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Washington: Hero or Flawed Man

Several days before beginning this assignment, I had a conversation with a friend and colleague on the life and legacy of George Washington. After only a minute, our discussion became an intellectual duel on the question of how society should judge Washington. It dawned on me, that our twenty-minute debate had captured the essence of this NEH seminar. Has, and should, George Washington be elevated to a level of infallibility, or, should he be presented as a flawed character? Authors, scholars, and the general public have argued this question as the American Founders have been reexamined over the past several decades. The historiography surrounding Washington offers readers a variety of accounts that vary from hero worship to downright condemning. Historians, such as the conservative-leaning Richard Brookhiser to the liberally bent Howard Zinn, form far different conclusions about the same individual. As a teacher of history, knowing how to present Washington to students can be even more challenging. Too often, teachers can present Washington as a hero or villain. However, a more honest assessment of Washington as an eighteenth-century man needs to be portrayed in the American classroom.

The creation of the mythological Washington started immediately after his death in December 1799. This is owed in large part to the first biography of Washington, *A History of the Life and Death, Virtues, and Exploits of General Washington*, by Mason

Locke Weems, better known as “Parson Weems” by his contemporaries.¹ Weems’ work created some of the most enduring Washington legends in American history. His consistent use of anecdotes symbolizing Washington’s laudable qualities litters the pages. The most time memorial anecdote being when a young, emotional Washington, decided to tell to his father that he had “barked” the cherry tree with his hatchet. “I can’t tell a lie, Pa,” exclaimed the honest Washington. “Run to my arms, you dearest boy ... Glad am I, George, that you killed my tree; for you have paid me for it a thousand fold” retorted George’s magnanimous father.² The cherry tree legend and others were conjured up by Weems at a time he knew a mourning public was eager to read them. Weems took many liberties to create a portrait of Washington that would cement his legend as America’s leading founder. For moderns, it is easy to criticize such embellishments as farcical. Yet, Weems’s account cannot be entirely dismissed from the historiography. Although Weems’ biography is uncritical and sounds in some instances like a Horatio Alger story starring Washington, he did highlight many qualities that scholars still emphasize. Weems’s analysis focuses on the virtuous Washington with chapters referencing his benevolence, industry, and patriotism. Teachers probably would not use Weems’s portrait of Washington as factual, but they still can utilize it when discussing the merits of mythologizing Washington.

The next popular biography of Washington was written by Jared Sparks, in his *Life and Writings of George Washington* (1837). Sparks took an avant-garde approach in using primary sources to write the best scholarly biography of his generation. Agreeing to share the proceeds of the book sales, Sparks secured use of the Washington

¹ Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1965) 265.

² Mason L. Weems, *A History of the Life and Death, Virtues, and Exploits of General George Washington* (Philadelphia: J.B Lippincott Co., 1918) 23.

manuscripts from nephew Bushrod Washington who was the inheritor of Washington's Mount Vernon estate. Similar to Weems, Sparks created a portrait of an ennobled Washington of heroic proportions, editing and omitting certain passages "without warning the reader." In 1851, this practice would be criticized by English scholar Lord Mahon, who believed Sparks "tamper(ed) with the truth of history."³ Sparks took umbrage from Mahon and defended this practice in a lengthy pamphlet war that ended in a truce several years later. But Sparks's research was still far ahead of its time. His use of primary sources, however flawed today, was his foremost contribution to the scholarship on Washington. Still, the hero worshipping of Washington as a flawless man remained. Sparks creatively used Washington's own words to raise the level of his subject. This Washington "genre" would remain unchanged until after the Civil War.

During the nineteenth century, the legend of Washington continued to grow. Immediately after Washington's death, the public mourned with celebrations of epic proportions. Festivals honoring Washington lasted the entire year of 1800, full with "mock funerals, militia reenactments, religious sermons ... and hundreds of eulogies ... celebrating his military and political achievements." Washington's image appeared on "state coins...bank notes, broadsides," and "magazines."⁴ Historian Frank Grizzard, a scholar of Washington since 1988, argued

The American public's fascination with the image of ... Washington in the nineteenth century was an outgrowth of an ambiguous but genuine cult of hero worship that emerged after his appointment as commander in chief of the Continental Army in 1775.⁵

³ Lord Mahon quoted in Boorstin, 276

⁴ Frank Grizzard, "George Washington and Nineteenth Century Culture," in *Encyclopedia of the United States in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Paul Finkelman (New York: Macmillan, 2001) 1.

⁵ Grizzard, 1

Liberty and union, themes Washington preached in his Farewell Address, were adopted by politicians during the “sectional crisis” to support their cause for either state rights or union. In addition, nineteenth-century political parties and candidates such as Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Jackson, and William McKinley “freely appropriated Washington in their campaign rhetoric and election paraphernalia.”⁶ Washington’s place as the most cherished American icon was only challenged after the Civil War and Lincoln’s assassination. The martyred Lincoln would hitherto become the most written about subject, especially by the twentieth century. Nonetheless, the memory of Lincoln still polarized the nation after the Civil War. With his Virginian roots and strong devotion to the Union, Washington was the most respected figure that could transcend divisions between the North and South. As Lincoln became the new fashioned American idol, Washington’s image would go through a transformation “in the three decades after” the Civil War. In his analysis, Grizzard described how scholarship placed increasing emphasis on Washington’s human qualities rather than his mythical ones. Interestingly, the desire to make “Washington more accessible to average Americans” further cemented his status as America’s most legendary man.⁷

Washington’s image had been challenged in 1913 by historian Charles Beard, in his, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*. Beard’s thesis argued that the Constitution was devised out of the economic interests of the founding fathers. According to Beard, the founders, including Washington, had written the Constitution to solidify their status in the new nation. Beard’s provocative thesis challenged the traditional narrative with his approach that emphasized the founders’ class consciousness.

⁶ Grizzard, 4-5.

⁷ Grizzard, 5.

Although a major revision in the historiography, Beard's critique never formed critical mass in academia and the general public.⁸

History from above remained the status quo until the social movements of the 1960s dramatically reshaped how history was taught in the classroom. With women, African Americans, and other minorities demanding equal rights, historians began to reexamine America's founding from other perspectives. Social, cultural, and gender histories, to name a few, were formed to analyze the lives of common people not heard in traditional texts. Scholarship tilted away from political and history of the elite, leaving the founding fathers in the dust bin. Washington's deified status was debated by scholars who centered their attention and criticism on his ownership of slaves and his wealth as "the richest man in America."⁹ In 1980, Howard Zinn wrote *A People's History of the United States* that directly challenged the status quo of American history textbooks. In the following decades, textbooks were rewritten to include a more complete view of the American experience. Washington was looked at, not as the "greatest horseman of his age" as Jefferson stated, but as part of the burgeoning slavocracy in the American South.

Today, history teachers across the nation have to reconcile with opposing views of Washington. Good teachers should be fair, balanced, and free from partisan ideology. To not do so would be a mistake for our youngsters. Students must learn to view history outside of their twenty-first century world views. Too often we judge men and women of the past as if they knew what would happen in the future. I am not arguing that Washington and his contemporaries should not be criticized. Students and teachers should be critical when they see fit, but remember Washington as a man of the eighteenth

⁸ Charles Beard. *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*. (New York: The Free Press, 1986)

⁹ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (New York: Harper Collins Inc., 2003) 90.

century, not the present. Is Washington a flawed individual or the founding American hero? In our age of political correctness, it would be difficult to hold Washington up as only a hero because he owned slaves. But he probably was little of both. I guess the question should read “can our heroes be flawed individuals? The answer is undoubtedly yes. Washington was flawed, but he also had countless virtues that should be celebrated and remembered. History should not be sugarcoated, but it should not be dragged through the mud either. Washington’s life presents students with an excellent opportunity to make their own judgments. As teachers, this is perhaps, the most important lesson for our students to learn.

Bibliography

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