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George Washington's Character

Posted by John Hinderaker
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When George Washington died in 1799, Congress passed a resolution naming him "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." In his new book, "Founding Father," Richard Brookhiser reflects on why Washington warranted this great tribute. "Founding Father" is a "moral biography," a meditation on the importance of character, and on the difference the character of one great man made to our nation.

Washington's accomplishments in public service were extraordinary. Serving without pay, he guided a ragtag Continental Army to victory — through the crucible of Valley Forge — against the mightiest military power of his age. Then, showing leadership of a very different sort, he skillfully piloted the Constitution into being at the Philadelphia Convention of 1787.

Washington served twice as president, both times elected unanimously by the Electoral College. In the process, he defined the office, and demonstrated to a doubting world that the Constitution could work.

Far from coveting power, he spoke of becoming president as "the event which I have long dreaded." He learned of his election, he said, with "a heart filled with distress," foreseeing "the ten thousand embarrassments, perplexities, and troubles to which I must again be exposed."

Again and again, Washington left his beloved Mount Vernon to promote the well-being of his fellow citizens, and the idea of self-government. For him, says Brookhiser, "There was always another step and another service, as long as he lived."

A life of moral striving

What personal traits made Washington great? Nature gave him the raw material to be a leader, but he could just as easily have become a Napoleon, a would-be dictator. His greatness sprang from his life-long effort to mold himself to conform with his character ideal.

Washington's life was marked by moral striving. He had a fiery temper, which he controlled through constant self-discipline. He had a love of honor and regard, which he strove to hold in check by courteous attention to all, both high and low. As a strong-willed man, Washington's paramount aim was selfmastery. His guiding ideals were fortitude, justice, moderation, and a belief in the dignity of every man. (Alone of all the great Virginia founders, he freed his slaves at his death.) As Brookhiser says, morals and manners were "the way he governed himself."

Today, we think of Washington as a cold and distant icon, if we think of him at all. According to Brookhiser, "We have forgotten the effort [his] self-control required. We treat what was a result as a natural condition, as if Washington had been carved from the same stone as his monument."

Why should we so undervalue this great man, without whom our nation might have foundered at its birth? Perhaps it is because we — the beneficiaries of his virtue and self-sacrifice — have largely forgotten the importance of character.

I had a unique opportunity to observe this, when I joined a parent discussion group during my children's early years. Each year, the discussion leader would ask, "What do you want most in life for your son or daughter?" The women in the group were good people and devoted mothers. But each year, they would greet this question with indecision. They would pause and look around, slightly embarrassed. Then, without exception, they would say the same thing: "I just want her to be happy." Occasionally, a particularly venturesome mother would add: "I want her to fulfill her potential."

I could see from their faces that these mothers had nobler aspirations for their children. But they weren't sure how to express them. For in our society, the ideal of "happiness" — of personal well-being and security — is driving out the ideal, and vocabulary, of character-building.

The notion of "governing ourselves," of a life devoted to principle, seems foreign. As moral relativists, we resist the idea that our souls are composed of higher and lower impulses, and that the higher should be cultivated, and the lower suppressed or eradicated.

In late-twentieth century America, the self — discovering it, ministering to it, expressing it — is our fondest care. We devote our energies, not to improving, but to "being" or "finding ourselves." We strive to achieve "authenticity" through self-release and self-expression. For Washington, the Holy Grail was self-command. For us, it is self-esteem.

His greater goal

We believe that self-fulfillment is the key to happiness. But Washington and his contemporaries knew differently. They knew that human beings who make happiness their goal are very unlikely to find it. For happiness is a by-product of striving to do what is right. After all his travails, we can be sure that Washington died happy. But this was precisely because he had always aimed at something far greater.

What would Washington have accomplished if happiness, rather than integrity and service, had been his life-goal? Instead of suffering with his men through the snows of Valley Forge, he might have followed the example of Benedict Arnold, another Revolutionary War general. Though brave and talented, Arnold valued his own well-being and prosperity above all else. Out of self-interest, he plotted to betray West Point to the British, and died a traitor to his nation.

What can we learn from Washington and his contemporaries about character-building? They teach us, most importantly, that "the soul can be schooled." Exercising reason and will, we can mold ourselves into beings far nobler than nature made us.

Americans of Washington's generation believed that character training begins in childhood. Our children are likely to spend school hours listing "10 things I like about myself." The youthful Washington, by contrast, laboriously copied 110 "Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior" into his exercise book. Washington's contemporary, Benjamin Franklin, drew up a list of 13 virtues he wished to acquire, and a program for practicing them. "I was surprised," Franklin wrote later, "to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined; but I had the satisfaction of seeing them diminish."

We relish emotional display, giving sky-high ratings to talk shows whose guests "tell all." But Washington (a modern therapist's nightmare) spurned such self-release. Told by an admirer that she could read his emotions in his face, the stalwart Washington replied, "You are wrong. My countenance never yet betrayed my feelings."

As we strive to do what is right, rather than what is pleasant or convenient, we may find inspiration in the words of Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor whom Washington's contemporaries greatly admired.

"Fortitude is necessary," he wrote, "and patience, and courtesy and modesty and decorum and a will, in what may for the moment seem the worst of worlds, to do one's best."