



George Washington

AND THE Formation of the American Character

“I believe, or at least I hope, that there is public virtue enough left among us, to deny ourselves everything but the bare necessities of life, to accomplish our end.”

—George Washington

High School Essay Contest in Honor of America’s Founding

REGISTER BY NOVEMBER 28, 2008. ESSAYS DUE JANUARY 23, 2009.

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Charles de Gaulle once scoffed at the suggestion that he was indispensable to the effort to rebuild France and Western Europe in the wake of WWII, responding that “the cemeteries are full of indispensable men.” It is tempting to believe, however, that at the time of the American founding, George Washington may well have been the exception to de Gaulle’s rule. He conspicuously stands out from among the other central figures of the founding era and earns Lighthorse Harry Lee’s encomium as having been “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen....”

The task of defining American identity is an ongoing, and seemingly endless, project—and one that each generation must take up anew. Answers to the question of what constitutes the distinctly American character range far and wide, taking on a different cast when examined through the respective disciplinary lenses of history, political science, economics, or the arts.

Careful study of the nation’s founding architects reveals a remarkably diverse and

complex set of animating convictions that only compound the challenge of defining the American character. Like his renowned contemporaries, Washington’s personal narrative was hardly monochromatic. It may well be that his enduring contribution to the American personality is the imprint of both his personal and public identity upon the nation he loved and served.

Students participating in this essay contest are asked to consider at least two central elements of Washington’s public or private life that found expression in American identity. Essayists are encouraged to consider how those characteristics have been weakened or strengthened over the past two centuries and what this suggests about the American character.

Essays are to be between 1,200 and 1,500 words long. Printed entries should be double-spaced and printed on one side of the page only. **All submissions must be post-marked or e-mailed by January 23, 2009.** Essays will be judged on the basis of scholarship, imagination, and quality of writing.

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George Washington AND THE Formation of the American Character

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