



WASHINGTON'S VIRTUES

Book Review by Peter McNamara

George Washington: America's First Progressive, by W. B. Allen.
Peter Lang, 254 pages, \$71.95

The Political Philosophy of George Washington, by Jeffrey H. Morrison.
The Johns Hopkins University Press, 256 pages, \$40

The Ascent of George Washington: The Hidden Genius of an American Icon,
by John Ferling. Bloomsbury Press, 464 pages, \$20

IN THE ROUSING CONCLUSION OF HIS INAUGURAL Address, Barack Obama repeated words that George Washington had ordered read to his troops before the Battle of Trenton. After a series of defeats, it was a do-or-die moment for Washington and for the American Revolution. The plan was risky: a river crossing in the dead of winter followed by a surprise attack on Hessian mercenaries fighting for the British. "Victory or Death" was the day's password. The words read to the troops were from the just-published first essay of Thomas Paine's "The Crisis":

Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet and to repulse it.

President Obama's reference was an intriguing one. There was, to begin, the implicit comparison of himself with Washington. What's more, there was something a little out of character about the famously cool, diplomatically-minded new president invoking the memory of a mission that was not only dangerous and difficult but contemplated, too, a ferocious surprise attack the morning after Christmas. Most

striking of all was the pairing of "virtue" with the ubiquitous presidential campaign theme of "hope." This was new and deliberate. Obama repeated the pairing again in his speech, the second time in his own voice. But what did the president mean by virtue? He mentioned prominently "honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism." Did Washington have similar qualities in mind? Surely; but how exactly did Washington understand these virtues? Would he have added others?

THREE NEW BOOKS ON WASHINGTON GO some but not all the way towards providing answers. William B. Allen's *George Washington: America's First Progressive* is as much about how to think and write about Washington as it is about the great man himself. A Michigan State political science professor and editor of a very fine collection of Washington's writings, Allen makes a number of large claims about both Washington (that he was *the* founder) and the American Founding (that it established the best regime).

For Allen, John Marshall remains the most important chronicler of Washington's role in the founding. Marshall was attentive to character (especially in the memorable conclu-

sion to his monumental—Jefferson called it a "mausoleum"—*Life of Washington*), but he was equally attentive to the role of Washington's thoughts and deeds. After Marshall, historians and biographers focused increasingly and with increasing sanctimony on Washington's character, transforming him from real-life founder into an important or pious or simply empty symbol of the American Founding.

Though chiefly concerned with political thought, Allen's book is a provocative, insightful outline of what a full account of Washington might entail. Allen shows the general thinking about an American union (or "nation," the term he uses repeatedly in his "Farewell Address") even before the French and Indian War, hence his claim (for example, in the "Farewell Address") that he had devoted 45 years to the service of his country. Washington recognized very early on the need to bind the nation together by opening up lines of communication for the spread of commerce and enlightenment, and to create an effective national government. Before the Revolution was over, he decided to go beyond the Articles of Confederation and work diligently to prepare the ground for a new constitution. What was most important in his plan was a "national morality" grounded ultimately in the individual virtues that make self-govern-



ment possible: courage, moderation, wisdom, and above all, justice. In this critical respect, it was character that really mattered most. Allen draws attention to Washington's conviction, which he thought was vindicated by experience, that happiness and virtue are inseparable. How is private morality promoted in a liberal society? Washington thought that the spread of commerce, education, religion, effective government, and, most important of all, good examples were important. He was acutely aware of the precedents he would set for the new nation, and was in that respect *America's First Progressive*, as Allen puts it, because he worked to improve national morality. Washington retired to Mount Vernon after his second term, writes Allen, because he thought the task of his life—the founding of a nation that could preserve civil and religious liberty—was complete.

THE AUTHOR NOTES, TOO, A GROWING seriousness in recent Washington scholarship. Jeffrey H. Morrison's *The Political Philosophy of George Washington*, for example, seeks to remedy the dearth of attention to Washington as a "political thinker and actor." Morrison, a government professor at Regent University, sees his subject as complex, mysterious, enigmatic, even at times approaching "Machiavelli's cunning prince." He makes no claim that Washington was an original thinker but does argue that he held to well-developed, consistent political views throughout his public life.

Morrison provides an admirably succinct, balanced treatment of what he sees as the three key influences on Washington's thought: classical republicanism, British liberalism, and Protestant Christianity. Washington's acute sense of duty, his effort to master his passions, his ideal of the gentleman farmer, and his concern for his public reputation all reflect the influence of classical republican ideals. Morrison rightly sees in his subject more of the Roman Stoic than the leisurely Aristotelian gentleman (though we should not forget Washington's love of the theater, entertaining, dancing, and, what the author does mention, his possession of a very fine library). Washington's liberalism—his belief in natural rights and government by consent—made him a revolutionary; provided his basic ideas about government, especially the need for checks and balances and for a strong central authority; and in time, led him to realize the injustice of slavery and free his own slaves upon his death. As for his Christianity, Washington attended church regularly, spoke frequently about religion and especially Providence in his public speeches, and, while steadfastly supporting religious toleration, did not believe in Jefferson's (and Madison's) "wall of separation" between church and state.

Still, there are some important unanswered questions in this neat account: how exactly did Washington combine these various influences into his distinctive synthesis? What does Morrison mean when he often speaks of Washington as embodying or personifying 18th-century thought? Does he mean Virginian thought, American thought, British thought, or Enlightenment thought? More generally, Morrison writes of Washington's "intellectual odyssey" in which his views on critical issues like slavery undergo fundamental changes. What guided such changes? Morrison comes close to suggesting that Washington adopted the opinions that found the widest public support. If so, his political ideas become a product of history, and the 18th-century equivalent of polling. But did Washington always follow popular opinion? According to William Allen, Washington's dedication to self-government and to the inseparability of morality and happiness are the two criteria that would have shaped his thought when he chose among competing influences.

THE SUBTITLE OF JOHN FERLING'S *The Ascent of George Washington is The Hidden Political Genius of an American Icon*. A history professor emeritus at the University of West Georgia, Ferling aims to fill an important gap in the literature by chronicling Washington's skill as a political operator. The book is not so much a debunking of Washington as it is an exposé. For Ferling, Washington the icon, symbol, and myth was not his hagiographers' creation (e.g., John Marshall) but Washington's own. He was a visionary land developer, a less than competent general who rose in reputation by assiduously deflecting blame and reaping laurels not truly his, and an ambitious politician who used the public perception of his "disinterestedness" as a cloak for his own partisan schemes. Ferling's Washington is truly a Machiavellian prince, and his account has much in common with Thomas Paine's public attack on Washington in 1796, in which he asked whether Washington was an "apostate or an impostor." Ferling also follows Charles Beard's well-known—and debunked—interpretation of the American Founding as a class conflict between wealthy, conservative elites and revolutionary democrats.

Despite these failings, there is something to be learned from this book. For example, in his characteristically vivid, vigorous prose, Ferling shows that not only did Washington aspire to be an 18th-century gentleman, he was also a bull of a man who could endure frontier hardships, shake off diseases, and fight the French and Indian War and the American Revolution—which were unwieldy, ferocious, bloody, devastating conflicts. As importantly, the author shows that Washington was far from being

above politics. Although neither a great writer nor a great speechmaker, he was a master in every other aspect: calculating, planning, using his influence, employing people effectively, organizing for one political action after another, and always attentive to his reputation or, as we would say today, his image.

There are, however, at least two large difficulties with Ferling's account. It is true that Washington made mistakes and that he had flaws—even Marshall in his own quiet way points to his hero's limitations. But sometimes Ferling just goes overboard, as for example, when he blames Washington for the unavailability of black soldiers in Charleston at the outbreak of the Civil War because the general had failed to support the enlistment of Southern blacks during the Revolution. In describing the decisive battle at Yorktown as conceived and directed by the French in opposition to Washington's longstanding desire to attack New York, Ferling understates the complexities Washington faced. Questions about the French military's reliability, France's geopolitical ambitions, and the possibility that a victory at Yorktown (let alone a defeat) might not end the war all surely weighed on his mind. And when the opportunity to trap Cornwallis clearly presented itself, Washington moved decisively. But there is a still greater difficulty. According to Ferling, Washington was a political "illusionist." Granting this for the sake of argument, the author never asks why Washington chose to emphasize good character, economic development, union and self-government, political and military victory, and executive statesmanship. A concern for economic self-interest and popularity explains little. Again we are led back to the guidance of Washington's more or less fixed political thought.

William Allen observes that the United States is increasingly, and with the encouragement of its intellectual elites, dividing along lines of race, ethnicity, and class. Building roads (even "information super-highways") and spreading commerce will have little impact on this kind of disunion. But reviving the moral ideal of self-government—that is, virtue—just might. Furthermore, in the messy, protracted struggle against Islamic terrorism now underway, and in likely conflicts just over the horizon, Washington's life provides many insights into what can go wrong and right in war and how politics enters into such conflicts. As we await a full account of Washington's life, we can only hope that an understanding of his virtues can become a priority for the nation he helped found.

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