARADIGM of George Washington's character: his ability to handle and learn from setbacks; his ability to grow from a self-centered youth to an other-centered adult; his move from over-ambition to self-denial and limitation. I would add to this a marked degree of that Aristotelian quality of proportionality, to see things as a whole, to see, in balanced perspective, that wise military and political mean. In his mature military and political life he never deceived himself with false mindsets, and he could grasp the entirety of problems and people. Call it that highest common sense, if you will, which sometimes eludes creative geniuses.

Washington wished to set an example, maintain a reputation, and proclaim a standard, worthy of us today. In all of this he had a spiritual sense of Providence, mentioned so often in his writings. This kept him humble and thankful. Among the maxims he would repeat to himself was, "Labour to keep alive in your breast that Little spark of Celestial Fire called Conscience."

How are we to react when the lofty standard first set by George Washington is sullied by a procession of some recent leaders who fall short of that standard? Do we plan to lower the standard with a shrug of our shoulders and a pronouncement that, "everybody does it?" This is what the polls seem to advocate. However, the response should be that "everybody shouldn't do it, especially our Presidents." The first one kept the standard,



George Washington



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