

# PATRIOT SAGE

## Chapter 1

### Today's Indispensable Man

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The men who established the American republic were acutely aware that they lived in a pivotal era in human history, and they eagerly rose to the occasion. They were all impelled by a love of liberty, but a large number were, in addition, driven by a desire for immortal Fame—the grateful remembrance of a distant posterity. To put it simply, they wanted to remain alive and be cherished in your memory and mine.

It may be that the Founders were as unlucky in their choice of posterity as they were lucky in their choice of time in which to live, for the American people are notoriously lacking in a knowledge of the past. But until Goals 2000 ensures that our children will learn nothing of our past, we still can assume that there is one American of the Founding generation whose name everybody knows: George Washington. And yet, knowledge of just what he did is far from widespread. Beyond the cherry tree episode (which never happened) and the fact that he was the first president, most Americans do not know why they should remember and cherish him. What I propose to do is to describe what he was like and thereby help us cherish his memory.

Let us begin with an overview. No historian doubts that Washington was the Indispensable Man of the epoch. By sheer force of character he created the Continental Army and held it together, under extremely adverse circumstances, for the eight years it took to win independence. His awesome prestige created the atmosphere in which the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 could draft a constitution that the states would ratify; and it is certain that the office of president was created only because he was available to fill it. Moreover, he never abused or sought to aggrandize his power, and he voluntarily surrendered power when a job was done, though he might easily have held it for life.

On the opposite hand, no scholar who has studied Washington would maintain—as schoolchildren used to be taught—that the man was flawless. As a soldier he was capable of rashness and poor judgment. He was addicted to gambling, indulged in a good deal of wenching, and was said to be a "most horrid swearer." He was vain, a bit pretentious, and hot tempered; and though he was a perfect gentleman in public, he was sometimes not in private.

Yet he was respected, admired, even revered by his countrymen, and he was the most trusted man of the age. What is more, and different, he was the most trustworthy man. Why he was so trusted, and why he came to be so trustworthy—in revolutionary circumstances of a kind that almost invariably breed Caesars, Cromwells, Castros, and Stalins—are questions that must be examined if we are to understand Washington's true legacy.

In regard to his being trusted, it is easy to overlook a crucial ingredient, that Americans sorely needed someone to trust. Partly this need arose from the perilousness of the undertaking on which they embarked in 1776. They had no way of knowing whether they would be founders or failures: the winners in such

circumstances are called Patriots, the losers are hanged as traitors. But there is more to it than that. Difficult as it may be to imagine, Americans were a monarchical people, a people who loved their kings. George III had been especially beloved, and when he betrayed Americans by making war on them, they reacted by embracing republicanism and by refusing to entrust executive power to anyone. And yet the craving for a symbol to embody the nation remained. In this diverse new entity—the United States of America—it was not enough to have leaders, no matter how virtuous or capable; there had to be one above all others. As Americans had earlier referred to George III as the Father of his People, they now needed someone to call the Father of his Country, if there were to be a country, and not thirteen separate countries.

Washington satisfied this need, and not least because he looked the part. Tall and powerfully built, he was "the most graceful figure...on horseback," as Thomas Jefferson put it, and was instantly recognized as the commander in chief even by soldiers who had never seen him before. When Abigail Adams finally met him in 1789 she was moonstruck. She gushed, as had the Queen of Sheba when first setting eyes on Solomon, "the *half* was not told me."

His physical appearance was complemented by an aura, not merely of strength, but of invincibility. His immunity to gunfire seemed almost supernatural. Early in his career a treacherous guide fired at him from point-blank range—and missed. Once he rode between two columns of his own men who were firing at one another by mistake and struck up their guns with his sword—the musket balls whizzed harmlessly by his head. Time and time again during the Revolutionary War musket balls tore his clothes, knocked off his hat, shredded his cape; horses were killed under him; but he was never touched. What mortal could refuse to entrust his life to a man whom God obviously favored? What country could refuse to do so?

But if it was his natural gifts that made others prone to trust him, there remains the question, how did he come to be worthy of trust? The answer is, he made himself that way. To understand how he did it, we must turn to the prevailing ideas about the nature of the human animal. Virtually every American at the time believed in God—the God of both the Old Testament and the New—which meant that, while they believed in the possibility of redemption in the hereafter, they also believed in original sin, in the inherent baseness of man.

And yet, though man could not escape his nature, there were a number of ways he could improve himself. All of them rested on the premise that the social instinct is a primary force; the desire to have the approval of one's peers ranked with the physical appetites in motivating people. A perceptive person could turn this instinct into an engine for self-improvement, which is what Washington did. As a child he devoutly wished to become a country gentleman (a status he was by no means born to) and toward that end he recorded and followed *110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation*. These rules were a manual of etiquette for circumstances ranging from being at the dinner table ("Being Set at meat Scratch not neither Spit Cough or blow your Nose—except there's a Necessity for it") to being "In Company of those of Higher Quality than yourself."

Notice the adolescent Washington's phraseology: "those of Higher Quality than yourself." Eighteenth-century Virginia society was highly stratified, as was society throughout Europe. Washington was acutely conscious of his own social position, for as a teenager he had been taken under the wing of a wealthy, titled family,

the Fairfaxes. From watching them, and also from a play he saw for the first time in his late teens, he learned to aim higher than just seeking the approval of his peers. The play was Joseph Addison's *Cato*, and its message was clear: Addison advised young Washington to follow precisely the opposite course from that recommended by Shakespeare's Polonius. In *Hamlet*, Polonius says: "This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man." Shakespeare put those words in the mouth of a prattling fool, and Addison's message is that, for public men, they are foolish words. Rather, he says: Do not trust in your own righteousness. Instead, be true to others; seek the esteem of the wise and the good, and it follows that you cannot then be false to yourself—or to your country.

Washington made that a guiding star for his own conduct. Later, when circumstances and his achievements made it possible, he aimed his sights even higher, and he sought by conscious design to earn the esteem of posterity, of generations of discerning and virtuous people yet unborn.

That was one way Washington improved himself. Another was through the concept of character. The term "character" was rarely used in the eighteenth century as we use it, to refer to internal moral qualities. Rather, at least in polite society and among people in public life, it referred to a persona or mask that one deliberately selected and always wore: one picked a role, like a part in a play, and sought to act in that role unfailingly, ever to be in character. If one chose a character with which one was comfortable, and if one played it long enough and consistently enough, it became a "second nature" that in practice superseded the first. One became what one pretended to be.

The results, for good or ill, depended upon the character or characters chosen and upon how well one acted the part. Washington chose to play a progression of characters, each grander and nobler than the last, and he played them so successfully that he ultimately transformed himself into a man of almost extrahuman virtue.

The first character to which he aspired was that of the country gentleman. This entailed becoming a successful commercial farmer. Washington's inheritance was small, but he worked skillfully as a tobacco planter and steadily increased his holdings. It did not hurt that he married a wealthy widow, whose property was greater than his. (As an aside I must point out that Washington, like his neighbors, employed slave labor. At the time, slavery was legal in almost every country on earth. Washington's duty, he believed, was merely to treat his slaves humanely. He gradually changed his mind, however, and in his will he freed his slaves. Though many other Virginians, including Jefferson, talked about the evils of slavery, none followed Washington's example. Moreover, Washington made provision for supporting his former slaves who were too old to support themselves. His estate was paying pensions to them as late as 1833.)

The key to Washington's success as a farmer was that, in an age in which scientific farming was in its infancy, he became the scientific farmer par excellence. He read every book and journal on the subject, and he exchanged letters with experts throughout Europe. He conducted endless experiments and made endless calculations (my favorite is that he determined that there were 13,411,000 grains in a bushel of timothy). He invented a plow that automatically dropped seeds in the furrows. He was his own architect in the construction of Mount Vernon. He conducted time and motion studies a century and a half

before efficiency experts introduced the concept into American manufacturing. And he became an immensely wealthy man by the time of the Revolution.

Already, however, he had aspired to and succeeded in his first public character, that of a military hero. At the age of twenty-two he was entrusted with command of Virginia troops sent to the back country in what turned out to be the beginnings of the French and Indian War. He took to warfare enthusiastically. "I heard the bullets whistle," he wrote to a younger brother, "and, believe me, there is something charming in the sound." He made mistakes, but in the crucial Battle of the Wilderness, he offered his commanding British general advice which, had it been followed, would have saved the day. Instead the British employed conventional tactics—and were slaughtered. Washington emerged as a hero, and was regarded throughout the colonies as a man destined to do great things.

His opportunity came twenty years later, when the Continental Congress convened to defend American liberties against British encroachments. Washington was the obvious choice for commander in chief, partly because he was the only American with an intercolonial reputation as a fighting man, partly because as a Virginian in charge of New England troops he would give the army a "national" flavor. However, lest Congress overlook the obvious, Washington attended its sessions dressed in a splendid general's uniform designed especially for the occasion. On the motion of John Adams, he was given the command.

Washington and his men drove the British out of Boston early in 1776, but soon thereafter things began to go badly. The Americans failed to defend New York, and Washington's army was forced to retreat to Pennsylvania. Part of the army disbanded; the remainder was a shambles. Making everything worse was that large numbers of civilians, upon seeing the British, suddenly lost their taste for independence and went over to the enemy. (Indeed, Washington's mother was a Loyalist.)

Washington headed off disaster by a bold stroke. On Christmas night, 1776, he crossed the ice-choked Delaware River and successfully attacked the British garrison in Trenton. Popular morale improved, and many volunteers joined the army. Yet by the summer of 1777 Washington knew that he would never have enough strength to defeat the British head-on. Instead, he would have to maneuver carefully and wait, possibly for years, until the British made a blunder that would enable him to strike the decisive blow.

But the waiting game required patience and discipline—traits that the Americans did not have and that Washington himself would have to teach them. Moreover, it cost a great deal of money to keep an army in the field, and the Congress had very little. Congress raised funds by printing paper money, backed merely by a vague promise to repay some day; the paper rapidly lost its value until it was worth nothing at all (giving rise to the expression, "not worth a continental").

In the fall of 1777, General Horatio Gates won a major victory in upstate New York, but out of jealousy of Washington he declined to cooperate with the main army, and as a result the enemy took Philadelphia. Washington's army retreated to Valley Forge, where it endured a winter quite as dreadful as legend depicts. A single brushstroke conveys the whole: Congress declared a day of "Continental Thanksgiving," and ordered that each soldier be fed a special "dinner," consisting of "half a gill of rice and a tablespoon full of vinegar."

Somehow, by one means and another, Washington kept the army together for three more years—a task made more difficult by his refusal to commandeer supplies from civilians. The British, meanwhile, steadily expanded the territory under their control. The low point came on January 1, 1781, when 2,400 veterans of the Pennsylvania line rose in mutiny. With difficulty they were persuaded to return to their duties. Then after ten more anxious months Washington got his opportunity. The British general Cornwallis made the blunder of encamping in Yorktown, with his back to the sea and without naval cover. A combined American and French force besieged the town, and Cornwallis had no option but to surrender. Suddenly the war was won.

Even so, danger persisted. A peace treaty had to be negotiated, and the army was held in Newburgh, New York, in readiness to fight again if the negotiations failed. The soldiers were restless and eager to go home, but they had not been paid in years and did not want to disband without some of their overdue pay or their promised bonuses. Grumbling increased alarmingly and reached a climax early in 1783, when anonymous pamphlets were circulated among the officers calling for a meeting where "plans" would be made to seek "justice." This was a perilous situation, one that could easily end in a military dictatorship.

To the surprise of the mutinous officers Washington showed up at the meeting. He had written a short speech, and when he took it from his coat pocket, he also drew out a pair of eyeglasses, which only his aides and closest friends knew he needed. He began, "Gentlemen, 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." He went on to shame the officers for betraying the Revolution, and reduced them, literally, to tears. The mutiny dissolved.

When Washington was finally able to retire to his beloved Mount Vernon, he was the most famous man in the Western world. He was idolized by his countrymen, praised throughout Europe, regarded as the greatest man of the age even in Britain. But Washington had considerable cause for uneasiness, nonetheless: he now lived in a goldfish bowl, as it were, with all eyes upon him, and he had to live up to the almost impossibly high standards that he had set for himself.

His situation was made doubly uncomfortable by the ongoing current of public affairs. Upon retirement, he had announced that he would never again emerge from private life. He was greatly concerned, however, that the Union was likely to fall apart. To prevent that he sent a circular letter to Congress and the governors of the states, urging that the Articles of Confederation be altered to create a central government adequate to the nation's needs. Otherwise, he predicted, the states would drift into anarchy.

The drift toward anarchy was already underway, and it increased with a rush during the winter of 1786-1787, when Shays' Rebellion erupted in Massachusetts. The rebellion was actually a taxpayers' revolt, but it was generally perceived as an uprising of desperate debtors who threatened a redistribution of all property. It was beginning to appear that the Father of his Country would soon have no country to be father of.

It was mainly in response to the news of Shays' Rebellion that Congress and the state legislatures called the Philadelphia Convention of 1787—and that Washington agreed to serve as a delegate from Virginia. James Madison thought it amazing that Washington would attend and thereby place his reputation in jeopardy, for it was by no means certain that a convention would accomplish

anything. But Washington, being the man he had become, realized that what was at issue was the grand question whether a people could govern themselves by a reasonable process of deliberation, rather than by the violent force of arms to which every other government on earth owed its origins. In a sense, the Constitutional Convention would be legislating for all mankind.

Washington was not an especially active member of the Convention—constitution making and abstract political theory were not his dish of tea—but he was indispensable to its successful outcome in at least three ways. The first had to do with credibility. Eighteenth-century Americans intensely distrusted centralized power and had an almost paranoid fear of conspiracies against their liberties. Washington's widely publicized participation in the Convention as its president gave it a legitimacy it otherwise could not have had. Americans were willing to give a convention meeting behind closed doors a chance because they trusted Washington.

Washington's second vital contribution had to do with the force of his personality among the delegates. Justly celebrated as the Framers have been for their wisdom and prudence, there were hotheads among them, and prima donnas and schemers. Washington's dignity and overpowering aura, however, made it impossible to behave in a mean-spirited, improper, or uncivil way when he was around. He kept his fellow delegates on their best behavior.

The third contribution pertained to the creation of the presidency. Most of the delegates had learned from experience that a government without an executive branch is not a government at all, but fear of executive power persisted. More than a third of the delegates supported a proposal for a plural executive—consisting of three to five persons—and a few others wanted a single executive checked by an executive council. A majority would support a one-man presidency only because Washington would be the man, but few were confident about giving the president more than ceremonial functions; and it is doubtful that Washington would have accepted the office under such restrictions.

The main sticking point was that Washington could not live forever, and no one could think of a safe way to choose his successor. Today it might seem that the solution would be to elect the president by popular vote; but given the primitive technology in communication and the fear of direct democracy, that was not an option. Objections ruled out any decentralized form of election—by the state governors or the state legislators, for instance—and that meant the choice must be placed in Congress. But congressional election would make the executive dependent upon the Congress, not a separate branch, and would encourage outside powers and special interests to corrupt the process.

For these reasons, the delegates were unwilling, as late as two weeks before the end of the convention, to endow the presidential office with substantive powers. Then somebody proposed the electoral college—a complicated, cumbersome, one might say cockamamie scheme—that overcame all the objections, and it was adopted.

Properly, at that point, the whole draft constitution should have been gone over again to separate the executive powers from the legislative. But that would have been a painstaking process, and the delegates, tired after nearly four months of tedious labors, were anxious to be done and go home. So they hastily made some changes in their draft: they made the president commander in chief of the armed forces, and they made the conduct of foreign relations the joint concern of

president and Senate (instead of, as in the draft, exclusively the affair of the Senate). Otherwise, they simply stated that "the executive power shall be vested in a president." This amounted to a blank check for Washington to fill in as he saw fit. The precedents he would set in office would determine just what the executive power was to be.

In my *American Presidency*, I consider in detail the enduring precedents that he set; here let me mention but a few. Washington made the president responsible for relations between the United States and foreign governments. We take that for granted, but constitutionally the "advice and consent" clause would have permitted the Senate a major role. After a couple of fruitless efforts to consult with the Senate in person, Washington and the senators agreed that thenceforth advice and consent should come after, not before, the president acted.

A related matter has to do with the tensions between Congress's exclusive authority to declare war and the president's exclusive power as commander in chief. When the wars of the French Revolution broke out, Washington wanted to issue a neutrality proclamation. Secretary of State Jefferson objected that since only Congress could declare war, only it could declare neutrality. But Washington in his capacity as commander in chief prevailed. In another exercise of the power as commander in chief, Washington sent the army to wage war against the Indians in the Ohio country—without asking for a declaration of war. He did so on additional occasions thereafter. The vitality of these precedents will be appreciated when I point out that although Congress has declared war five times in our history, presidents have sent American troops into combat, not counting the Indian wars, more than 200 times.

Others of Washington's major precedents include the use of departmental heads as a cabinet, the two-term tradition, and the practice of initiating the budget-making process.

The last part of Washington's legacy is the most subtle, and it may be the most important. He was acutely aware that he had become a legend in his time, a true myth, and he recognized that the presidency made possible the institutionalization of the role he had been playing. That is to say, he endowed the presidency with the capacity—and the awesome responsibility—to serve as the symbol of the nation, of what it is and what it can aspire to be.

In the following passage from his First Inaugural Address, Washington specified our founding principles. It was imperative, he said, that "the foundation of our national policy be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality,...there is no truth more thoroughly established than that there exists...an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness;...[and] that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right;...the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, as deeply, perhaps as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people [Washington's emphasis]." Those words are as true and as relevant today as they were when Washington uttered them in 1789.