

The Idea of George Washington: A Short Historiographical Investigation of the First President

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Who was George Washington? If your students say that he was the first President, they are right. If they say he commanded the Continental Army, they are right. If they say he wore wooden teeth, well they are partially right. There are many articles, monographs, stories, and other works written about George Washington. Most are positive, some critical; no two seem to present the same picture of the man. What are the qualities that make him a good person? Was he always a good person? Did he have any flaws? A look at the historiography of George Washington reveals more about the man who holds an honored place in American history. By examining the works of Gerald E. Kahler, Paul Longmore, and Barry Schwartz, George Washington's iconography becomes clearer. The end result will not be a concise view of Washington, but a glimpse into the world that built the idea of him. Washington is complex man. These authors seek to identify different aspect of his life and admiration to aid in the discovery of his character.

Why historiography? According to Merriam Webster online, historiography is, "the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials, and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods."¹ In short, as contrasted with a book review, a historiography provides more analysis of the topic, tones, and intention of the author. It does not digest the book, but provides a look into the scholarship of various authors. Examining the sources and premise of the different authors reveals the many pictures of the man, George Washington.

In *The Long Farewell*, Gerald E. Kahler dissects the different ways in which the young nation mourned George Washington. Instead of looking at the mourning as a whole, Kahler examines separate groups to see how each created their own vision of Washington. These

¹ "historiography." Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2009. Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/historiography>. (accessed 29 July 2009)

groups include the Federalists, Freemasons, military, clergy, Society of Cincinnatti, women, and ordinary Americans. Members of each hoped to gain political clout by associating themselves with George Washington. They arranged their mourning to show respect and create a connection they hoped would endure beyond the period of mourning.

Kahler argues that different groups claimed Washington as their own. His monograph explains many of the images we see of Washington. From devout Christians to practicing Freemasons, the mourning of Washington upon his death offered different groups the chance to show that they belonged in American society because they were associated with this great man. However, Kahler does not solely focus on the desires of what might be called fringe groups in the late 1700s. The death of George Washington provided a chance for people to extol the virtues of humanity. Women took up roles as teachers who instructed their children using the life of George Washington.² Even the inclusion of children in the mourning process was a way to inculcate the idea of virtuous citizenship.³

Kahler's use of funeral orations, eulogies, programs, and other mourning material provide a glimpse into a nation which had not yet had time to cope with the death of their "Father." Through an investigation of the mourning process, Kahler reveals many of the political and social issues present in the new nation. These competing interests created the images of George Washington that Americans have come to know and revere. This approach to history, while macabre, provides readers with a unique look into the minds of Americans as they end the first quarter century as a nation.

The person who emerges from Kahler's discussion is a true "Man of All Seasons." Washington is the grand uniter of the Federalists, but at the same time he is devout Anglican,

² Gerald E. Kahler, *The Long Farewell: American Mourn the Death of George Washington*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 81.

³ Kahler, 84.

practicing Freemason, and the embodiment of the Roman hero, Cincinnatus. People recognized the virtues that Washington displayed. They knew of his reputation and regard. It is little wonder that many different groups chose to memorialize him so.

Taking an opposing approach, Paul Longmore seeks to dissect the person of George Washington by looking at his career as a farmer and legislator in *The Invention of George Washington*. Although his work focuses on a small portion of Washington's career, Longmore presents a man who is not just shaped by the views of others, but his own ideas of what it means to be a man of reputation. Longmore analyzes Washington's desire for power, not through pompous accolades, but through calculated manipulation of the situation. Observation and experience taught Washington that the way to power is not through purchase or inquiry; one had to prove that they deserved a certain station.⁴ Longmore uses the early military and agricultural career of Washington to show how he worked to support his reputation, but also received accolades from those who saw that he was more than his rank described.

Longmore analyzes the time period between the French and Indian War and 1776. This provides a look into the life of a man who is not a future general or President. He is an ordinary man. He has a farm, is involved in the legislature, and subject to Britain taxes and restrictions. Washington does not simply complain about the impositions of the British; he changes the way he runs Mount Vernon.⁵ In this instance, Washington is a practical man, reacting to the situation around him and adjusting his actions. He does become more anti-British, however, he wonders about the action of his own legislature in resisting the taxes,⁶ and criticizes the radical actions of the Boston Tea Party.⁷ He may not be the same patriot that other leaders of the American

⁴ Longmore, Paul, *The Invention of George Washington*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 54.

⁵ Longmore, 90.

⁶ Longmore, 121-122.

⁷ Longmore 135.

Revolution were, but his cool, disciplined manner connotes a leader who can bring real victory to the American side. Longmore makes Washington an “Everyman,” as opposed to the scholarly firebrands of the “Revolutionary Generation.”

Instead of looking at Washington solely from his proximate time period, sociologist Barry Schwartz looks at Washington in his time and ours. Using this approach, Washington does not appear as a mere relic of a revolutionary time. His achievements stand as a testament to the strength of perseverance and the appropriate use of power. In *George Washington, the Making of an American Symbol*, Schwartz analyzes the views of Washington by his peers and considers the lasting legacy of his life. To help illustrate his points on the veneration of Washington, Schwartz uses the ideas of social scientists such as Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud. Thorough his investigation, Washington is seen as a man of 18th century virtue, but also a man who can be embraced by Communists and Fascists for his use of power.⁸

Schwartz states that many of the issues surrounding the veneration of George Washington had nothing to do with him as a person. Washington was admired for not just his work on the battlefields during the French and Indian War, he was admired for his work in the Virginia legislature. According to Schwartz, his membership in the Freemasons also helped to spread the rumors of his greatness.⁹ However, many of the issues that came about with this laudatory aspect of Washington ran deeper than political squabbling. Schwartz points out that much of the criticism had to do the act of hero worship. Aside from the religious connotations, people thought that the adulation freely given to Washington might vault him to the status of king,

⁸ Schwartz, Barry, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol*, (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 109-112.

⁹ Schwartz, 14.

something they hoped to avoid.¹⁰ He also states that what most people knew (and know) is through a Washington cult, an institution of the values and details of his life.¹¹

Schwartz poses the following quandary: “How Washington became a symbol in the first place, and why he remained one despite a succession of serious military failures, are equally important questions which present writings tend to ignore.”¹² In this respect, Schwartz is right. Both Kahler and Longmore place more emphasis on the positive side of Washington. They mention some of his failings, especially in respect to how he was unprepared for some battles. However, they do not present an overall “lesson learned” aspect which provides insight into how Washington evolved from the failings. Schwartz looks at the successes and failures of Washington to show his growth. Richard Brookhiser might complain that this humanizes the first President¹³; nonetheless, it allows common people as well as historians and politicians to connect with the man. It is one thing to say that he overcame, but another to explain how it was done. Schwartz’s analysis of Washington creates a “Man of the Ages.” He is someone who has the personal history and values which Americans and others feel worthy of repetition.

This insight provides a new context in which to view Washington. People needed a symbol to carry them through this new experiment. Washington became a symbol of the Revolution and new government. He provided a lynch pin to keep the fledging nation together. Whatever his foibles, he was the General who led to colonies to victory, then he resigned. He was the one who reluctantly took power as the first President, and then resigned it. He could have been an all powerful man, but he chose not to be. These achievements and his demeanor

¹⁰ Schwartz, 22.

¹¹ Schwartz, 103.

¹² Schwartz, 4.

¹³ Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington*, (New York: Free Press, 1996), 9.

cannot be denied; they provide some examples of what many parents hope their children will learn from the life of Washington.

The picture that emerges of Washington is a man of achievement. He carries himself with a sense of cautious confidence. He wants the reputation of a Southern gentleman, an achievement he attains through observation and experience. Part of this reputation puts him at odds with the colonial policies which added to his reputation as a radical. His military achievements gave him the reputation of a good leader. Washington was not without his faults, but the above qualities combined to create the image children strive to emulate. The “Father of his Country” wanted a reputation, but he was more than the power he was given. He would much rather live and work at Mount Vernon. Like Jefferson, he embraces the lessons of Voltaire’s *Candide* who resigns to a simple life of cultivating his garden.

What is the idea of George Washington? Washington was a hard-working, socially-conscious, and admired man. He was not conspicuously ostentatious; however, he wanted his achievements known. He was observant. He understood what was going on around him and adjusted his activities to suit his needs. Unlike many historical figures, Washington cannot be described in one or two words. His numerous achievements overshadowed his military defeats and political controversies. The George Washington that people want to remember is a resourceful, confident, thoughtful man. The writers above prove that Washington was more than the first President or the Commander of the Revolutionary forces. The idea of George Washington that emerges is a man who knows how to manipulate his environment in a way that benefits himself and those around him. Indeed, he is an “Everyman,” but his actions make him a “Man for all Seasons,” and “Man of the Ages.”

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