

To forget the first president is to forget the qualities that made him such an influential figure in American history

# Washington and Marshall

## Two Studies in Virtue

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David Hein

Having learned to control his personal desires and to sublimate his passions for the sake of higher ends, George Washington came to personify, if not all that we need to know about statecraft in a republic, then at least some of its salient features, in particular several key character traits. The most important of these qualities were almost as countercultural in his time as they are in ours.

To cite a major example, Washington's republican turn led him to practice a moral habit that was unnatural to his personal constitution: patience. He learned to wait for the right moment, to persevere through adversity, and to yield authority to others gracefully.<sup>1</sup> A related strength, his devotion to duty, may be equally unfashionable—and just as needful—today.

These virtues that Washington embodied, and his precedent-setting actions in other areas, together provide us with a heuristic device: a rule of thumb whose utility for statesmen is not limited to conditions within an eighteenth-century republic. Many authors have analyzed Washington's virtues, but surprisingly few have attempted to describe his power to affect the lives of other leaders. This omission is a pity, because we can learn much about his significance as exemplar by examining the effects of his influence.

Although subsequent American military commanders paid much more attention to the aggressive tactics and strategies of Napoleon Bonaparte and his marshals than to the largely

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defensive moves of George Washington, they still revered Washington as the ideal of responsible leadership in a republic.<sup>2</sup> James Collins, a brigadier general who served as chief historian at the Army Center of Military History, has affirmed that Washington—the figure of both history and legend—“had an immense influence in shaping the American officer corps and in providing ideals of responsible leadership.” No one who is acquainted with the history of the United States military would contradict this claim.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, for example, recalled that, as a young man, he “found absorbing” the military campaigns of Frederick the Great, Napoleon, and Gustavus Adolphus—but, he wrote, “Washington was my hero.” Of Washington’s exploits at Princeton, at Trenton, and especially at Valley Forge, “I never tired of reading.” He retrojected his imagination to the time of the Continental Army and thus “conceived...a violent hatred of [the Irish-French brigadier general Thomas] Conway and his cabal.” The young Ike “could not imagine anyone so stupid and so unpatriotic” as to wish, as Conway did, to see Washington removed from command of the American forces.

Eisenhower learned most, however, from “the beauty of his character.” Washington’s “stamina,” his “patience in adversity,” and “his indomitable courage, daring, and capacity for self-sacrifice” compelled Ike’s admiration. And “while the cherry tree story may be...legend, his Farewell Address, his counsels to his countrymen,” and “his speech at Newburgh to the rebellious officers of his Army” contained “the human qualities I frankly idolized.”<sup>3</sup>

James Collins asserts not only that Eisenhower’s boss, General George C. Marshall, was “a faithful follower of the Washington tradition” but also that Marshall provides one of the best examples of his predecessor’s legacy of influence.<sup>4</sup> Few knowledgeable observers would dispute this.

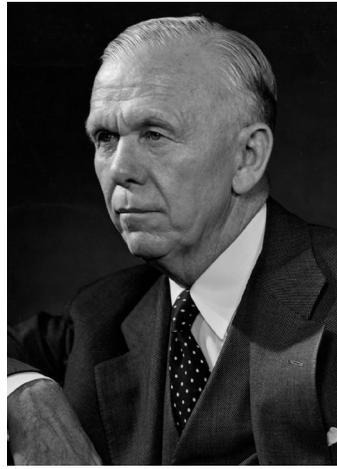
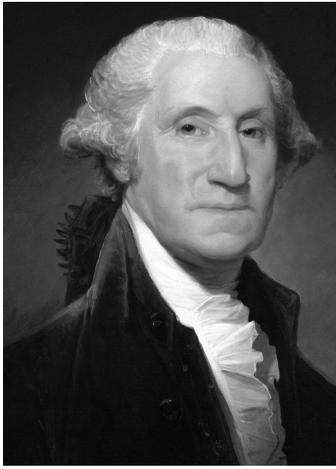
Indeed, in George Marshall we see Washington’s influence in full. The resemblance has often been remarked upon. When Marshall received an honorary degree from Harvard University on June 5, 1947—the occasion of his speech announcing the European Recovery Program—the citation for his honorary doctorate described him as “a soldier and statesman whose ability and character brook only one comparison in the history of the nation.”<sup>5</sup>

Even more than most U.S. Army commanders, Marshall had a long and abiding fascination with George Washington. Weak in most of his school subjects, the young Marshall much preferred to play sports or to join his father and shoot grouse or fish for trout. Although an indifferent student in the classroom, he loved to read history and biography; he was inspired by George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Stonewall Jackson, and Robert E. Lee. When he was sixteen, he sought admission to the Virginia Military Institute.

The connection with George Washington was especially striking. It began by happenstance of birth in southwestern Pennsylvania. Born and raised in Uniontown, which comprised 3,500 souls, George C. Marshall Jr. lived only eleven miles from the remnants of Fort Necessity and nine miles from the grave of British general Edward Braddock. Writes the principal Marshall biographer, Forrest Pogue: “History in Uniontown lay all around him—the liveliest sort to stir a boy’s imagination.”<sup>6</sup> The families in this locale, Marshall recalled in 1957, “went back to the days of Washington and his farm was nearby.”<sup>7</sup>

Old homesteads could be visited in Uniontown, which was founded in 1776 and is on the historic National Road. But as Pogue points out, most exciting for young George “were the sites and reminders of war.”<sup>8</sup> Marshall remembered that “when they were

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*It would be hard to overestimate the influence Washington had on Marshall, especially regarding his sense of duty*

building the National Road through, they dug up [Braddock's] grave and identified it by the brass buttons and skeleton." Then "they reentered him close by in a very picturesque little plot." Marshall recalled that he and his friends "would go out in that vicinity to picnic." There they would sit on the flat board top of a white fence: "lots of my early courtship efforts were made sitting on that fence on a moonlight night after" a picnic supper.<sup>9</sup>

The retired General Marshall reminded his biographer that at Fort Mifflin, in July of 1754, Colonel George Washington "had to surrender his force... when he was outnumbered by the French and Indians. That has now been built up into quite an impressive fort. But in my day there was just a slight ridge in the field." Marshall's father showed it to him when he was "about seven years old."<sup>10</sup> George Catlett Marshall Sr. told his boy the whole story of the battle, describing the sequence of events in detail. By these means, Pogue writes, the son "saw again the Indians fighting from behind trees ringing the bowl of the meadow, and traced the remains of the earth entrenchments from which Washington's men had fought."<sup>11</sup>

Two recent biographers of Marshall—Debi and Irwin Unger—take note of these facts

and refer to the significance in their subject's formative period of "the special mystique of George Washington." Even at the end of his life, these chroniclers observe, when Marshall was answering Forrest Pogue's questions, he "seemed almost obsessed with Washington and his early military exploits." They find it "not surprising that as he evolved into an adult George would borrow the attributes of his childhood hero and make them his own." Directly from George Washington, he "learned much of what manhood meant, or should mean."

The Ungers cite "one telling instance of imitation": Marshall's love of horseback riding, his regular form of exercise. This "almost compulsive attachment to riding" was likely "inspired by his great predecessor." And they hear a final echo: at the end of his life, knowing that Washington had rejected a state funeral full of pomp and circumstance, Marshall issued the same instructions for his own rites.<sup>12</sup>

It is easy to exaggerate these perceived connections and to mistake coincidence for cause and effect. For example, emotional restraint and a certain aloofness may simply have been the natural demeanor of both men or the mask of command that each chose to

keep in place, without Marshall's having copied Washington's austere manner. And obviously two people independently of one another can be shaped by the same authority. For both Washington and Marshall, low church Episcopalianism was to some degree an influence: the *Book of Common Prayer*, with its rhythms of contrition and repentance, thanksgiving and renewal; and the Anglican tradition's marked emphasis on the conscience and the will, stressing gradual growth in moral excellence, including the virtues of faith, humility, gratitude, courage, and perseverance.<sup>13</sup>

While it is possible to embellish the details of Washington's influence on Marshall, it is essential not to overlook the undeniable impact through the years of Washington's character and deeds. To cite a crucial example, both Washington and Marshall truly grasped the meaning and worth of the civil-military relationship in a republic. Like almost all American commanders, Marshall took seriously Washington's deference to elected officials and the U.S. Constitution.

In his respect for the civil authority, Washington benefited from his legislative experience. His background in both military and civil affairs gave him a superior understanding of the problems and proper roles of soldier and statesman. His acceptance of civil authority during the War of Independence both tested and proved his loyalty to the habit of patience. Similarly, what Marshall received from George Washington's example was reinforced by the lessons he drew from his years as senior instructor with the Illinois National Guard (1933–36).

The civil-military relationship in the American republic was classically represented in Washington's resignation as commander in chief at the end of the War of Independence. This act of republican virtue, whose power was paradoxically rooted in self-denial, is an example of patience as relinquishment: the voluntary handing over of authority.

This famous deed found its reverberation in General Marshall's patient refusal in 1943 to push himself forward and inform President Franklin D. Roosevelt that he yearned to be appointed commander of the invasion force that would take Europe back from the Nazis.

Not self-assertion but self-abnegation in service of a good cause was the lesson that Marshall took from Washington's devotion to duty. After the Revolution, the commander of the Continental Army sought only to retire to Mount Vernon, there to enjoy his estate "under his own vine and fig tree."<sup>14</sup> But his leadership abilities and his manifest trustworthiness, demonstrated in his refusal to seek a crown, made him everyone's first choice to head the new federal government. Washington truly did not want the job. He "had seen fit," Joseph Ellis writes, "to apprise all who inquired that he was permanently embedded beneath his vines and fig tree at Mount Vernon and had no intention to budge."<sup>15</sup>

The only reason that Washington agreed to become the first president was his overwhelming sense of duty. "In effect," Ellis writes, "once he stepped back onto the public stage in Philadelphia, he had committed himself, and there was now no way he could avoid leading the launch." That was Alexander Hamilton's argument at any rate, to which Washington could only reply that he was overwhelmed by "a kind of gloom." Accepting the presidency "would be attended," he said, "with more diffidence and reluctance than ever I experienced before in my life." He was not being coy. Ellis comments: "No president in American history wanted to be president less than Washington."<sup>16</sup>

His reluctance anticipates Marshall's repeated efforts in the postwar period—a time for him of slowly declining vitality of body and mind—to give up the demands of high office and to let someone else take up the burden. In 1945 he attempted to retire to his residence in Leesburg, Virginia, Dodona Manor, which had once belonged to George

Washington's grandnephew. There Marshall sought well-earned rest under his own vine and fig tree—or rather, as historian Don Higginbotham has revised the phrase to accord with Marshall's distinctive interests in flora, “with his beloved roses and tomato plants.”<sup>17</sup>

Before he had been home for one full day of retirement, however, the telephone rang; President Truman was on the line. Would he be willing to undertake a special mission to China? “Yes, Mr. President.” Marshall said nothing to his wife, Katherine, who was taking a nap upstairs. Upon awakening, she learned about her husband's new assignment when she heard it announced on the radio. “I could not bear to tell you until you had had your rest,” he told her. His wife, reports historian Mark Stoler, was “bitterly disappointed.” To General Douglas MacArthur, Marshall lamented: “My retirement was of rather short duration.”<sup>18</sup>

After returning from his frustrating year in China, Marshall became secretary of state. His efforts helped Truman to prevail upon a Republican-controlled Congress to pass the bill that launched the European Recovery Program, which everyone except the secretary called the Marshall Plan. Like George Washington, he was trusted because he put duty to country above any personal reward, and people knew it.

For George Marshall, the excellences of George Washington were inseparable from the man. Indeed, for anyone who seeks knowledge of the substance of leadership, specific virtues embedded in all the complexities of a real life nobly lived, rather than abstract precepts by themselves, will ignite the imagination, instruct the mind, and strengthen resolve.

This simple fact of heuristics is one on which cognitive psychologist, philosopher, and preacher can all agree. This—engagement with the best in history, including exemplars of statecraft, rather than with

theoretical reason on its own—is also a bedrock principle of conservative thought and one of its signal contributions to a proper understanding of shared life in community.

The nostrums of the moment may represent the most progressive ideas and a great leap forward from the outmoded dogmas of the past, as well as from the terrible injustices of the present. But good sense bids us take care. Prudence unfashionably urges respect for tradition, even daring to suggest that our republic's Founders may warrant, if not reverence, then at least a second look. In this way practical wisdom, rooted in the concrete particulars of lived experience, can serve as ballast on the moral and political journey to a better future, lest we find ourselves cast up on shimmering shores more plague-ridden than the lands we left.

As Edmund Burke made clear, the social contract—if we must speak of contracts at all—is not for citizens to concoct going only by the deductions of abstract reason and to consent to while thinking only of themselves today, indifferent to forebears and future generations. Our larger “connexions,” to use his word, are crucial.

A loyal Whig, Burke could not ignore the theme of contract with which his party was closely identified. But he could rework its meaning—doing so in a way that was not rhetorical sleight of hand but principled and heartfelt: “Society is indeed a contract,” he acknowledged. But the state is not a partnership agreement like a contract in civil law, such as a person might subscribe to in the “trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco.” The best sort of contract is not a temporary expedient.

Rather, Burke believed, a sound social contract should be viewed with “reverence” as “a partnership” in knowledge, in art, and “in every virtue.” It is not an agreement made only by and for parties now living, but rather a relationship “between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be

born.” Thus it spans the centuries. And “each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primæval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world.”<sup>19</sup>

By means of what one of his most astute commentators, Iain Hampsher-Monk, calls his “transfiguration of contract,” Burke managed to describe civil society not on Hobbesian lines as the possible product of an agreement based on a (misplaced) confidence in reason but as a partnership organically, even to some extent mysteriously, rooted in tradition. Thus Burke’s redefinition of contract, Hampsher-Monk notes, “retains—indeed sublimates—its ideological power while draining it of its radical potential: a contract involving the dead and unborn could hardly be renegotiated.” Burke understood that our social and especially our political institutions “cannot,” in Hampshire-Monk’s words,

be the product of any individual’s calculation or insight... Institutions and dispositions cannot be created at will. If we are fortunate enough to have them (as the English were), we should cherish them. Since we do not quite know how they are formed, we cannot recreate them once lost.<sup>20</sup>

Burke questioned the adequacy of reason alone as a basis of good conduct by most people most of the time. He asked: “What would become of the world if the practice of all moral duties, and the foundations of society, rested upon their having their reasons made clear and demonstrative to every individual?”<sup>21</sup> But if reason alone cannot create the best possible society, what can? “Time,” he affirmed, “is required to produce that union of minds which alone can produce all the good we aim at. Our patience will achieve more than our force.”<sup>22</sup>

A patient and prudent citizenry, therefore, will safeguard history and tradition, prefer

hard-won facts to rationalistic ideals, nurture institutions that have proved their worth as schools of courage and compassion, and prize individuals who exemplify the civic virtues. At the same time, while supporting worthwhile reform, wise leaders will remain mistrustful of the passions of the moment and of intellectual arrogance, especially any tendency to make an absolute of theory—for they know where that can lead.

If we grant the wisdom in this Burkean counsel, then we will be eager to esteem the witness of Washington, for here we find in compelling detail what conservatives treasure: the embrace of habits of self-control, a resolute commitment to duties and allegiances. If we begin on that road, however, we will be chagrined to discover that, at least in the case of George Washington, current trends do not favor recovery of the memory of this Founder as a model for future generations. The man whom Major General Henry (Light-Horse Harry) Lee called “first in war” and “first in peace” is no longer “first in the hearts of his countrymen.”<sup>23</sup>

James C. Rees, a former executive director of Mount Vernon, wrote not long ago about George Washington’s “fade from prominence.” People recognize his picture on currency and in newspaper advertisements, but in recent decades his status as “a genuine hero and effective role model” has declined dramatically. When pollsters ask ordinary Americans to rank the presidents, Washington “typically drops to seventh or eighth place.” Young people know little about his achievements, and “65 percent of college seniors don’t know who commanded the American forces at Yorktown.”

What caused this change in renown to occur? “Why,” Rees asks, “are Americans losing touch with the true essence of George Washington?” There are at least three reasons, he believes: First, public schools no longer stress Washington’s significance. His portrait

is absent from classroom walls, and history textbooks devote as little as 10 percent of the coverage to Washington that they included half a century ago.

Second, George Washington's birthday "has all but vanished"; and if the legislators who substituted Presidents' Day for it believed that "meaningful discussions" of "presidential leadership" would take place as a result, then "they were wildly off target." Consider what has been lost: Rees reports that senior citizens "frequently tell me about the George Washington's Birthday parades they viewed as children and the school assemblies that featured skits about Washington's honesty and goodness. Washington was a unifying figure for American families, not just the nation as a whole."

Third, the appeal of history as a subject has dwindled. In the 1960s, 1.3 million people visited Mount Vernon annually. Forty years later, annual attendance had fallen to less than three-quarters of that number. Other historical sites, such as Williamsburg and Monticello, fared even worse.<sup>24</sup>

George Washington's decline in popular appreciation is especially poignant because Light-Horse Harry Lee's encomium contained no exaggerations—unusually so for a funeral oration. As biographer Joseph Ellis has stated, the three elements of Lee's formulation accurately limned Washington's remarkable achievements: "leading the Continental army to victory against the odds and thereby winning American independence"; then securing the results of this endeavor "by overseeing the establishment of a new nation-state during its most fragile...stage of development"; and, finally, providing at least the appearance of unity by "embodying that elusive and still latent thing called 'the American people.'"<sup>25</sup>

Another Washington biographer, Peter R. Henriques, underscores this last point, citing overwhelming "objective evidence for asserting that George Washington deserves

the premier position among all American statesmen." His chief reason for this assessment is the fact that in a century in which "Americans...were a divided and fractious people," Washington "was the one man who united all hearts." The leader whose "record of accomplishment" remains "unchallenged" was "truly America's 'Indispensable Man.'" Without his "great skill as a unifier and without his charisma and national vision, the United States of America would not exist today as a single independent nation. It is a record of leadership without parallel in American history."<sup>26</sup>

Regrettably, not all historians concur with Ellis and Henriques that George Washington deserves this premier ranking among statesmen. Gordon S. Wood, a prominent historian who does agree with this positive appraisal, has also observed what James Rees discussed: Washington's decline in popular esteem. "A recent poll asking who was America's greatest president showed that only 6 percent of those polled named Washington," Wood writes. "He was ranked seventh among presidents. Young people in particular did not know much about Washington."

Wood comments that popular polls "are probably silly things." A more serious concern for him as a historian of the founding is that in recent years revisionist scholars have gone beyond the critical—but respectful—analysis of such historians as the highly influential Charles Beard to produce work that amounts to "academic vilification": "Historians' defaming of these elite white males seems much more widespread than it used to be. Sometimes this criticism has taken the form of historians' purposely ignoring the politics and the achievements of the founders altogether, as if what they did was not all that important."

Academic historians over the past forty years have shifted their focus away from political leadership to the race, class, and gender of ordinary people in the early

republic. But when they do write about leaders, including the Founders, Wood finds that “present-day criticism of them is much more devastating than that of the past.”

Recent historians do not share Beard’s respect for the Founders. They do not seek merely to scrape away the barnacles of myth and expose the all-too-human, flesh-and-blood men underneath. Rather, “some of these critical historians want to dehumanize, not humanize, the founders.” And some historians today, Wood points out, do not believe that the Founders did anything very well: the Revolution failed to free the slaves, to provide full political equality to women, to grant citizenship to American Indians, or to foster conditions leading to economic equality.

Then Wood makes a larger point. In the end, he says, “because our present-day culture has lost a great deal of its former respect for absolute values and timeless truths, we have a harder time believing that the eighteenth-century founders have anything important or transcendent to say to us in the twenty-first century.”<sup>27</sup>

What Washington and Marshall have to say to us has to do most of all with the ethical claims of the virtue of duty. According to Immanuel Kant’s definition, duty is invariably an unnatural virtue; we are not naturally eager to perform it. We carry it out for no reason other than the fact that undertaking its tasks is the right thing to do. Our duty is a categorical imperative, an unconditional demand. Certainly it felt like that to Washington and Marshall on those occasions when they would have preferred to retire rather than to serve in another taxing office.

Having a strong sense of duty is a virtue. It goes with certain professions, such as the military, especially. Like all the virtues, it cannot be viewed in isolation; duty to country should not be carried out if we would thereby be participating in a great evil, such as genocide. Duty is subservient to and must be assessed in light of our allegiances. Which

means that our faith—what we trust in for true meaning and lasting value—determines our loyalties and hence our duties.

For both Washington and Marshall, their native land warranted their allegiance. This bond obtained—to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln in his eulogy for Henry Clay—partly because the United States was their country but mostly because it was a free country. Although far from ideal, it possessed the moral and material resources to advance in human liberty, rights, and prosperity.<sup>28</sup> Their nation was not the ultimate object of their faith, but, under God, it was worthy of their unstinting service and sacrifice. A recent essayist indicates what is at stake if this service is avoided: “duty . . . is the civic virtue *par excellence*.” Therefore “its dereliction . . . is fatal to [the] republic.”<sup>29</sup>

Why the virtue of duty has become unfashionable is a topic best considered on another day. For various reasons, our society’s virtues have shifted. Particularly for the young, prudence and chastity are out; progress, authenticity, and health are in.<sup>30</sup> Hope, however, is a virtue necessarily held close by all generations. And anyone who has had the good fortune to spend a day or two interviewing candidates for the various U.S. military academies will be unwilling to paint, much less criticize, with too broad a brush.

In the quotation above about dereliction, “duty” and “civic virtue” are terms that teachers would need to take time to unpack for students. Instructors would be wise to begin this process not with abstractions or theory but with concrete examples from history, including leaders—George Washington and George C. Marshall foremost among them—whose lives were marked by the persistence of duty. And teachers would ably fulfill their calling if they convey their conviction that civil society is best understood and entered into as a partnership in every virtue, linking those who are living, those who have died, and those yet to be born. ❧

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### NOTES

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