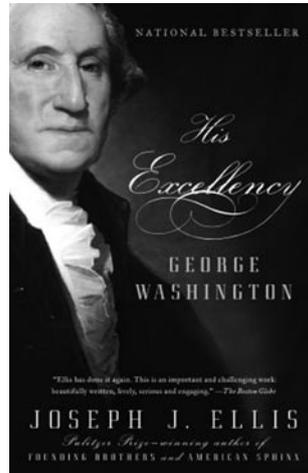


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# The Foundingest Father of them all

Andrew Kemp reviews  
*His Excellency George Washington*  
by Joseph J. Ellis  
(Knopf, 2004, 352 pages)



‘It seemed to me that Benjamin Franklin was wiser than Washington; Alexander Hamilton was more brilliant; John Adams better read; Thomas Jefferson was more intellectually sophisticated; James Madison was more politically astute. Yet each and all of these prominent figures acknowledged that Washington was their unquestioned superior.’

Our first glimpse of Washington is usually through the tale of the cherry tree (‘I cannot tell a lie, I did cut it with my little hatchet’). This, of course, never happened. Despite its fabrication, however, it comes extraordinarily close to depicting the essence of Washington’s character. *His Excellency* is itself a tale, a true one, of a man with remarkable judgement and unmatched leadership.

It is Ellis’s analysis of such leadership that will give the book relevance for many readers, but it is the origin of Washington’s qualities that will make *His Excellency* such an important contribution to America’s history. Ellis has not only produced, in his own words, ‘a fresh portrait tightly focused on Washington’s character’, but a blueprint for leadership. A *Prince* for nice guys.

Unlike the hypothetical Prince, however, Washington lived and breathed as we do today. Ellis places great weight on Washington’s lack of education—the first President only received the equivalent of our grade-schooling. Ellis argues

that his judgements during the key moments of American history ‘derived in part from the fact that his mind was uncluttered with sophisticated intellectual preconceptions’.

Unlike Jefferson, Washington knew that the French Revolution would end in blood. And unlike several of his revolutionary brothers, Washington knew that ‘nations were driven by interests rather than ideals’. In a prophetic letter to his friend Lafayette, Washington would predict that ‘however unimportant America may be considered at present, there will assuredly come a day when this country will have some weight in the scale of Empires’.

Where exactly this quality of judgement derived from has been much debated by historians. Although we can never conclusively understand the psychology of Washington, Ellis has nonetheless been able to trace particular experiences that would have shaped his beliefs. The failure of the Continental Congress to provide sufficient resources to Washington during the War of Independence seemed to have stemmed his determination to create a legitimate central government. His commercial relations with the British Merchant Robert Cary meant that his beloved Mount Vernon would be economically dictated to by a company thousands of miles away. The increasing failure of his

tobacco crops to provide a sufficient income saw him switch to the production of wheat, as opposed to those who simply demanded higher prices (there was no ‘fair trade’ 200 years ago). Washington’s grasp of simple economics allowed him to be one of few who would die without debt.

Such ‘rock-ribbed’ realism would become the backbone to Washington’s decisions. The Jay Treaty, a highly controversial agreement with the British that would remove redcoats from the frontier and improve commercial relations with Britain (an act that the newly liberated populace would regard as semi-betrayal) is such an example. This would pale by comparison, of course, to the monster predicament of American slavery, ‘the one issue with the political potential to destroy the republican experiment in its infancy’. Washington’s decision to halt the slavery debate until 1808 could be seen as a moral failure by contemporary historians. But Ellis stands strong on the grounds that Washington had one priority in sight: Cement the nationhood of the United States of America.

Had Machiavelli been around to witness the ascent of Washington, perhaps *The Prince* would read a little differently today. He may have noticed, for instance, that the power of an individual can long exceed death. Washington’s vision lingers on because it was a shared vision, moulded from real life experiences, and not simply the ambitions of one man. As Ellis explains:

Unlike Julius Caesar and Oliver Cromwell before him, and Napoleon, Lenin, and Mao after him, he understood that greater glory resided in posterity’s judgement. If you aspire to live forever in the memory of future generations, you must demonstrate the ultimate self-confidence to leave the final judgement to them. And he did.

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