



How George Washington Shaped History

What we take for granted then astonished the whole world

Tim Stevenson

AMERICANS HAVE BECOME historically challenged as never before. Rampant ignorance, miseducation, and twisted political agendas are clouding our national atmosphere.

The juvenile notion that the discovery of flaws in any individual of the past somehow wipes out the good they accomplished is the rage. Middle schoolers can reason better than that.

Every person is a child of his time. Today's Woke moralists apparently believe that if they had been born in 1770 or 1815, they would have pursued the "enlightened" views they hold today. Such blindness and self-conceit amazes.

Consider George Washington

On this Independence Day we will benefit, individually and nationally, from becoming reacquainted with the greatness of George Washington, whose decisions astonished the world of his time.

Whoever served as our first President would have enormous influence; if nothing else, for all the precedents he set. Washington established the practice of forming a Cabinet, issuing a State of the Union message, and being addressed in the plain language of "Mr. President." Given that there were others who suggested "Your Majesty" and the like, that was a stroke of American brilliance.

But in my opinion, George Washington's greatness is best seen in what he did *not* do.

The establishment of civil authority

Much of the history of the world is a monotonous, dreary parade of the same type of character: kings, emperors, dictators, pharaohs, Caesars, Tsars, generals, and "leaders." They gain power and make a show



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of serving the people, but they mainly serve themselves. Some are worse than others, but if there's any characteristic they have in common, it's this: *Having gained power, they never willingly surrender it.*

Imagine now, without applying 237 years of hindsight, the state of affairs in 1783. Having served as the supreme military commander of the united colonies for the duration of the Revolutionary War, having defeated the British in the decisive battle of Yorktown, having received a declaration of peace ending the war, and still in command of the army — what would Washington do now?

He could have refused to step down and disband the army. He could have become “Emperor George I” of the USA. That's exactly what Napoleon would do just a few years later in France.

In the euphoria of victory, a French-born colonel named Lewis Nicola said what was on many minds. He suggested that Washington was so popular and powerful that they should crown him king.

Washington was horrified, and scolded Nicola with these words:

“Let me conjure you, then, if you have any regard for your country, concern for yourself or for posterity, or respect for me, to banish these thoughts from your mind and never communicate, as from yourself or anyone else, a sentiment of like nature.”

By this response and by disbanding his army and returning to Mount Vernon, Washington made it possible for our Constitution to be created a few years later, a government formed by “We the People.”

“The Cincinnatus of the West”

You know that Washington was called upon to serve as our first President under that new Constitution. But remember: No one knew

what would happen next. How many terms might he serve? More to the point, would he claim the Presidency for life? That is exactly what most Europeans expected.

As Washington's second term was coming to an end, King George III of England said, **“If George Washington goes back to his farm, he will be the greatest character of his age.”** Napoleon was also baffled and stunned by Washington's refusal of a third term, feeling burned by the comparison. From his exile he later complained that his enemies **“wanted me to be another Washington.”**

The amazed admiration of the world was summed up in the description made by the poet Lord Byron. He called Washington “the Cincinnatus of the West.”

The Roman model

Americans of the 18th century were thoroughly educated in the classics. When the revolutionary writers and framers of our government searched for inspiration and examples, they frequently returned to the histories of ancient Greece and Rome.

Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus was a Roman aristocrat in the 5th century B.C. He served capably in government but was a farmer by trade. In 458 B.C. a Roman army was surrounded by enemies and in danger of complete annihilation. Members of the Senate rushed to the farm of Cincinnatus, where they found him at the plow, and announced that Rome needed him.

During times of extreme emergency in the days of the Roman Republic, they would invest a leader with the title of *Magister Populi* (literally, “Master of the People”), which carried with it absolute power and authority for a given period — in essence, Dictator. Cincinnatus was named dictator on the spot. He dropped his plow and called to his wife to bring his toga (the official garment). Within days, he had

assembled an army, raced them to the conflict, and defeated the hostile tribes. On the very next day, Cincinnatus resigned his dictatorship and returned to plowing.

As the ancient Roman histories record, Cincinnatus was called out of retirement to become dictator a second time in 439 B.C. Once again, he led them to quick success and again immediately resigned absolute power.

The legend of Cincinnatus inspired the Roman people for centuries as the ideal Roman character, the man who lived for the good of his people, who used power to serve, then resigned that power, refusing to misuse it for even a day for his own selfish purposes.

I'm sure you can see similarities with the ideals and values of our founding generation. After the Revolutionary War, the Society of the Cincinnati was formed, a brotherhood of American citizen-servants who sought to follow the example of the ideal Roman. Alexander Hamilton chaired the first meeting, with the membership being limited to officers who had served during the war. Cincinnati, Ohio is named for that society.

The ideal of the servant leader

George Washington, the "Cincinnatus of the West," also resigned his power, firmly establishing that the United States would continue to be a genuine Republic. We take it for granted today that this is what happened, but it was not assumed by everyone at the time that he would step down voluntarily.

Columnist George Will commented,

The final component of Washington's indispensability was the imperishable example he gave by proclaiming himself dispensable.

Would not our country be better off with more men and women with the same spirit of

public *service* today? Depressingly, far more common are preening politicians literally drunk with power and self-admiration. Can you imagine what some of these would do with the power and opportunity Washington had?

When Jim Collins examined the best companies for his book *Good to Great*, he discovered that they tended to be led by what he called Level 5 leaders: "an individual who blends extreme personal humility with intense personal will." Describing them, he says,

Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It's not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious — but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves.

Though it sounds funny say it this way, George Washington could be described as a Level 5 leader for his country. Historical accounts affirm that he had a strong ego and a firm sense of personal dignity, but his commitment was to the larger vision of bringing a nation into being. He exemplified servant leadership.

Did the man have flaws? Of course, just like the rest of us. Was he a child of his time, sharing some of the bad assumptions and biases of his era? Of course, just like the rest of us. Anyone today who thinks he or she is exempt from such influences is a fool.

I contend that greatness is greatness, and that mature thinkers can sift through the good and bad in historical individuals and retain what is valuable.

And I contend on this Independence Day that we continue to benefit from the good done by George Washington more than two centuries ago. Thank God for George Washington and God bless America. **L**