# SEVEN MEN AND SEVEN WOMEN

## AND THE SECRET OF THEIR GREATNESS

ERIC METAXAS

An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

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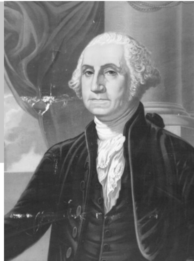

# ONE
# George Washington

## 1732–99

Let me begin the first biography in this book by saying that even if the seven great men discussed within its pages were not in chronological order, I probably still would have started with George Washington. When it comes to true greatness, Washington's tough to beat. But someone's greatness can sometimes lend him an aura of such outsized fame that we begin to think of him not as a real person but as a cartoon superhero or as a legend. That's often the case with Washington.

As you know, he has a state named after him. (Do I need to say which?) And he has our nation's capital city named after him; he has a soaring obelisk monument in that city; his birthday is a national holiday; and he has a huge bridge named after him right here in my hometown of New York City. And if all these things aren't impressive enough, his face is on the dollar bill! (Perhaps you already knew that.) So who really thinks of him as an actual flesh-and-blood human being who struggled as we all struggle and who put on his breeches one leg at a time? That's the problem with being *that* famous. People often don't really think about you as a person at all.



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If you do think of him, you probably think of George Washington as that old guy with the somewhat sour expression on the aforementioned dollar bill. In that overfamiliar picture, sporting heavily powdered hair and a lace-trimmed shirt, he looks almost as much like an old woman as an old man.

But what I've discovered is that this famous portrait has given many of us an outrageously false picture of who Washington actually was. It presents him as an elderly man with chronic denture discomfort, who looks none too happy for it. But the reality is completely different.

What if I told you that in his day, George Washington was considered about the manliest man most people had ever seen? No kidding. Virtually everyone who knew him or saw him seemed to say so. He was tall and powerful. He was also both fearless and graceful. On the field of battle, he had several horses shot out from under him; on the dance floor, he was a much sought-after partner.

There's so much to say about Washington that it's hard to know where to begin. For one thing, he was a man of tremendous contradictions. For example, the man who became known as the father of our country never fathered children himself. And he lost his own father when he was a young boy. The man who was viewed as deeply honorable actually told some real whoppers when he was a young man, despite Parson Weems's fictitious episode by the cherry tree: "I cannot tell a lie." More than anyone else, he is responsible for freeing American colonists from the greatest military power on earth—the British Empire—and yet he held some three hundred black men, women, and children in bondage at Mount Vernon.[1]

But here's the biggest contradiction: Washington was an extremely ambitious young man who worked hard to achieve fame, glory, land, and riches—yet at a pivotal moment in American history, he did something so selfless that it's difficult to fully fathom. It's principally because of this one thing that he's included in this book.

So what did he do? In a nutshell, he voluntarily gave up incredible



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power. When you know the details of his sacrifice, it's hard to believe that he did what he did of his own free will. And yet he did it. The temptation *not* to surrender all that power must have been extraordinary. There were many good reasons not to surrender it, but history records that he somehow did. Somehow he made an impossibly grand sacrifice—and in doing so he dramatically changed the history of the world. Had Washington not been willing to do it, America as we know it almost certainly would not exist. That's not hyperbole.

This is why contemporary memorials to Washington describe him as an American Moses, as someone loaned to Americans from God. He was the right man for his time—arguably the only man who could have successfully birthed the American Experiment. If you wonder whether one person's actions can matter, and if you wonder whether character matters, you needn't look any further than the story of George Washington. So here it is.

George Washington was born on February 22, 1732, in what is now Westmoreland County, Virginia, the first son of Mary Ball Washington and tobacco farmer Augustine Washington. George had two older half-brothers, Augustine and Lawrence, and one half sister, Jane, who were children from his father's first marriage. George also had five full younger siblings: Samuel, Elizabeth, John, Charles, and Mildred.

Augustine and Lawrence were sent to England for their educations, but George's father died when George was just eleven, making an English education for him financially impossible. He would regret this deficit in his education throughout his long life. George's brother Lawrence, who was fourteen years older, became a father figure to him, someone whose advice the young George would listen to. In 1751, Lawrence took nineteen-year-old George to Barbados, where Lawrence hoped to be cured of tuberculosis. Alas, George contracted smallpox on this trip. Although the disease was dangerous, it actually turned



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out to be a hugely fortunate occurrence; George was then inoculated from the disease at an early age, thereby preventing him from future attacks of it when he was a general. During the Revolutionary War, large numbers of soldiers died of disease rather than enemy attacks.

As a boy growing into manhood, George frequently visited Lawrence's home on the Potomac River, which was named Mount Vernon. He also frequently visited Belvoir, owned by Lawrence's in-laws. As one biographer put it, at Mount Vernon and Belvoir, "George discovered a world that he had never known."[2] In particular, Belvoir "was a grand structure, an architectural showcase gracefully adorned with exquisite molding and rich paneling and decorated tastefully with furniture and accessories from England."[3] George "was stirred by the people" in these homes, "people of influence," adults "who were well-read and thoughtful, men who were accustomed to wielding power."[4]

Young George determined to turn himself into one of them—especially someone like Lawrence, who was not only a distinguished war hero but also adjutant general of Virginia, a member of the Virginia legislature, the House of Burgesses, and by marriage, a member of the socially prominent Fairfax family. George threw himself into learning proper etiquette, reading serious books, dressing properly, and improving his character. He also eventually shot up to be roughly six-foot-three, this making him much taller than most of his contemporaries and giving him the heroic, statuesque appearance of a born commander.

Given his future career, it's certainly ironic that George's mother fought his efforts, at age fourteen, to become a commissioned officer in the Royal Navy. She thought such a life would be too harsh for her son, so George decided to learn to become a surveyor. He was fiercely intent on acquiring property and wealth, and a surveying career could lead to quick riches in land and money. By the time he turned twenty, George owned some twenty-five hundred acres of Virginia's frontier land.[5]



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But that same year—1752—tragedy struck. George's beloved brother Lawrence lost his battle with tuberculosis. Lawrence's wife and daughter also died within a few years. This meant that George would ultimately inherit Mount Vernon—an estate he would ambitiously enlarge and improve during the next four decades.

When he was twenty-one, George once again turned his attention toward the possibility of a military career. Through the intervention of influential friends, and despite the fact that George had no military experience, Virginia's governor appointed him commander of the southernmost military district of Virginia, a post that gave him the rank of major. This was an unexpected development, and it would not be long before George had an opportunity to test his mettle in a dramatic—and ultimately historic—way.

On the horizon loomed the French and Indian War, in which the French and several tribes of native Americans joined forces against Great Britain (including the Anglo-Americans) for what was then called the Ohio Territory—a vast area, much larger than the current US state of Ohio. Both France and Britain claimed this territory, and in 1750, France sent an army there and built Fort Le Boeuf, about fifteen miles from Lake Erie, in what is today the northwestern corner of Pennsylvania. This aggressive move by the French infuriated many Virginians, particularly those who owned territory in the region. What to do? The governor of Virginia, Robert Dinwiddie, consulted Crown officials in London, who advised him to send an emissary to the French, letting them know in no uncertain terms that the territory belonged to the English and that they had better remove their troops posthaste.

When young George Washington learned of the need for a messenger to travel through the mountains and wilderness during that upcoming winter, he immediately put himself forward as the man for the job. Governor Dinwiddie accepted Washington's offer and also gave George a number of other responsibilities. He was to spy out the land and the size of the French force. He was also instructed to consult



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with the so-called "half-king," the chief of the Seneca tribe, about the possibility of their joining with the British against the French, in the event that war should break out. And he was to attempt to find a good location for building an English fort in the area—something that was an absolute necessity if the Ohio Company, a Virginia land speculation company, were to "gain legal title to the hundreds of thousands of acres it coveted in the Ohio Country."[6]

So twenty-one-year-old George left with the governor's letter and six companions. They spent weeks hiking the many miles from Virginia to Ohio, through the endless terrain of winter snow, headed for Fort Le Boeuf.

When they got close to their destination, a French patrol met them and escorted Washington and his men to the fort. The French treated them civilly, as was the custom. They welcomed them, fed them, received and read the letter George delivered, and then gave George their response to take back to Virginia. But as George suspected from conversations that he overheard, the response was not what the English hoped. The French resolutely declared that the land was theirs. If that was true, the two world powers would soon be at war.

George and his men returned home with the letter—in which the French indeed claimed the land as their own—and he prepared an account of his adventure, which was published in colonial newspapers. His fame also spread through London when his memoir was published in pamphlet form under the title *The Journal of Major George Washington*. It was the first time the British would hear of this valiant young man, and obviously not the last.

Faced with French defiance, the House of Burgesses was forced to take action. The members voted to fund what they named the Virginia Regiment, a three-hundred-man volunteer army. This regiment was to travel to the Ohio Valley to assist in building a fort, which Dinwiddie considered essential to protect British interests. The Virginia Regiment was to be led by an experienced British soldier named Colonel Joshua Fry. The ambitious Washington pressed political friends to promote



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him to the rank of lieutenant colonel, which they succeeded in doing, and so he joined the regiment with this rank.

But Fry could not immediately leave Virginia, so it was the young Washington himself who was charged with leading 186 men into western Pennsylvania. Upon learning that the French had sent one thousand soldiers to build what they would name Fort Duquesne, Washington was in a quandary. He had far fewer men at his disposal than did the French. He had been urging Indians to join the British, but he had no way of knowing whether they actually would.

He also feared negative repercussions if, in effect, he surrendered before meeting up with French troops. Should he wait for Colonel Fry and reinforcements? Adding to Washington's uneasiness were the stealthy nighttime sounds of men nearby. Were they deserters or French soldiers?

Indian scouts gave Washington a further confusing message. They said that a force of French soldiers was headed in Washington's direction, hoping to meet Washington and attack the English. Washington decided to stay where he was, and two days later he received more news from Christopher Gist, who had traveled with Washington on his previous trip into the Ohio wilderness, that a French party of about fifty men was approaching. These soldiers "had invaded [Gist's] nearby wilderness cabin, vowing to kill his cow and smash 'everything in the house.'"[7]

As one historian notes, the inexperienced Washington made "a crucial decision, and one that violated Dinwiddie's instructions to keep the army within its fortifications."[8] Washington sent half his men ahead and then learned from an Indian ally that the French had been spotted not far away. Washington took forty of his men on a rainy night march, determined to make a surprise attack. What took place the next morning in May 1754 simply boggles the imagination.

On their arrival, Washington discovered thirty-two French soldiers calmly preparing their breakfast. For some unknown reason, Washington ordered his men to open fire, and a dozen of the French



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were immediately slaughtered. Once the smoke cleared, French ensign Joseph Coulon de Villiers, Sieur de Jumonville, attempted to explain to Washington that his troops were on a diplomatic mission. But at the very moment that "Jumonville read this ultimatum, things got immeasurably worse: the Half-King stepped forward, split open [Jumonville's] head with a hatchet, then dipped his hands into the skull, rinsed them with the victim's brains, and scalped him."[9]

Washington would never forget this unspeakably grotesque scene or the demonic horrors of the chaos that ensued. The Seneca traveling with him now viciously attacked and scalped the wounded French, impaling the head of one man on a stake. "Immobilized either by bloodlust or the awful sights that he was beholding for the first time, Washington made no attempt to stop the carnage," writes biographer John Ferling.[10] It's possible Washington did not want to antagonize the Indians by attempting to stop their atrocities.

After it was all over, Washington wrote to Dinwiddie, claiming the French soldiers were actually "Spyes of the worst sort"[11] who intended to prepare the way for an attack by the French. This may well have been true—the diplomatic message may indeed have been cover—but knowing that his French prisoners would have their own story to tell about what happened, Washington warned Dinwiddie not to believe them.

To be sure, Washington had more to worry about than possible condemnation by Dinwiddie. When French leaders at Fort Duquesne learned of the carnage that had taken place against their men, they would certainly seek revenge. Washington immediately ordered his men to begin construction of what he would call Fort Necessity. But the fort's location was rather ill chosen: forests and hills closely surrounded the fort, which meant that the French would be able to get close to it and shoot the English like fish in the proverbial barrel.

This was precisely what happened. Some nine hundred French and Indian fighters arrived under the command of Louis Coulon de Villiers, who was the brother of Jumonville, and immediately opened fire. After they had killed or wounded a full quarter of Washington's



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men, Villiers asked Washington if he would like to surrender. Washington agreed to do so and—worse from the standpoint of his record—he signed a document in which he confessed that Jumonville had been murdered.

Washington again sent misleading reports of the battle, falsely claiming that more than three hundred French had become casualties (in reality, they suffered only nineteen) and that the English defeat was due to inexperienced men and dwindling supplies. Washington "never, then or later, admitted to any errors on his part," writes Ferling.[12] Washington also claimed that the man who acted as translator between the French and the English was incompetent and possibly corrupt; otherwise he never would have "confessed" to the murder of Jumonville. Again, it's difficult to know what really happened.

The French and Indian War, as it would henceforth be known, and which these battles launched, would last five years. Despite patently bad decision making, the young Washington's "virtues stood out amid the temporary wreckage of his reputation. With unflagging resolution, he had kept his composure in battle, even when surrounded by piles of corpses. . . . Utterly fearless, he faced down dangers and seemed undeterred by obstacles."[13] In the weeks after the debacle, "condemnation of Washington gradually gave way to widespread acknowledgment that he had confronted terrifying odds at Fort Necessity."[14]

The now twenty-two-year-old Washington, doubtless licking his wounds, retired to Mount Vernon. But it would not be very long before he had a chance to redeem himself.

In 1755, the British sent General Edward Braddock, two infantry regiments, and seven hundred provincial soldiers to take Fort Duquesne from the French. Washington, who was experienced in traveling in the wilderness and in communicating with Indians, was invited to join this expedition and to serve on General Braddock's staff.



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On July 9, after fording the Monongahela River, Braddock and an advance force of fourteen hundred men encountered a huge force of French and Indians. The French soldiers, who had learned how to fight Indian-style, raced into the woods, surrounded the British, and rained deadly fire on them, killing or wounding 976 men, including Braddock. It was a tremendous slaughter, "the worst defeat suffered by the British in America prior to the War of Independence."[15] But in this hellish hail of bullets and death, Washington first showed himself as a man of legendary courage and passion on the field of battle. History records that "Washington alone of Braddock's aides emerged unscathed, though his hat and coat were riddled with bullet holes and two horses were shot from beneath him. Washington never ran. He stood and fought with great valor."[16]

It seems genuinely miraculous that Washington survived that day, and the courage involved in staying amidst such gunfire as would put holes in his hat and coat—and not one but two horses—is nothing less than superlatively heroic. As a result of Washington's spectacular gallantry during this battle, Governor Dinwiddie asked him to command Virginia's now much larger army. He would have the rank of colonel. Washington and his men of the Virginia army spent the next several years fighting the Indians, who continued to attack settlements and murder the families living there. Washington often complained about the lack of adequate men, equipment, and Indian allies, along with the fact that they were fighting a defensive rather than an offensive war. And as military leaders often do today, he complained that the civilian leaders who knew little about battlefield tactics were making the wrong decisions.

In 1757, the British government decided that to finally drive the French from Fort Duquesne, it would send three armies to America, one of them under the leadership of Brigadier General John Forbes. Washington now presided over two Virginia regiments of some two thousand men, and Forbes assigned him to lead one of these three brigades. Learning from captured enemy soldiers that Fort Duquesne was lightly garrisoned, Forbes, intent on capturing it, sent twenty-five



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hundred men under Washington's command to do it. But when they at long last arrived in late 1758, they discovered that the French had fled the fort after burning it. The Americans later learned that the French had become uneasy after their Indian allies left them and decided that their best option was to destroy the fort and leave. There was obviously little glory in Washington's victory, but it was a victory nonetheless. And thus would end the military career of the twenty-six-year-old George Washington—or so he then thought.

Shortly afterward, Washington resigned his commission, to the sorrow of his officers, who had become extremely fond of him. Many of them participated in a moving farewell tribute, noting his commitment to justice, as well as his loyalty, fairness, sincerity, and other positive qualities. Few could question that Washington's disciplined and courageous leadership had inspired them to give their best efforts.

Washington was deeply touched by this farewell. He thanked the men, saying that he did so with "true affection for the honor you have done me, for if I have acquired any reputation, it is from you I derive it."[17] This was typical of the graciousness that would mark him in future years.

But now that he was leaving the military, just what would become of this promising young man?

For starters, George Washington would marry. Shortly after returning home, he wed Martha Dandridge Custis, the wealthy Virginia widow he had been courting for some time. He brought her to Mount Vernon, determined to make his living there as a tobacco planter. Washington also ran for a seat in the House of Burgesses and won. He would serve there for sixteen years, but seldom did he make a speech or join in debate. In the next few years he would continue to improve and enlarge Mount Vernon, ordering everything from Wedgwood china to a chariot from England. He also helped rear Patsy and Jacky, Martha's two young children from her previous marriage.



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But things were happening in the world beyond Mount Vernon that wouldn't let George Washington remain as he was for long. In 1764, Britain's passage of the Revenue Act, which taxed rum, wine, coffee, tea, molasses, sugar, and tobacco, enraged most Americans, even though the taxes were intended to pay for Britain's defense of America from future attacks by the French or Indians. After all, no American had a seat in Parliament, and taxation without representation was not something they were eager to accept.

When, in 1765, Parliament passed the Stamp Act (a tax on official documents and pamphlets among other things), the outrage against Great Britain increased. For one thing, there were riots. Parliament repealed the Stamp Act in 1766, but it then promptly reinfuriated the Americans by passing the Townshend Acts in 1767, which taxed paper, tea, glass, lead, and paint. American boycotts of many British imports ensued, costing the British much lost income.

In 1770, the Boston Massacre took place, in which British soldiers killed five colonists, further inflaming American feeling against the presence of British troops on their soil. And in 1773, the British imposed the Tea Act, which led to the Boston Tea Party—an act of protest that amuses most Americans today, but that in some of its lesser-known and gruesome details horrified many, including George Washington. Nonetheless, Washington knew that things had come to a point at which something had to be done. Until now he had mostly listened quietly while other members of the Virginia House of Burgesses expressed their wrath at the escalating British abuses. Even he "was prepared for a strident response against Britain's imperial policies, if a majority of colonists were of like mind."[18]

Indeed, they were. The American colonists passionately believed that Parliament had absolutely no legal authority to impose taxes on them. So in August of 1774, Washington was among seven men chosen to represent Virginia in Philadelphia at the newly formed Continental Congress. The Congress decided on a boycott of all British-made goods, to be supported by the thirteen colonies. And



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the congressmen made plans for activating each colony's militia if the need should arise, which it soon and certainly did.

It was on that now famous date, "the eighteenth of April in '75," that a Boston silversmith named Paul Revere rode through the night to warn his fellow colonists of the imminent arrival of British troops. The British had sent a thousand soldiers to confiscate arms and arrest Revolutionary leaders. The next morning, the curtain rose on that great War of Independence we now call the American Revolution. Most of us know the story of how American fathers and husbands left the warmth of their beds to fiercely resist British troops at Lexington and Concord. The casualties from these historic clashes were shocking at the time, especially given the fact that war had not yet been declared. Nearly three hundred British soldiers and one hundred Massachusetts militiamen were killed or wounded.[19]

Learning of the conflict, Washington memorably mused in a letter to his friend George Fairfax,

> Unhappy it is though to reflect, that a Brother's Sword has been sheathed in a Brother's breast, and that, the once happy and peaceful plains of America are either to be drenched with Blood, or Inhabited by Slaves. Sad alternative! But can a virtuous Man hesitate in his choice?[20]

News of the battles electrified the thirteen colonies; thousands of New England militiamen poured into Boston, besieging the British in an effort not only to trap them within the city but also to force them, through a shortage of food and other supplies, to board their ships and leave, preferably forever.

In what became known as the Battle of Bunker Hill—which the English technically won—the angry Americans, who happened to be very good shots and who broke the rules of military etiquette by targeting officers, forced the British to pay a heavy price: about one thousand



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British soldiers were killed or wounded, while the Americans suffered around five hundred casualties.[21]

That May, the Second Continental Congress met. Its members realized that the colonies could not fight independently of one another; the thirteen militias needed to be transformed into a single, national army. But who would lead it? On June 19, 1775, George Washington answered the call. He was forty-three years old.

But we must wonder, what exactly was it about Washington that put him forward as the first choice of the Continental Congress? John Adams joked that he met every qualification: he was tall and handsome, and he moved gracefully—qualities evidently lacking in the other candidates. But there were serious reasons too. For one thing, Washington was rich, so he was considered immune to enemy bribes. That was an important consideration at the time. And he had a sparkling reputation; he seemed to make a grand impression wherever he went. As one Connecticut observer noted, "He seems discreet and virtuous, no harum-scarum, ranting, swearing fellow, but sober, steady, and calm."[22]

Addressing Congress at Philadelphia's State House, Washington—who knew it would take a miracle to beat the British—said with his typical humility: "I do not think myself equal to the command I [am] honored with, [but] as the Congress desire it I will enter upon the momentous duty, & give every power I possess in their service & for the Support of the glorious Cause."[23]

Washington revealed his apprehensions about the militiamen's lack of experience, who were not trained soldiers but farmers and tradespeople. Writing to his brother-in-law shortly after he was given his command, Washington said, "I can answer but for three things: a firm belief in the justice of our cause; close attention in the prosecution of it; and the strictest integrity. If these cannot supply the places of ability and experience, the cause will suffer."[24]

After making final preparations for his new duties and bidding Martha good-bye, Washington fatefully mounted his horse and rode from Philadelphia to Cambridge, Massachusetts.



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What followed, from the summer of 1775 through 1781, were six long years of sporadic fighting from Saratoga to Boston, from Trenton to Long Island; from Moore's Creek Bridge, North Carolina, to Bennington, Vermont; Savannah, Chesapeake Bay, and, finally, Yorktown.

The details of the Revolutionary War have become iconic; the bleak winter of 1777–1778 at Valley Forge, where many of Washington's troops died from sickness. The crossing of the Delaware River that was part of the daring Christmas night attack, surprising hungover Hessian mercenaries and winning a victory when America desperately needed one.

Washington stoically dealt with endless difficulties: constant troop shortages; the disturbing betrayal of a trusted colleague, General Benedict Arnold; attempts at assassination; and efforts to capture him. But somehow—many would say quite miraculously—Washington shaped up a ragtag collection of underfed, underpaid, and underarmed men into the enviable fighting force that (with a little help from the French) vanquished the most powerful military force that had ever existed.

One biographer notes that in the final big battle of the war, in Yorktown, Virginia, "Washington dismounted, stood in the line of fire, and watched."[25] No one disputes that he was tremendously brave. Many times throughout his military career, he fearlessly put himself in harm's way, despite the fact that when the tall general mounted his horse, he provided enemy soldiers with an especially visible and tempting target.

Many of us have seen the famous painting of General Washington piously praying on one knee beside his horse. Biographers tell us that there is no record of Washington ever having done anything like this. But there is no doubt that Washington was a deeply religious man and that he relied on his faith to help him when making decisions



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about the war. So what's depicted in that painting certainly could have taken place.

Washington's nephew, George Lewis, was an inadvertent witness to his uncle's faith. He related what he saw to Washington biographer Jared Sparks, who wrote:

> Mr. Lewis said he had accidentally witnessed [the general's] private devotions in his library both morning and evening; that on these occasions he had seen him in a kneeling position with a Bible open before him and that he believed such to have been his daily practice.[26]

As Ron Chernow relates in *Washington: A Life*, when, during the Revolutionary War, General Robert Porterfield "delivered an urgent message to Washington" he "found him on his knees, engaged in his morning's devotions."[27]

A lifelong churchgoer, Washington served for twenty-two years as a vestryman of Truro Parish and also served as a churchwarden whose duties included assisting the poor. Friends, such as John Marshall, knew Washington to be "a sincere believer in the Christian faith, and a truly devout man."[28] Washington also believed that God had a special purpose for his life, and he spoke of his belief that Providence had saved him from being killed in various early battles precisely because God had a purpose for him.

Washington's charity toward others is also well documented. Before leaving to command the American forces in the Revolutionary War, he made a point of telling his estate manager to continue looking after beggars who showed up at Mount Vernon: "Let the hospitality of the house with respect to the poor be kept up. Let no one go hungry away . . . provided it does not encourage them in idleness."[29]

Chernow notes,

> We know that the Washingtons tried to practice anonymous charity even when it would have been politically expedient to advertise



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> it loudly. Washington's secretary, Tobias Lear, recorded hundreds of individuals, churches, and other charities that, unbeknownst to the public, benefited from presidential largesse. Even leftovers from the executive mansion were transferred to a prison for needy inmates.[30]

Many of us are familiar with the oft-quoted lines in Washington's Farewell Address in 1796: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports." But we're likely less familiar with the rest of the passage, in which Washington warns that "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."[31] As "national morality" is at the heart of self-government, this is an especially important statement.

It says much about Washington's character that, following General Cornwallis's surrender, Washington told his men to treat their defeated foes with respect and to refrain from shouting taunts and insults at them. "It is sufficient for us that we witness their humiliation," he said. "Posterity will huzza for us."[32]

There was something about Washington's heroic, humble, fearless, and fair example that inspired fierce devotion in the men under his leadership. In fact, the respect, admiration, and love his men had for him increased during the years of war. Biographer David Adler writes, "His men followed him barefoot through the snow at Trenton. They wintered with him at Valley Forge without proper clothes, food, or firewood. Surely, they fought not only for independence, but also for Washington."[33]

But it was what George Washington did after the war that for all time marks him as someone who stands in the very first rank of the great men of history.

One might well ask: When the heroic struggle for independence



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was finally won, what next? How should the great man who carried this new nation to its nascent victory be rewarded? How should his epochal triumph be crowned? Some talked of doing so literally, of crowning Washington as King George I of America—or at the very least, of making him into a kinglike figure. Even those who disliked this idea feared that with all Washington had done, it was somehow inevitable: he had simply earned it. And those who bitterly opposed the idea expected Washington to take what he thought belonged to him. They pointed to Washington's desire to maintain a standing army as evidence that he planned a military coup after the war. As they saw it, newly independent America would end up with a military dictatorship, with Washington as dictator in chief.

Yet Washington was that rarest of men on the expansive stage of history because he would have none of it. His attitude toward the idea that he should grab the reins of civilian power is dramatically illustrated in an incident that reveals, as few others do, the singular greatness of George Washington.

It took place in March 1783. The war was over and won, but the mood among the officers of the Continental Army in Newburgh, New York—Washington's headquarters at that time—had turned decidedly ugly. This was mainly because Congress was quite broke and would not likely be able to honor its promise to compensate the soldiers for their years of arduous service to their country. It seemed Congress wasn't even able to provide pensions. This was a tremendously harsh blow to these men who had given so much for their country, and they now complained bitterly.

One officer named Lewis Nicola did more than complain. He took action, circulating an anonymous letter among the men, putting "in writing what many officers were whispering behind the scenes: that the Continental Congress's erratic conduct of the war had exposed the weakness of all republics and the certain disaster that would befall postwar America unless Washington declared himself king."[34] It was a threat: if they did not receive their promised pay and pensions, the



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officers determined to seize control of the fledgling government. Of course he proposed that Washington should be their leader.

In reply, a horrified Washington told Nicola to "banish these thoughts from your Mind" and "denounced the scheme as 'big with the greatest mischiefs that can befall my Country.' "

The following March saw the arrival of what became known as the Newburgh Conspiracy. As Joseph Ellis writes in *His Excellency, George Washington*, "Scholars who have studied the Newburgh Conspiracy agree that it probably originated in Philadelphia within a group of congressmen, led by Robert Morris, who decided to use the threat of a military coup as a political weapon to gain passage of a revenue bill . . . and perhaps to expand the powers of the Confederation Congress over the states."[35]

An anonymous letter, which later became known as the Newburgh Address, made the rounds in Newburgh. Written by Major John Armstrong Jr., it contained not one but two threats: if Congress did not guarantee back pay and commutation, "the army would disband," even if the war continued (the peace treaty would not be signed until September 3, 1783). And if a peace treaty were signed, well then, the army would simply and absolutely refuse to dissolve. In effect, Armstrong was proposing tyranny and treason both.[36]

When Washington became aware of what was happening, the great man was horrified. And discovering that the leaders of the conspiracy planned to meet on March 11 to plot strategy, Washington stepped in. He "countermanded the order for a meeting [and] . . . scheduled a session for all officers on March 16."[37]

Washington then set about writing the speech of his life. Everything he believed in was at stake. For one thing, his hard-won reputation was in peril, but much more important, the very existence and future of America were threatened. If not for what he then said and did, all he had said and done up to that point might have been for naught: the newly birthed nation might well have been strangled in its cradle.

On March 16, just before noon, the officers were gathered in a



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newly built hall in Newburgh called the Temple, to await the start of the strategy session, which was to be chaired by General Horatio Gates. At twelve o'clock sharp, General Washington entered the room and strode to the podium. Silence fell over the room as Washington removed his speech from a pocket and began reading in his slow, quiet style.

First, he would rebuke them. "Gentlemen," he began, "by an anonymous summons, an attempt has been made to convene you together; how inconsistent with the rules of propriety, how unmilitary, and how subversive of all order and discipline."[38]

Many of the men present were angry with Washington for not doing enough, in their view, to secure their salaries and pensions. Washington reminded these men that he was one of them:

> If my conduct heretofore has not evinced to you that I have been a faithful friend to the army, my declaration of it at this time would be equally unavailing and improper. But as I was among the first who embarked in the cause of our common country. As I have never left your side one moment, but when called from you on public duty. As I have been the constant companion and witness of your distresses, and not among the last to feel and acknowledge your merits. As I have ever considered my own military reputation as inseparably connected with that of the army. As my heart has ever expanded with joy, when I have heard its praises, and my indignation has arisen, when the mouth of detraction has been opened against it, it can scarcely be supposed, at this late stage of the war, that I am indifferent to its interests."[39]

Washington then got to the main point, referring to the—in his mind scandalous—letter that had been circulated:

> But how are [these interests] to be promoted? The way is plain, says the anonymous addresser. If war continues, remove into the unsettled



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> country . . . and leave an ungrateful country to defend itself. But who are they to defend? Our wives, our children, our farms, and other property which we leave behind us. Or, in this state of hostile separation, are we to take [our families] to perish in a wilderness, with hunger, cold, and nakedness?
>
> If peace takes place, never sheathe your swords, says he, until you have obtained full and ample justice; this dreadful alternative, of either deserting our country in the extremist hour of her distress or turning our arms against it (which is the apparent object, unless Congress can be compelled into instant compliance), has something so shocking in it that humanity revolts at the idea. My God! What can this writer have in view, by recommending such measures? Can he be a friend to the army? Can he be a friend to this country? Rather, is he not an insidious foe?[40]

Washington then repeated what the soldiers had grown tired of hearing: that they should be patient as the Congress slowly sorted out how and when and how much to pay them. He also pointed out how far their mutiny would reach:

> Why, then, should we distrust [the Congress]? And, in consequence of that distrust, adopt measures which may cast a shade over that glory which has been so justly acquired; and tarnish the reputation of an army which is celebrated through all Europe, for its fortitude and patriotism? And for what is this done? To bring the object we seek nearer? No! Most certainly, in my opinion, it will cast it at a greater distance.[41]

The old general then reminded his officers of what they had come to mean to each other:

> For myself . . . a grateful sense of the confidence you have ever placed in me, a recollection of the cheerful assistance and prompt



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> obedience I have experienced from you, under every vicissitude of fortune, and the sincere affection I feel for an army I have so long had the honor to command will oblige me to declare . . . that, in the attainment of complete justice for all your toils and dangers, and in the gratification of every wish, so far as may be done consistently with the great duty I owe my country and those powers we are bound to respect, you may freely command my services to the utmost of my abilities.[42]

Washington then gave what to many is the most moving part of his speech:

> Let me entreat you, gentlemen, on your part, not to take any measures which, viewed in the calm light of reason, will lessen the dignity and sully the glory you have hitherto maintained. . . . Let me conjure you, in the name of our common country, as you value your own sacred honor, as you respect the rights of humanity, and as you regard the military and national character of America, to express your utmost horror and detestation of the man who wishes, under any specious pretenses, to overthrow the liberties of our country, and who wickedly attempts to open the floodgates of civil discord and deluge our rising empire in blood.[43]

He encouraged his men to look to the future—to imagine what generations yet unborn would think of them and what they had achieved:

> By thus determining and thus acting, . . . you will give one more distinguished proof of unexampled patriotism and patient virtue, rising superior to the pressure of the most complicated sufferings. And you will, by the dignity of your conduct, afford occasion for posterity to say, when speaking of the glorious example you have exhibited to mankind, "Had this day been wanting, the world had



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> never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining."[44]

Ironically, as magnificent and eloquent as these words are, it was not the words of Washington's speech that turned the tide and saved the American Experiment. Historians tell us that as Washington finished his speech, the room was perfectly silent.

But they differ in their opinions about precisely what happened next. Did Washington plan and rehearse his next move? Or was it a spontaneous act?

Announcing that he had something else to read to the men, Washington now reached into his uniform pocket and slowly pulled out a letter penned by a Virginia congressman. Washington unfolded it and began to read aloud, appearing to stumble over the words. Reaching into his waistcoat pocket, the general produced a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles. His men had never seen them before, although the fifty-one-year-old general had been using them as reading glasses for some time.

Washington apologized for the delay, saying, as he unfolded the spectacles and put them on: "Gentlemen, you must pardon me. I have grown gray in your service and now find myself growing blind."[45]

Somehow, these disarming, humble, and spontaneous words, spoken by the exceptional man standing before them, took everyone by surprise, and in an instant, the mood of the angry, battle-hardened men was utterly changed. Indeed, many of them wept openly as Washington read the letter and then quietly walked out of the room. The powerful temptation to crown Washington king or dictator and to wrest from Congress all control of the fledgling nation had been dealt a death blow—and the Nicola and Armstrong letters were cast upon the ash heap of history.

Who can imagine that the liberty of millions might depend on the character of one man? What was it that gave him the strength to do the right thing when the temptation to do something less noble must have been overwhelming?



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In acting as he did that day—and on other occasions when the siren call of power might have overwhelmed a lesser man—Washington "demonstrated that he was as immune to the seductions of dictatorial power as he was to smallpox."[46]

Most of us can hardly fathom just how unusual Washington's decision was. In rejecting power, General Washington became the first famous military leader in the history of the world to win a war and then voluntarily step down instead of seizing and consolidating power. In fact, Washington's sworn enemy, George III of England, could scarcely believe his ears when he heard what Washington had decided to do. If the leader of the army that had defeated the most powerful military force on earth had indeed stepped down, as was being reported, George III declared that man would be "the greatest man in the world."[47]

Whatever else historians say about Washington, all celebrate his willingness to set aside the chance of being crowned King George I of America in favor of going back to being a Virginia farmer. Nor was this a decision he made hastily. Washington had made clear, in the very first year of the conflict, that he was determined not to win the war against King George III only to set himself up as a rival American tyrant once he had won. In a speech to New York leaders, Washington announced that, in becoming a soldier, he "did not lay aside the Citizen"—that is, he recognized civilian authority over the military.[48]

And yet Washington's decision still amazes.

As historian Joseph Ellis describes it,

> his trademark decision to surrender power as commander in chief and then president was not . . . a sign that he had conquered his ambitions, but rather that he fully realized that all ambitions were inherently insatiable and unconquerable. He knew himself well enough to resist the illusion that he transcended his human nature. Unlike Julius Caesar and Oliver Cromwell before him, and Napoleon, Lenin, and Mao after him, he understood that the



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greater glory resided in posterity's judgment. If you aspire to live forever in the memory of future generations, you must demonstrate the ultimate self-confidence to leave the final judgment to them. And he did.[49]

Of course the preceding events took place years before Washington became president. And yet most of us remember him principally as the first president of the United States. We forget that Washington wasn't simply the first president; he essentially invented the US presidency.

Before him, there was no such thing. He set the precedent for president, so to speak. Specifically, Washington had no model upon which to base such basic decisions as how the president should dress, whom he should meet, how he should make federal appointments, whether people should curtsy or bow to him, or even what he should be called (John Adams provoked much laughter by seriously suggesting that Washington be addressed as "His Elective Majesty" or "His Mightiness"). But let's be clear that what George Washington chose to do became the model for all who followed. Much of what he determined was adopted by virtually every other American president. Perhaps the most important of these decisions was when he refused to serve more than two four-year terms, another humble and selfless decision with incalculable ramifications for the nation's future. Washington also decided where every future president would live when he decided where the nation's capitol should be built.

In his first administration, Washington dealt with the massive debt the country had incurred fighting the war, including money borrowed from France, Spain, and Holland, which somehow had to be repaid. There were numerous conflicts with Indians who, armed by the British, continued to attack white settlements; the British, in defiance of the peace treaty, still kept troops on American soil. The first ten amendments to the Constitution were agreed on and passed into law.



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Three more states—Vermont, Kentucky, and Tennessee—were added to the Union.

Actually, Washington wanted to retire at the end of his first term, longing to live at Mount Vernon with his wife and step-grandchildren. He had good reason to think he would be able to do this. As he had hoped and worked for, "a national government existed and was working," and he had "made the presidency into a potent and magisterial office. Already, many of the seemingly intractable economic tribulations of the war years and immediate postwar period had been rectified, and a bright future beckoned."[50]

But the president was pressured by others, including Thomas Jefferson, to stay in office for another term. Jefferson argued, "Your continuance at the head of affairs [is] of the [greatest] importance" because "the confidence of the whole union is centered in you." In addition, a second Washington term would keep "the Monarchial federalists," led by Alexander Hamilton, from "every argument which can be used to alarm & lead the people . . . into violence or secession. North & South will hang together, if they have you to hang on."[51]

Realizing that his country still needed him—especially with the French Revolution in Europe looming—Washington reluctantly agreed to serve a second term.

During the next four years, Washington, over objections by many who remembered how the French had come to America's aid during the war, kept out of the French Revolution, believing it was not in the best interests of the United States to get involved. His prescience in this decision is especially impressive. Washington also negotiated an end to the British practice of attacking and raiding American ships and taking American seamen prisoner. The owner of Mount Vernon, which was home to three hundred slaves, also oversaw the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, which required all states, even those that had outlawed slavery, to return escaped slaves to their masters. To his sorrow, Washington saw the beginnings of political parties and partisan warfare.[52]



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Washington, now sixty-four and exhausted by "those cares [of] which public responsibility is never exempt"[53] and by the increasing personal attacks, adamantly refused to consider a third term. After seeing John Adams inaugurated, Washington joyfully began riding the many miles of his farms again. He entertained the endless parade of guests who came to visit him and spend time with his family. Still, one thing nagged at him: What to do with his slaves?

Washington had wrestled with the slavery issue for much of his adult life, and in July 1799, he finally made an important decision. He rewrote his will, not only freeing his slaves but also ensuring that the young ones would be taught to read, write, and learn a trade, and that the old and infirm ones would be taken care of for the rest of their lives.

Five months later, on December 12, 1799, the sixty-seven-year-old general went out riding, as was his custom, to inspect his farms. The fact that it was storming meant little to him, and when he came in five hours later, he went to dinner in wet clothes. This was because he didn't want to keep his guest waiting. The next day he had the symptoms of a cold but insisted on going out nonetheless. That night he became seriously ill, and the next morning, doctors were summoned.

The medical care that Washington received horrifies us today. He was bled four times—five pints in all. To put this in perspective, that was more than 40 percent of the total amount of blood in his body. The doctors also "blistered" his neck with hot poultices and gave him laxatives. All of these treatments certainly made him weaker. Historians believe he was suffering from "a virulent bacterial infection of the epiglottis,"[54] but the antibiotics that could easily have treated it would not be discovered for more than a century.

Washington died on December 14, 1799, with his beloved Martha at his bedside. When the citizens of Alexandria learned of his passing, bells tolled unceasingly for four days and nights. In France, flags were lowered to half-mast. Out of respect, more than sixty British ships



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lowered their flags to half-mast as well, in honor of the man who had "out-generaled" them, as one British soldier put it during the war.[55]

More than two hundred years after Washington's death, his willingness to relinquish power—twice—is the most remarkable thing that we remember about him. These refusals to seize power for himself were the greatest acts of one of history's greatest men.

Despite his human flaws, Washington was inescapably great. He was arguably the only man who could have overseen both the scuttling of the British and the rise of the American republic.

Historian John Ferling concludes that "merely by being there . . . Washington enabled the new nation to hang together and survive its terribly difficult infancy." He "ushered America toward modernity, fashioning the economic system that sustained growth and gradually made the United States a truly independent and powerful nation capable of maintaining its security."[56]

Historian Joseph Ellis writes that Washington led "the continental army to victory against the odds . . . thereby winning American independence." He secured "the Revolution by overseeing the establishment of a new nation-state during its most fragile and formative phase of development" and embodied "that elusive and still latent thing called 'the American people,' thereby providing the illusion of coherence to what was in fact a messy collage of regional and state allegiances."[57]

Ellis adds, "There was a consensus at the time, since confirmed for all time, that no one else could have performed these elemental tasks as well, and perhaps that no one could have performed them at all."[58]

Washington's successor, John Adams, would have agreed. Days after the general's demise, Adams said, "His example is now complete, and it will teach wisdom and virtue to magistrates, citizens and men, not only in the present age, but in future generations, as long as our history shall be read."[59]

It's a pity that most schoolchildren today think of Washington the



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way he's pictured on the dollar bill: as that slightly grumpy-looking old man. If I had my way, we'd replace those false images with portraits of the young, vibrant Washington, who can more easily be imagined dreaming big dreams, fighting significant battles, designing America's future—and then riding home to Mount Vernon, happy to have won his battles against power itself—the great temptation that can tempt mortal man. How grateful and how mightily blessed we are that he did.



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