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Web Extra

The Character of a Man and a Nation

Washington's lasting impact

by Col Thomas J. Gordon (Ret.)

***>Col Gordon assumed the duties as the Commandant of Cadets at The Citadel upon his retirement from the United States Marine Corps after 30 years of active service. He returned to his Alma mater to educate and develop the next generation of principled leaders. Col Gordon is the author of a best-selling book,* Marine Maxims, Turning Principles into Practice*, and is a frequent contributor to the* Marine Corps Gazette.**

The etymology of the word character traces its root to the ancient Greek word *kharaktēr*, a noun meaning a "mark or distinctive quality" used to imprint, notably coins. The Greeks would imprint likenesses on their currency to give it credibility. We chose to imprint the image of George Washington on the dollar bill because his character defined the character of this Nation, his courage secured our liberty, and his selflessness and civility serve as the basis of our professional military ethic. As a general, Washington lost more battles than he won, but he was a principled leader who surrounded himself with gifted subordinates. Practicing what we today call mission command, Washington's ultimate success was the product of his resilience, humility, decisiveness, and determination. As journalist Jon Avalon wrote, "character was the architect of his achievement."[1]

With one notable exception, all our Founding Fathers had classical educations. George Washington, the third son of a dead father, was self-taught. Washington studied the Greeks and the Romans and did his best to exemplify their classic virtues. Washington was inspired by Cato but, in the end, embodied Cincinnatus. Like Cato, he learned early the pain of loss and humiliation. Unlike Cincinnatus's, Washington's military record was defined by defeat more than by his victories. However, like Cincinnatus, it was his character in the end that defined his legacy.

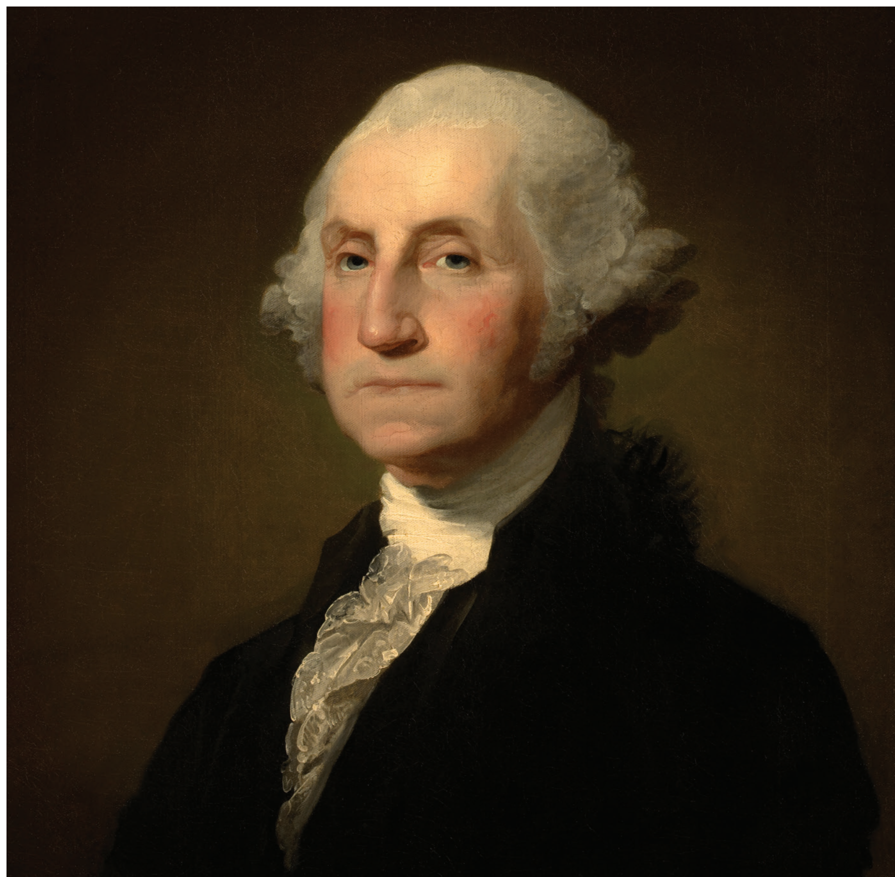
The fable of young Washington and the cherry tree may be a great parable to inspire integrity in grade schoolers, but this image bears little resemblance to the young, ambitious, and prideful Washington trying to make his mark in Virginia as a provincial officer. Washington's path to becoming a man of character and virtue was a rocky one; however, his journey is a case study for aspiring military professionals and a roadmap to heal a divided nation.

Through failure early in his military career, Washington learned the difference between character and reputation. Later, as a general leading the Continental Army, he courageously averted decisive defeat on numerous occasions. More than just an exemplar of battlefield bravery, his moral courage and the conviction of character he demonstrated at Newburgh in 1783 laid the foundation for our professional military ethic. Finally, the selflessness Washington exhibited at Fraunces Tavern, resigning his commission after winning the independence of this land, was extraordinary. He refused to be the next Napoléon; instead, he stepped down like Cincinnatus. In the end, Washington achieved the consistency of character that would define the new republic.

Forged in the Crucible of Failure

At the age of twenty-two, young Washington was given the rank of major with no prior military training or experience. In the Spring of 1754, at the behest of the Governor of Virginia, Washington led two companies of Virginians into the Ohio River Valley to join England's Indian allies and force the French to abandon Fort Duquesne, a strategic outpost located at the forks of the Ohio River (today's Pittsburgh). Washington, with the help of a Seneca tribe led by Chief Tanacharison, ordered the first shots of the French and Indian War, ambushing thirty French soldiers bivouacked in Western Pennsylvania. When the outnumbered Frenchmen surrendered, Tanacharison split the head of the French commander with his tomahawk. The Seneca warriors followed their chief's lead and put the French wounded to the blade. Young Washington was powerless to stop the slaughter. Fearing the stain on his reputation, he further damaged his character by not reporting it.

Fearing a counterattack by the French, young Washington hastily constructed the aptly named Fort Necessity in the river bottom. Unlike the tactical advantage provided to the French by Fort Duquesne, Washington's lack of military training was exposed by Fort Necessity's location and design. On 3 July 1754, 700 French soldiers besieged the hastily erected fort. The next day, Washington was forced to surrender and accept responsibility for his role in



Gilbert Stuart's **Portrait of George Washington** *is permanently housed and on public view at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts.*

the execution of the French wounded weeks prior. Though he would later deny any culpability, claiming instead that he did not understand what he was signing because it was in French, Washington was humiliated. His quest for glory resulted in a damaged reputation, and his excessive self-defense of the incident only further eroded confidence in his character. Ever sensitive to slights, Washington resigned his commission when he learned that the British would not accept his rank as the equivalent of a regular army commission.

In 1755, Washington was given the opportunity to restore his reputation. Gen Edward Braddock received orders to dislodge the French from Fort Duquesne. To lead the expedition, he needed an officer familiar with the terrain. Washington was offered the opportunity to serve as Braddock's aide and was promoted to lieutenant colonel. Though Braddock hired Washington for his experience, he and his regular officers were not interested in his tactical advice. In June 1755, when Braddock's 1400 Redcoats were within striking distance of their objective, the French and Indian allies launched a spoiling attack that killed or wounded two-thirds of the British force. When Braddock himself fell, Washington, as the lone surviving officer, took command and heroically led a fighting withdrawal. Despite having two horses shot out from underneath him, Washington's presence of mind and gallantry were extraordinary. He was dubbed the "Hero of the Monongahela," promoted to full colonel, and given command of the Virginia Provincial Forces.

In the Fall of 1758, Washington was given command of one of the three brigades the British deployed in their final attempt to take Fort Duquesne. The British plan under Gen John Forbes required a new road to be cut through the wilderness to move heavy artillery. Once again, as a provincial officer, Washington's experience and knowledge of the terrain were ignored. By the time the British arrived, the French had destroyed the fort and withdrawn their forces and supplies.

Washington resigned his commission in 1759. When he put on a uniform again, he would not be the same person who was so easily wounded by trivial insults. He had grown in character, having learned it is impossible to govern others without first being in control of oneself. Indifferent to criticism and resolute in the cause, Washington was uniquely qualified to command the Continental Army.

Courage as a cardinal virtue.

Combat is the ultimate arbiter of character. As the commanding general, the character Washington imprinted upon the Continental Army would withstand eight years of brutal combat. Washington was inspired by Cato and the Stoics. The Stoics held courage as a cardinal virtue. By cardinal, the reference was to the Latin definition meaning hinge, on which all rest. With the fate of the cause resting on his shoulders, Washington's personal courage would prove indispensable.

In July 1776, having withdrawn from Boston, the British expeditionary force, 400 ships and 32,000 strong, lay off the coast of New York. Before making landfall on the shores of Long Island, a British dispatch offered Washington and his men a full pardon and guaranteed protection to any American who would lay down their arms and swear allegiance to the crown. Washington refused, "Those who have committed no fault want no pardon."[2] On 26 August, the British attacked. Believing the advance on Long Island was a feint, Washington committed a grave mistake and divided his forces. With overwhelming mass, the British simultaneously attacked the Continental Army's right and left flanks and sent the Hessians forward to press the center line. Losses were great on both sides as the forces locked in close combat. Washington's lines broke, and the Continentals retreated behind the fortifications at Brooklyn Heights. For reasons still debated, the British forces under General Howe did not press the attack.

Surrounded on Brooklyn Heights with the East River to his back, Washington's options were grim. As providence would have it, a fierce storm rolled in that night, allowing Washington to withdraw his forces across the river onto Manhattan. Under the cover of darkness, what remained of the Continental Army was ferried in small boats under torrential rain. Washington personally supervised the entire operation and was the last man to leave Brooklyn.[3]

Gen Howe, embarrassed by Washington's escape, was determined to crush the rebellion. On 15 September, 4000 British and Hessians shoved off from Long Island. Under British bombardment, the colonial lines withered. When Washington arrived at Kip's Bay, he found his forces suffering a rout. Sitting alone on top of his mount, he struggled to rally the retreating army. As his troops rushed past, the general held his position. Washington's aides grabbed his horse's reins in an attempt to pull their commander to safety. At one point, the British and Hessian troops stopped firing and cheered Washington's bravery; never had they seen such gallantry.[4] Washington's courage may have carried the day at Harlem Heights, but the victory would be short-lived. Defeats at White Plains and Fort Washington followed in close succession. For the second time that summer, Washington had nearly lost the army because he was trying to fight a British-style battle. If his Army was to survive, he would have to adopt a new kind of fighting. Far from the glory he sought as a young provincial officer, Washington subordinated his ego and embraced unconventional tactics. For the cause to succeed, the Army must remain in the field.

Noble Selfishness

In a piece I wrote for *Proceedings*, I describe how Washington, as the commanding general of the Continental Army outside of Newburgh, New York, in 1783, laid the foundation for our military's professional ethos.[5] The Continental Army at the time had real grievances with the Continental Congress. After enduring eight years of war and deprivation, they had gone eight months without pay. Alexander Hamilton, Washington's aide-de-camp, wanted the general to use the Army to intimidate Congress. On the "Ides of March," Washington gathered his officers and "in as much anger as he allowed himself to show in public," issued a stern rebuke of an anonymous letter circulating amongst the ranks.[6] When Washington learned of Hamilton's personal involvement, he admonished him as well, reminding all that "the army is a dangerous instrument to play with."[7]

Conclusion

In his book *Character is Destiny*, Senator John McCain declared that only two men were indispensable to the salvation of this Nation—Washington and Lincoln. In retelling Washington's response to the Newburgh Conspiracy, he wrote that his "civility was never more complete or appropriate to the circumstances."[8] Nine months later, with the British defeated and the Continental Army bivouacked in Central Park, Washington laid down his sword. In the time of Napoléon, Washington's public virtue was exceptional. We would have a very different America without the immensity of Washington's integrity. Washington proved that the character of a fledgling republic could be governed by example and a guiding hand. As a general and later President, he never changed his character in response to criticism, remaining selfless in service.

ADM James Stockdale professed that character is permanent and issues are transient. In his book *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot,* he warned that "those who study the rise and fall of civilizations learned that no shortcoming has been surely fatal to a republic as the dearth of public virtue."[9] Dysfunctional government opens the door for demagogues. The solution today is to look back, much in the way of Washington. We should desire what we admire in our leaders. Washington taught us that the surest way to develop character is to trace and attempt to emulate the example of your heroes. Washington learned to align his aspirations with virtuous role models—a practice we must cultivate today to fortify our own character and retain the public's trust.

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Notes

1. Jon Meacham, *Washington's Farewell: The Founding Father's Warning to Future Generations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

2. David McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 145.

3. Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010).

4. Donald T. Phillips, *The Founding Fathers on Leadership: Classic Teamwork in Changing Times* (New York: Warner Books, 1997), 100.

5. Thomas J. Gordon, "Washington and Aristotle Can Restore the Military's Professional Ethos," *Proceedings* 148, no. 2 (February 2022), https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/february/washington-and-aristotle-can-restore-militarys-professional.

6. Thomas E. Ricks, *First Principles: What America's Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 171.

7. Ibid., 173.

8. John McCain and Mark Salter, *Character Is Destiny: Inspiring Stories Every Young Person Should Know and Every Adult Should Remember* (New York: Random House, 2005), 103.

9. James B. Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1995).