

“George Washington: The Che Guevara of Fairfax County, Virginia”

FEBRUARY 19, 2017

This weekend is President’s Day Weekend. President’s Day celebrates leadership. When I was a youngster we celebrated February 22 as Washington’s Birthday and February 12 as Lincoln’s, but we only got Washington’s Birthday off from school. Now they’ve “Mondaylized” both and though Washington’s actual birthday is Wednesday, the national holiday is tomorrow.

The inauguration of a new President always invites comparisons with earlier Chief Executives. Moreover, celebrating the legacy of people like Abraham Lincoln and George Washington encourages us to ask: “What makes a great leader?” “What distinguishes a true *leader* from a run-of-the-mill boss? Or a celebrity?” “What are some of the essential qualities of leadership?”

- First of all, leaders are not managers.
- Leaders cast a vision; one that others pick up on and lend their support to.
- Leaders set an example (*e.g.*, the Rev. Carl Scovil in the kitchen washing dishes).
- The work of the church vs. church work (If the minister doesn’t do enough internal *churchwork*, she’ll be hampered—stymied—in her efforts to do *the work of the church* effectively in the larger community.)

Truly great leaders are held up as cultural heroes and heroines: people who, in the face of danger and adversity or from a position of weakness, display courage and the will for self sacrifice—heroism—in support of some greater good for all humanity. This definition usually refers to martial courage or excellence but can also mean moral excellence. I once read a list of superheroes compiled by some scholar; at the top of the list were Jesus and the Buddha—they had something like thirty-two points a piece, followed by Socrates with thirty points and so on, on down the list...Alexander the Great...Teresa of Ávila...Martin Luther... and so on, all the way down to the likes of Evel Knievel. I have no memory of where he came in on *that* hero list, but George Washington comes in very near the top of mine. I want to share with you why.

The eighteenth century was very different than today; it’s not easy to identify with its customs or its people. George Washington, in the popular imagination of today, comes across as wooden and aristocratic. Nothing could be further from the truth! He was a daring revolutionary: radical, creative, and yet able to restrain and focus his extraordinary energies until *just* the right moment.... Good timing was *one* of his many gifts, and it never failed him.

Who was he, really? Born in 1732, his father died when he was only eleven years old—and with that death George’s dreams of studying abroad as his older brothers had or of landing a commission in the British army were immediately cut back. Adjusting his sights downward, young Washington took up surveying. Luckily, wealthy and cultivated neighbors, Sally and George Fairfax, befriended him. Sally, in particular, noticed in this diamond-in-the-rough a future world citizen...and paved the way for that to happen. She and her husband introduced George to many among the socially prominent, politically

connected “first families” of Virginia. Drawn into the world of his sophisticated patrons, George embarked on a serious self-improvement campaign, copying a long list of personal habits he wished to cultivate: his own personal *Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour In Company and Conversation*. [e.g., “4th — In the Presence of Others Sing not to yourself with a humming Noise, nor Drum with your Fingers or Feet”; “41st — Undertake not to Teach your equal in the art himself Proffesses; it Savours of arrogance”; “110th — Labour to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire Called Conscience.”] Perhaps they helped; in time, fully internalized, he grew into a person with a remarkable sense of decorum and integrity. It’s important to add, given the era, that Washington was also, in Thomas Jefferson’s words, “the finest horseman of his age.” He was tall, handsome and an excellent horseman; he blended well into colonial Virginia society.

Efforts on behalf of the Virginia militia before and during the French and Indian War—Washington was in his twenties—led to battle testing, and familiarity with the terrain across the Appalachians and up and down the Ohio Valley. His record of victories was not enviable. His training, as things turned out, was. His qualities of fairness and dedication—necessary for any leader—were honed. More important still, he refined an intuitive gift for absorbing the rapidly changing gestalt that is the battlefield and making immediate, strategically effective decisions. He was cool, as they say; indeed, *very* cool under fire.

He married a wealthy widow, Martha Custis, becoming part of the 1%. Despite her grand first marriage, Martha Washington’s own family background had been modest and she preserved kind, unassuming ways; her genius lay not in cleverness or aesthetics but in the area of relationship building—by *all* accounts she was warm-hearted, gentle, and direct of speech. Wealthy the Washingtons were, but they were not snobs. Nor were they disconnected from the worries and aspirations of the 99%—countrymen and women with whom they increasingly came to indentify.

In trying to understand our first President, it’s important to remember that above all he was a *frontiersman*, far more familiar actually talking and sitting in council with Indians than *any* other of our presidents. He became involved in land speculation, which added to his wealth. More importantly, he began to recognize—long before most others of his class and culture—that America’s future lay westward, not linked up with England far off to the east across the sea.

The key aspect to Jefferson’s remark that Washington was “the finest horseman of his age,” it seems to me, is the observation that he was totally at home with the technology of the mid-18th century frontier: horses and surveyors tools. To be totally at home with the technology of the 21st century, a comparable leader of today wouldn’t be a race car driver; but she *would* be totally at home—in the saddle, as it were—when it comes to moving comfortably along the electronic communications frontier.

In Washington’s case, we have a handsome young man: tall, graceful, and well to do (though not an *aristocrat* and increasingly distrustful of aristocracy and its trappings). He

liked dancing and entertainment, especially spectacles of any kind. (He'd stop cold for a puppet show!) Temperamentally a gambler, at cards and at war, he was not afraid to take a well-calculated risk when it offered a good chance for success. More and more he saw with clarity the economics of the colonists' situation—and became increasingly radicalized. Like others of his era and class, he believed in the values of the enlightenment, especially the value of *reason*. He began to talk with his neighbors about the political wisdom of launching a *revolution* against empire.

Leadership, as I noted earlier, is not to be confused with management. It typically involves management and, indeed, great leaders are almost always good managers, too; but leadership is more than management alone. I think of my Scoutmaster, Karl Bruch. He led by way of his integrity, his fairness, and his dedication—qualities that George Washington had, too. Another quality Mr. Bruch shared with Washington was *leading by example*. By hanging in there with his soldiers through coldness and privation, through battle losses and extended nonpayment, through discontent and betrayal—leading by example—Washington somehow eight years later ended up having defeated the largest imperial force on the face of the planet. He was always able to think outside the box. He lost most of his battles—except the last one when it mattered most. He perfected guerrilla warfare when he found he couldn't win conventionally. He rallied loyal allies from every corner of every colony—and hung in there until their glorious cause was achieved. At which time he handed in his commission and returned home.

Days beforehand there was a moment—March 15, 1783—when everything hung in the balance. This happened in Newburgh, New York. Disgruntled officers, sullen from having never been paid, began the rumblings of a coup d'état. When the Commander in Chief strode in unannounced and up to the dais their rumblings continued. He who had led them in battle now appealed to their reason. He spoke of his years of service *with* and his love *for* his comrades; they were unmoved. He spoke of avoiding civil discord; their anger and resentment grew. Awkwardly he pulled a letter from his pocket—at which point things suddenly appeared to go wrong; he looked confused and stared at the paper helplessly. The officers, concerned he was unwell, leaned forward, their hearts filled with anxiety. The General then pulled from another pocket something only four or five people had ever seen him wear: a pair of eyeglasses. “Gentlemen,” he said with marked embarrassment, “you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only gone gray, but almost blind in the service of my country.” This unrehearsed confession had the effect his arguments failed to achieve. Hardened comrades began to weep...and the threat of a coup evaporated. What Washington could not accomplish out of strength he *was* able to bring about through acknowledgement of his vulnerability—another sign of uncommon leadership.

He then retired. Like the fifth century farmer Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus who successfully led the armies of Rome and then retired to his farm, Washington went home—willingly, joyfully home—to Mount Vernon. He returned to public service a few years later to preside over the writing of the Constitution, and then, as President, helped bring its “plan”—self-government—to fruition as the country's first president. He then retired for good.

At the time of his death in 1799, two and a half years after leaving office, Thomas Jefferson wrote: “He was, indeed, in every sense of the words, a wise, a good and great man.” And one of his officers, Henry Lee, summed it all up with: “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.”

I love history and have read biographies of over a dozen U.S. presidents. Recently, I plowed through Carl Sandberg’s six-volume biography of Abraham Lincoln, who many consider our #1. I love Lincoln, too, but I rank him as #2. Here’s what makes George Washington, in my estimation, our greatest chief executive:

- 1) He gave it up. He gave it up *three* times: as General of the Revolutionary Army, as would-be “King” of the Continental Convention, and as President. Compare this to Napoleon, Chairman Mao or *any* other revolutionary honcho. Power *never* corrupted him. Nor the seductive fantasy that all would deteriorate should he not be in charge.
- 2) He was never intimidated by others’ brilliance. Good leaders are magnanimous; spreading credit for their successes widely while conversely taking responsibility for failures. He chose Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, men of incomparable genius, as his two closest aides, but neither of them—in fact no one—ever doubted who was in charge. By nature a man of action, he learned to temper a fiery disposition by listening carefully to trusted aides and only then, after careful deliberation, acting.
- 3) Most of all I love Washington for his unfailing commitment to a *vision of democracy*. He was one of—perhaps *the*—wealthiest persons in America. He has been described, by some, as increasingly conservative toward the end of his presidency, but the categories of contemporary politics don’t really apply. He was a Federalist. Federalists believed that government—especially the federal government—could and should improve and uplift the lives of their countrymen; they were 180 degrees across the political dial from the Tea Partiers of today. It’s my belief that President Washington, as he peered into the young republic’s future, came to favor Hamilton’s vision of an emerging capitalist economy over Jefferson’s agrarian model because it was the only way he could foresee the country shaking off the economic burden—and moral curse—of slavery; and indeed, George Washington was the only one of the founding fathers to free all of his slaves, which he did in his will.

He was not a saint. He had a temper and could be a flirt. It’s humanizing to learn that while he was a dutiful son, he struggled—as many people do—with his mom, Mary Ball Washington. He was generous to her in every way; nevertheless she embarrassed him publically for neglecting her and dismissed his patriotic deeds as largely a matter of undeserved luck. Amazing....

He owned slaves, it’s true. But, alone among the slave-owning founding fathers, all were freed in his will. His turn towards Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists towards the

end of his presidency I ascribe, not to creeping conservatism, but to a clear recognition that budding free-market capitalism was the best—perhaps only—bet for ending slavery and enabling free government—truly free, democratic government—to thrive.

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Being a great parish minister requires leadership skills, certainly. Being a good leader of any kind requires many attributes, some obvious and others less so. One metaphor that I like when contemplating leadership is the metaphor of a ship (Washington made only one sea voyage in his life: to Barbados as a teenager along with his older half brother Lawrence, who died there. It was, naturally, a sad trip and he never discussed it. But he did contract and recover from smallpox while in the Caribbean—which gave him immunity to a disease that would later decimate troops on both sides throughout the Revolution.) In any case, I like to think of ministry as an ocean-going sailing ship. Such vessels require plenty of sail and—below the surface—a deep and solid keel. No sail and the ship flounders. Too much sail without a counterbalancing keel and you’ll go up on the rocks. So it is that the strongest, most resilient ministries are like great sailing vessels, with plenty of sail *and* with deep, solid keels beneath the water line.

Like many generals, Washington had a lot of sail; he loved wearing a uniform, resisted airs of familiarity, and was at home in the spotlight. But he developed as a leader by *deepening and strengthening his keel*. It was as a supply general that he made his mark: detailed requisition documents, careful inventory, and lengthy reports to civilian authorities written almost daily and with meticulous detail. He was not fond of what today we’d call “networking,” schmoozing with critical powers-that-be in order to help make things happen and move agenda along; though never keen on its painstaking courtesies, Washington learned how to network and also how to reap its benefits.

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In conclusion... in this celebrity-addled post-modern era, let us be thankful for the strong examples we have been given of effective, noble leadership, examples like George Washington. May we be inspired by him, and by other heroines and heroes, in our own efforts to nurture and strengthen and make whole our hearts and consciences—and to be our most honest and integral selves in the work we are asked to do, whatever it is. May we be made stronger by their virtue, their creativity, and their love of humanity. And through it all, may we humbly do the best *we* can to bring more of the good they’ve exemplified into our world, our communities, and our homes. *Amen*. And blessed be.

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