

George Washington – the “Moral” Man

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Marking Presidents’ Day

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George Washington – the “Moral” Man

By Alan Y. Lowcher

George Washington – the marble man – “First in War! First in Peace! First in the Hearts of his Countrymen!” But he did not start out that way.

Young, ambitious, a man of strong passions, Washington sought recognition and social status which at that time was measured either by wealth or military rank and “glory.” Washington was not wealthy (until he married Martha) measured by the standard of the Fairfaxes, and in the eyes of the British officer ranks, he was merely a “provincial.” But he was personally courageous and decisive. He inspired trust in his leadership ability by keeping a cool head when things went badly, such as at Fort Mifflin and Braddock’s ill-fated march on Fort Duquesne very early in his military career during what we know as the French and Indian War. He was under fire in both engagements, and though men around him fell, he was unscathed. Moreover, although both actions were failures, no personal blame fell to Washington. Historian Joseph Ellis, in his Washington biography, *His Excellency*, wrote that Washington had a sheer knack for survival and found that if he survived, he would succeed.



This character trait would serve him well twenty years later.

The young Washington recognized his “faults” — among them his strong

temper and his love of honor and regard that led him to take offense at what he perceived were personal insults, believing himself the “better man” — and developed patterns of behavior rooted in self-control and personal probity that shaped his character. As he matured, he was increasingly viewed as a levelheaded leader in Virginia politics. His election to represent Virginia at the first Continental Congress was his introduction to delegates from the other colonies, particularly the New England contingent led by Massachusetts. It was John Adams who proposed the formation of a Continental Army with George Washington as commander.

But for all this “restraint,” Washington was willing to take risks for a cause that he believed in. For him and for his brethren “Founding Fathers,” that cause was the American Revolution.

At the War’s end, Washington took his final leave from his fellow officers in 1783 and “retired” from public life to Mt. Vernon. His retirement was short lived. He served as President of the Philadelphia Convention in 1787 and, with the ratification of the Constitution, he answered the call of his country and served as President for two terms, both times elected unanimously by the Electoral College. In public life — during the War and as President — Washington was well aware that history was being made and that he was the one making it. He acutely avoided the appearance of impropriety, for example, refusing a salary as Commander in Chief. In private life, he was also “sensible” about how an action might appear to others, for example, refusing payment in shares of stock in the Potomac Company that proposed to improve navigation of the upper Potomac River (which would have benefited Washington by virtue of his extensive landholdings in what was then the frontier west of the border colonies) for services rendered.

Two blemishes on Washington’s carefully cultivated character were his appetite for land and slave holding. Yet, he alone among his slave holding contemporaries eventually emancipated his slaves through his Last Will and Testament. He was a man of his times, and no one is perfect — not even Washington.

It was altogether fitting and proper that after Abraham Lincoln’s assassination in 1865, a well-known carte-de-visite memorial card

showing George Washington welcoming Lincoln into heaven with a laurel wreath was widely circulated. There is a shaft of light above the Presidents' heads with angels visible inside. The caption reads: "Apotheosis of Washington & Lincoln."

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