

THE AMERICAN CINCINNATUS: THE UNIQUE GREATNESS AND REPUBLICAN VIRTUE OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

Christian Wilson

INTRODUCTION

History has made clear that self-interest causes human beings to have a natural tendency to establish social arrangements in order to secure property and basic liberties. These social arrangements, or governments, always have been problematic when concerned with liberty because the congregation of individuals must submit a certain amount of freedom in exchange for security of their interests. What became evident in ancient times is that the simplest way to secure the rights of the public was to raise a sovereign with absolute executive authority over the affairs of human beings. This form of government is attractive in the sense that it contains enough effectiveness, power, and energy to secure its people from outside threats, but it is inherently flawed because the sovereign, being naturally predisposed to value his own self-interest, has little regard for the interest of the public as a whole and eventually becomes a tyrant. This system tends to subvert the original intention of government by making the concerns of the state synonymous with the concerns of the sovereign rather than those of the public. Human beings have made numerous attempts to establish a form of government that best secures the liberties of the public

Christian Wilson, of New Market, MD, is a 2014 graduate of the Ashbrook Scholar Program having majored in Political Science.

without compromising the interest of individuals. In order to transfer the power of the public for the sake of preserving individual and collective liberties, human beings establish a republic, a form of government in which the supreme power resides in the body of individual citizens who elect representatives to advocate their interests.

Prior to the eighteenth century, all attempts of establishing a republican form of government were generally unsuccessful, as they were eventually conquered by tyrannical empires or became empires themselves. The evident weakness of past republics can be attributed to the weakness of civilian authority in the face of great military leaders, and that dictatorial power is often irresistible to individual human beings. This is shown through the examples of great generals such as Julius Caesar, Oliver Cromwell and Napoleon Bonaparte, who were all responsible for dissolving their respective republics due to their inability to resist the allures of dictatorial power. These men were all considered to be great in their own time, but it was not the kind of greatness that is needed in a republic. The consistent trait within these failed examples is that they all lacked a George Washington.

The only successful attempt at republicanism in history began in America on July 4, 1776, as the thirteen colonies declared independence from Great Britain. The first notable difference from past failures at republicanism is that this generation of men, born in the eighteenth century enlightenment, believed that the purpose of

government is to secure every individual's God-given natural rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." With the coming of the American Revolution, followed the idea to establish a new "republican experiment" that would seek to learn from the mistakes of failed attempts at republicanism by making provincial and experimental constitutions. The other element that was the single most determining factor in the success of the American Revolution and the "republican experiment" was the leadership and true statesmanship of George Washington, who was unanimously elected to lead the Continental Army. The American experiment of self-government was a success because Washington understood the true meaning of republican virtue. Through the example of Washington, one can clearly understand that virtuous individuals are needed within a republic to guarantee its success. George Washington was the embodiment of republican virtue because he was able to align his own ambitions with the interest of the public through the understanding that the will of the public needed to precede his own will. His unique kind of greatness set him apart from those military leaders who came before him.

The American Revolution was not different from other attempts at republicanism in the sense that it faced the same inherent problems: The power of the civilian authority (the Continental Congress) was not strong enough to tax the states for the proper supplies that were necessary for the sustenance of the Continental Army. The weakness of the Continental Congress nearly caused the complete dissolution of the Continental Army throughout the entire span of the war, as they did not have the resources to properly feed, clothe, supply, or pay the army. The frustration of the army towards Congress grew to a climax on March 15, 1783 as the officers of the army met in Newburgh, New York to plan a military coup against Congress and to establish a

more reliable and powerful government, possibly with George Washington as a king-like figure. Washington was the most likely candidate for being made a king as he had gained the love and respect of his men, he had inspired the army to band together and survive the war, and he had been the foremost advocate for petitioning Congress to give more financial support to the army. Washington was in the same position as those mentioned prior. Remarkably, instead of seizing the opportunity at dictatorial power, Washington quelled the conspiracy at Newburgh by reminding the army what they had been fighting for in the long, hard years of the war. It was a breaking of the mold of history that was completely induced by George Washington. It was at this moment that Washington proved his immunity to the seductions of power and that he believed in the cause and success of self-government and republicanism.

Washington solidified his actions at Newburgh when he formally resigned his commission as Commander-in-Chief to congress and simply went home to his farm. In England, when King George III had heard that Washington turned all of his power over to an essentially powerless congress and went home he said, "If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world."¹ Though George III can hardly be considered an authority on greatness, his words merit attention in this case. Washington had done what few in history could do by surrendering his powerful military status to civilian authority in a Cincinnatus-like fashion. Cromwell and later Napoleon had made themselves synonymous with the cause of their revolutions and had used that to justify the assumption of dictatorial power but Washington made himself synonymous with the American Revolution to affirm that dictatorial power was incompatible with the cause of self-government and true liberty.

¹ Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency* (Vintage, 2005), 139.

By his actions throughout his entire career, but especially at Newburgh and Annapolis, Washington demonstrated that he was the embodiment of Republican Virtue, a unique combination of spiritual, moral and ethical qualities enshrined in liberty, ensured by God-given equality, and abiding within the rule of law that personal wants not only submit to the greater good of the whole, but also are protected by the whole. He demonstrated Republican Virtue throughout his life with honor, integrity, work ethic, and aspirations for greatness as tempered by serving the greater good balancing the scales of personal and public interest. Even in his most tenuous moments – the overwhelming and life threatening dangers of war; the eminent rebellion of the Army he led – Washington's example of Republican Virtue assured that personal freedom informs and establishes the rule of law by consent, not compulsion. His moral character in consent to just law not only defined Republican Virtue, but also served as the foundation and prerequisite for self-government and the pursuit of happiness. In doing this, he became the modern version of the renowned Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, a Roman statesman who was given dictatorial power to defend the Roman Republic against invaders in 460 B.C. Cincinnatus resigned from office and returned to his farm two weeks later after his duty to the public was fulfilled and the invaders were driven away. Cincinnatus was praised as a hero who embodied the republican virtue by never holding power one moment longer than the public needed him to. Doubtless, characters such as Cincinnatus inspired Washington to value civic duty above all else, even his own ambitions.

Washington's ability to resist the natural tendency of human nature to crave power for a higher purpose may have made him "the greatest man in the world," but what was it about Washington that made

him different than Caesar or Cromwell? What made him different from Napoleon, who even saw Washington's example in his own lifetime? Among modern scholars it seems that the answer lies in the nature of his ambition, which is the product of some debate. Many modern scholars, and even some of his contemporaries have made claims that Washington's greatness can be attributed to his lack of ambition. That he was able to wield "power without ambition"², seems to be the simple answer to the question of Washington's unique greatness to most. This assertion, however, seems to rob Washington of his humanity. Evidently, through the intimate analysis of Washington's life and writings one can clearly see that Washington did, in fact, possess a deep ambition. What is apparently not as clear is the type of ambition that was within Washington.

Other modern scholars seem to be disposed to the assertion that Washington had boundless ambition and that he found ways to gain more power by denying it. In his book, *His Excellency*, Joseph J. Ellis claims that Washington was creating delusions to hide his ambition when he was unanimously elected to be Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army by saying that he had "considerable trouble recognizing his own ambitions," and "needed to convince himself that the summons came from outside rather than inside his soul" and that Washington "was playing hide-in-seek within himself on the question of his own ambition."³ Another scholar, John Ferling, asserts that Washington "burned with ambition: ambition for his country, to be sure, but also for renown, power, wealth, and success,"⁴ and that he "relinquished power

² Charles Caldwell, *Character of General Washington*.

³ Ellis, 71.

⁴ John Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington: The Hidden Political Genius of an American Icon* (Bloomsbury, 2009), 6.

... knowing that power would come to him without his having to chase after it.”⁵ Though to say that Washington was devoid of ambition is a superficial assertion, the suggestion that Washington was only clever in his way of acquiring of power seems to be overly cynical. The truth in these statements is that Washington did have bottomless ambition and he did end up obtaining more power from denying it, but the evidence available suggests that Washington’s ambition did not drive him to seek power. Washington was severely ambitious, but he possessed a unique kind of ambition. Instead of craving power, Washington craved greatness in the eyes of posterity.

Washington’s unique greatness resided in his ambition to be seen as a virtuous man in not just the eyes of his contemporaries, but also the eyes of posterity. In his actions throughout life, Washington has demonstrated that he cared about cultivating a reputation as a virtuous hero worthy of praise and remembrance. Washington was set apart from Caesar, Cromwell, and Napoleon in his belief that his legacy of greatness would be defined by serving the greatness of humanity rather than by serving himself. Washington was a man born to protect the success of the American “republican experiment” because his own ambition and sense of destiny was completely aligned with the ideals of republicanism. In 1798, President John Adams said that Americans “have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion.”⁶ The example of Cincinnatus and Washington prove Adams words in the sense that a republic needs moral, and virtuous individuals in order to secure and preserve a free and equal government that truly protects the rights and high interests of every individual.

⁵ Ferling, 370.

⁶ John Adams to the Officers of the First Brigade of the Third Division of the Militia of Massachusetts, October 11, 1798.

PART I: A Foundation of Greatness

From a very early age, it is clear that Washington desired to be a man of quality. If power was ever present among Washington’s ambitions it was during his early life as he worked relentlessly to escape his humble beginnings and to attain a respectable status within society. In his Eulogy of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson most adequately describes Washington’s situation in life, saying “that never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great, and to place him in the same constellation with whatever worthies have merited from man an everlasting remembrance”⁷ Washington’s circumstances fit his own ambitions nicely as he was able to use the example and patronage of his brother to propel himself into high society in Virginia and to develop his basic values about what it truly meant to be a man. Washington’s early life is extremely important in understanding what kind of education inspired him to care about being a virtuous person. Through examining this time in his life, one can clearly see that Washington became an independent, self-made man who had developed a foundation for his own ideas about what it means to be great.

Section 1: Early Life Motivation and Education

No one is born great. George Washington was no exception. In fact, Washington’s beginnings seemed to leave little hope that posterity would recognize him at all. Circumstance left him little and less to use to his advantage upon entering the world.

⁷ Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Walter Jones, January 2, 1814.

Eighteenth century colonial Virginia was a particularly precarious place to be born, especially with a lack of recourses. But it was within this perilous frontier that Washington weathered the elements and constructed the pillars of his own nature. Born into an uncertain world, Washington, full of fervor and ambition, was not the sort of man to succumb to a lack of fortune. There was something primal and fierce within him that made him stand out from his peers. The famous painter, Gilbert Stuart, best articulates Washington's true nature of fierceness, masked in reservation as he once said, "Had he been born in the forests ... he would have been the fiercest man among the savage tribes," and that his contemporaries thought him "by nature a man of fierce and irritable disposition, but that, like Socrates, his judgment and great self-command have always made him appear a man of a different cast in the eyes of the world."⁸ The earlier part of Washington's life reveals that he was a man of action, passion, ambition, and even impatience. At the start, Washington carried with him a severe sensitivity to his humble beginnings and an incessant desire to attain and exhibit greatness.

George Washington, born in Westmoreland County, Virginia, February 22, 1732, was a product of Augustine Washington's second marriage with Mary Ball Washington, and the prospects for success already seemed to be poor. George's half-brothers had been provided a formal education, including studies abroad, but by the time George's father died in 1743 there was little inheritance (mostly given to his brothers) to provide the same education for the 11-year-old George. Washington's inheritance consisted of ten slaves and the rights to Ferry Farm, a worn out tract across the Rappahannock River from Fredericksburg, Virginia. With such a meager begin-

ning, young George Washington wanted more than he was given. His natural ambition drove him to aspire to be a man of substance.

Augustine Washington acquired a small fortune as a tobacco planter, land speculator, and proprietor of an iron forge. He also held several local offices in Northern Virginia. Washington undoubtedly aspired to surpass the accomplishments of his father. The true father figure in Washington's life, after whom he modeled himself, was his older half-brother, Lawrence. Lawrence undeniably embodied what greatness looked like to George, and his means of wealth and success provided George with an applicable plan for success. In many ways, Lawrence Washington's example was George's formal education. Lawrence's means of acquiring wealth stemmed through being a colonial officer in the 1739 war with Spain. Lawrence was well educated, wealthy, dashing in his uniform, and considered a hero by the most influential men and women in Virginia. Lawrence was the appointed adjutant general of Virginia (making him the foremost soldier in the province) and was elected to the House of Burgesses. Lawrence also married into the Fairfax family (which claimed title to six million acres in Virginia, as the most prominent family in Northern Virginia). Lawrence took up residence on land overlooking the Potomac River. He named his country farmhouse after a British Officer, Edward Vernon, under whom he served. He called it Mount Vernon. Clearly, given the endeavors of his early life, George modeled himself very closely after his brother.

Upon entering adolescence, George was invited to Mount Vernon and Belvoir (the Fairfax's neighboring estate seven miles away from Mount Vernon) by Lawrence. Belvoir was a showcase of all the extravagances of English Aristocracy. Through these invitations, Washington was exposed

⁸ Rob Chernow, *Washington, A Life* (Thorndike, 2010), *xxi*.

to the elite upper class of Virginia. Within the presence of adults who were well educated, powerful, wealthy, and enjoyed an opulent lifestyle, Washington discovered what men of substance truly look like. Lawrence, wearing his splendid military uniform for these social occasions, most definitely appeared to be the vision of a man of substance. To Washington, Lawrence embodied the most worthy qualities and lived the exalted status, which young George evidently wanted to emulate.

Aside from the influence of Lawrence and the Fairfax family, Washington's education was mostly elemental. While his contemporaries were attending the College of William and Mary, Washington was learning from watching the world around him. Washington carried a deep sensitivity about his lack of a formal education throughout his life. There are three notable works, however, that Washington valued highly in his youth: the composition of *The Rules of Civility*; Joseph Addison's play, *Cato*; the compilation of essays known as *Seneca's Morals*. Based on the way Washington conducted himself and lived his life, it is clear that all of these works had a significant impact on him as he came of age.

In his adolescence, Washington developed into a polished young man who could fit in with the Virginia planting class. To be a man of worthy qualities, Washington believed that he needed to be a part of the Virginia elite. This prompted him to pay very close attention to behavior and etiquette. Washington copied *Rules of Civility, and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*, in his time growing up. The *Rules of Civility* were a set of 110 rules based on a composition by French Jesuits in 1595. These rules are important to understanding the basis for Washington's mannerisms and social philosophy. Though these rules are fairly aristocratic in nature, they emphasize acts of selflessness in social situations, even to those who would be

considered social inferiors. The first rule is "Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present." Some of the rules seem to be silly, obvious things (like not to bite one's fingernails, spit, or talk with one's mouth open), but as a whole, the principles found within this composition support an acceptance of social equality, such that would be found in a republic. Rule 36 states, "Artificers & Persons of low Degree ought not to use many ceremonies to Lords, or Others of high Degree but Respect and highly Honor them, and those of high Degree ought to treat them with affability & Courtesy, without Arrogance."⁹ This way of thinking could possibly be seen as a base for breaking down aristocracy because it accentuates that a true man of quality does not look down upon his inferiors, a deviation from the original British way of thinking.

Washington became the embodiment of the *Rules of Civility* throughout his life. Aside from emphasizing respect towards all classes of people, there are many rules that emphasize self-reservation, thinking before speaking, only speaking when having something meaningful to say, and refraining from giving any controversial opinion. Clearly, this is evidence for the root of Washington's characteristic of aloofness, and insight to the true purposes of his reserved, outward appearance, which his contemporaries believed reflected his inward character. Marquis de Chastellux's description of Washington is particularly insightful, "The strongest characteristic of this respectable man is the perfect harmony which reigns between the physical and moral qualities which compose his personality. ... It is not my intention to exaggerate. I wish only to express the impression General Washington has left on my mind, the idea of a perfect

⁹ *Rules of Civility, and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*.

whole.”¹⁰ Washington’s stature, bearing, and countenance made him seem like more than a man in the eyes of his contemporaries. Jedidiah Morse, an officer during the French and Indian War, also gives an articulate description of a 26-year-old Washington’s foreboding appearance:

tall, upright, and well made; in his manner easy and unaffected. His eyes were of a bluish cast, not prominent, indicative of deep thoughtfulness, and when in action, on great occasions remarkably lively. His features strong, manly, and commanding; his temper reserved and serious; his countenance grave, composed, sensible. There was in his whole appearance an unusual dignity and gracefulness which at once secured him profound respect, and cordial esteem. He seemed born to command his fellow men.¹¹

The best explanation for Washington’s famous demeanor is that he took the *Rules of Civility* with tremendous seriousness. Rules such as “let your countenance be pleasant but in serious matters somewhat grave,” “think before you speak pronounce not imperfectly nor bring out your words too hastily but orderly & distinctly,” “the gestures of the body must be suitable to the discourse you are upon,” and “let your conversation be without malice or envy, for ‘is a sign of a tractable and commendable nature: and in all causes of passion admit reason to govern” were clearly important to Washington. In his adolescence, Washington

aspired to be a country gentleman and these rules were undoubtedly his means for becoming socially competent.

Another source of inspiration for Washington’s values was his favorite play: *Cato*, by Joseph Addison. *Cato* is a dramatization of the last days of a Roman senator, Marcus Porcius Cato, who had chosen suicide over submission to Caesar. In Addison’s play, Cato represents republican virtue and opposition to tyranny. It links success not only to service and devotion to one’s country but also to worthiness of success. Washington frequently quoted from this play throughout his life. In his early life it can be seen in correspondence to Sally Fairfax, a woman with whom Washington had apparently and controversially (because she was his best friend’s wife) fallen in love “I should think our time more agreeably spent, believe me, in playing a part in *Cato*, with the company you mention, and myself doubly happy in being the Juba to such a Marcia, as you must make.”¹² In the play, Juba was in love with Cato’s daughter, Marcia; but in review of Washington’s life, it is clear that he related much more closely with Cato rather than Juba.

Later in life, at Valley Forge, Washington defied a congressional ban on theatre productions to entertain his men with the play, “The Camp could now afford you some entertainment: the manouering of the Army is in itself a sight that would charm. —Besides these, the Theatre is opened— Last Monday *Cato* was performed before a very numerous & splendid audience.”¹³ It can be speculated upon that the reason Washington showed this play was to reiterate to his troops and officers, at the point in the war when the republican cause was most fragile, the cause for which they all were fighting. Later comparisons can be

¹⁰ Marquis de Chastellux, *Travels in North America*, 1780-1782.

¹¹ Albert Bushnell Hart, ed., *Tributes to Washington*, Pamphlet No. 3 (Washington, DC: George Washington Bicentennial Commission, 1931), 6-7. Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man*, 37-39.

¹² Washington to Sarah Carey Fairfax, September 12, 1758. Ellis, 37.

¹³ Colonel William Bradford Jr. to his sister, May 1778.

made of his famous Newburgh Address, where he puts an end to a conspiracy by his officers against republicanism. Addison's play played a substantial role in the way Washington understood patriotism and republican virtue.

The third most important work that influenced Washington's idea of virtue was Seneca's *Morals*, a compilation of essays on ethical behavior, and especially emphasized that success depends in part upon the virtues of sacrifice, tenacity, restraint, and the control of one's emotions. The ideology of Roman stoicism and the idea of fortifying one's self in the face of suffering was an essential part of Washington's life philosophy and his success in the Revolutionary war "I hope I shall always possess a sufficient degree of fortitude to bear without murmuring any stroke which may happen."¹⁴ The philosophy of stoicism played a crucial role in Washington's understanding of what it meant to be a man; that suffering is a part of life and one must bear it with dignity and strength while finding the good in it, was noticeably among Washington's greatest values.

Though Washington's countenance and manners became famous in his later life, Washington understood that success and elevation in society could not be done through etiquette and a virtuous philosophy alone. Through the example of Lawrence, Washington learned that one could elevate one's status in society very quickly through military service. At the age of 14, Washington sought to enter Great Britain's Royal Navy as a commissioned officer. His mother would not consent to this endeavor. Instead, Washington learned the trade of surveying from self-help books. This was a particularly lucrative opportunity for Washington because surveyors were paid in land. When Washington was 17 years old, he was

appointed surveyor of Culpepper County Virginia. This experience was Washington's introduction to politics because it is likely that Lawrence and the Fairfax family had some influence in his appointment, otherwise he would have had to endure a lengthy apprenticeship.¹⁵ Washington was clearly a beneficiary of the powers of patronage, as the Fairfax family was able to help him establish himself within the Virginia planter class in a very short amount of time. By Washington's 20th birthday, he had acquired nearly 2500 acres on the Virginia frontier. Through surveying land, Washington received an important aspect of his education: knowledge of how to survive in the wilderness.

In 1752, Lawrence Washington died of tuberculosis and left Washington his property in Fredericksburg. George immediately asked the Governor of Virginia for Lawrence's position as adjutant general.¹⁶ He did not receive the position he wanted but due to his powerful patron's influence he was appointed to the rank of major and was put in charge of the southernmost district. Washington's early military career was severely important to his development as a public figure in Virginia. It was through his actions in the French and Indian War that he gained notoriety in England, and fame in Virginia. By the time he retired at the age of 26, Washington had become the most prominent military figure in Virginia and perhaps the colonies as a whole.

¹⁴ George Washington, Letter to Lund Washington, May 29, 1779.

¹⁵ Ferling, 12-13.

¹⁶ George Washington, Letter to Gov. Robert Dinwiddie, June 10, 1752. Chernow, 13.

French and Indian War Lessons

Washington's experience in the French and Indian War was essential to his development as a public figure and to his soon-to-be needed military experience. Washington's actions in the war reveal several notable traits that would prove to be essential to his success in the Revolutionary War. First, the depth of Washington's ambition can be seen through the way he takes the initiative to involve himself in important affairs; second, Washington's untouchable courage can be seen through his success in acting decisively in several dangerous situations; third, Washington showed that he has the willingness and ability to learn from his mistakes; fourth, Washington immersed himself in frontier-style military strategy, and studied British tactics and discipline that would prove useful later in his life; fifth, Washington developed his basic convictions about America's role within the British Empire. This period in Washington's life was crucial in developing what he believed it meant to be American. Washington would soon represent everything for which America stood, a feat that would not have been possible without his experience in the war.

Ironically, despite the necessary experience Washington gained from the war, his actions played a direct role in the cause of the war. In the early 1750s, French troops were beginning to occupy the land in the Ohio River Valley and make alliances with the local Indian tribes. This irritated Englishmen who already had claims on these lands. King George II was soon convinced that the French needed to be removed. Robert Dinwiddie, the governor of Virginia, needed an emissary to deliver a message to the French, telling them to leave the Ohio Valley or face the wrath of Great Britain. It was essential to choose an emissary who was likely to survive the Ohio County, a foreboding wilderness inhabited

by Indians who were enemies to the British. As one of Virginia's adjuncts who had run nearly two hundred surveys, Washington seemed to Dinwiddie to be the obvious choice. On the very day Washington was commissioned into the Virginia militia, he set out to deliver the message. It was a dangerous journey as Washington and his companions faced Indians, the dead of winter, and almost drowned in a river. Washington, having barely survived the journey, but returned with the French's response of rejection; war was imminent. Washington kept a journal of his findings that revealed that the French were building forts and raising soldiers and Indian warriors in the Ohio Country. Governor Dinwiddie had Washington's journal published in London in pamphlet form to substantiate his cause of protecting the English claimed territory in the Ohio Valley. From this, Washington acquired some renown within the British Empire and was described as "a youth of great sobriety, diligence, and fidelity."¹⁷

Several events with which Washington was faced, created a revealing prospect for his identity as an American rather than an Englishman. Washington made a series of mistakes that alienated him from the British, but made him a hero in the eyes of the colonists. His decisions during the war clearly demonstrated that he was concerned more with a Virginian agenda than that of the British, and his frustration with the British allowed him to move closer to the idea of being an American.

Governor Dinwiddie believed that Washington had earned himself a promotion by the accomplishments from his emissary mission. At the age of twenty-one, Washington was promoted from Major to Lieutenant Colonel. On April 2, 1754, Washington ventured into the Ohio Valley with

¹⁷ *The Gentleman's Magazine* in London. Reference in Ferling, 16.

160 men, and orders to occupy a part of the land that is present day southern Pennsylvania. As Washington held a position in the Great Meadows, Indian intelligence suggested that French detachments were descending upon them. After a few days of being under the assumption that his camp was being spied upon and also assuming that the French meant to destroy his company, Washington elected to take the offensive. Ten Frenchmen were killed and the survivors claimed that they were diplomats rather than soldiers. The truth of what transpired remains unclear, but apparently the Indians got carried away and brutally killed a French officer named Monsieur de Jumonville, which changed the small skirmish into a worldwide incident.

To the French, the death of de Jumonville was a clarification of English aggression towards the French. The French made Washington out to be an antagonist, and found him responsible for the “assassination” of de Jumonville. Governor Dinwiddie, on the other hand, congratulated Washington: “I heartily congratulate you, as it may give a testimony to the Ind[ian]s that the French are not invincible w[he]n fairly engaged with the English.”¹⁸ He truly believed that Washington had acted rashly and grouped him and his company with the Indians as responsible. He wrote another letter to the Board of Trade in London saying, “This little skirmish was by the Half King and their Indians. We were auxiliaries to them, as my orders to the commander of our Forces [were] to be on the defensive.”¹⁹ Thanks to this report, in England Washington came to be viewed as a reckless and inexperienced young man. In the colonies, however, Washington was viewed as a hero. Washington wrote a self-promoting letter to his brother saying “The right wing, where I

stood, was exposed to and received all the enemy's fire ... I heard the bullets whistle, and, believe me, there is something charming in the sound.”²⁰ This statement made its way into the Virginia newspapers, and perpetuated his reputation within the colonies.

As Washington held his position in the Great Meadows that he called Fort Necessity, he was able to make an observation extremely significant to his understanding of the colonies’ true place in the eyes of the British Empire. To support Washington’s regiment at Fort Necessity, Captain James Mackay and his South Carolina Independents (mostly colonial soldiers but still a part of the regular British Army) arrived. Mackay held his captaincy through a royal commission, meaning that his status as a regular made him superior to the colonists by British law. Mackay brought 100 men with him and immediately asserted his prerogatives over Colonel Washington by staking out a separate campsite. Washington’s frustration is seen through a letter to Dinwiddie, claiming that he would “endeavor to make all my officers show Captain Mackay all the respect due to his rank and merit, but [I] should have been particularly obliged if your Honor had declared whether he was under my command or independent of it.”²¹ Washington realized that a royally commissioned officer would not subject himself to the orders of a lowly colonial officer as Mackay refused to accept the protocol and countersign to be used at the camp. Mackay also refused to help Washington’s regiment in an important road building operation. From this experience, Washington realized that he was fighting for a country that considered him to be inferior.

Fort Necessity soon fell to the superior French force from Fort Duquesne,

¹⁸ Letter from Robert Dinwiddie, June 1, 1754.

Chernow, 44-45.

¹⁹ Chernow, 45.

²⁰ Washington to John Augustine Washington, May 31, 1754. Ellis, 14-15.

²¹ Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, June 1, 1754. Chernow, 45.

and Washington was forced to surrender on July 4, 1754. The French translator, Jacob Van Braam, tricked Washington and McKay into signing a confession of responsibility for the assassination of de Jumonville, which gave the French useful propaganda. Washington insisted, "That we were willfully, or ignorantly, deceived by our interpreter in regard to the word *assassination*, I do aver and will to my dying moment."²² Washington's signing of the confession was confirmation to the French that the British had fired the first shots of the war. At first, Washington was heavily criticized for the debacle at Fort Necessity, but Dinwiddie, though upset with Washington, realized that the endeavor was poorly funded and the rest of the colonies demonstrated a "monstrous" failure to offer support. What at first appeared to be a large military debacle became, in the eyes of the colonies, another act of bravery as Washington had held his ground in the face of insurmountable odds in defense of his country. Washington learned a few invaluable lessons from the debacle at Fort Necessity: first, the French had won the battle using Indian tactics, the sort of guerilla warfare that became useful in fighting on the frontier; second, that it was unwise to hold indefensible positions; third, that the colonies needed unification in order to be successful; fourth that the British Empire placed little confidence in the colonies. As time would show, Washington had a special aptitude for learning from his mistakes and his environment.

After Washington's first military campaign the Virginia Regiment was divided into 10 independent companies. As a result of this, Washington was outraged and resigned his commission. This did not last long, however, because in 1755 Major General Edward Braddock arrived in the colonies with the task of expelling the

French from Fort Duquesne. Washington sought Braddock's patronage and became his aide de camp. With his honor and reputation already in question, Washington offered to serve without pay, "This, I flatter myself, will manifestly appear by my going [as] a volunteer, without expectation of reward or prospect of retaining a command."²³ This is a prime example of Washington's bottomless ambition to achieve his goals. Washington's determination to be a man of worthy quality meant that he needed to rise to the level of a Virginia planter. The military was Washington's ladder to elite status; he saw an opportunity arrive with General Braddock and, without hesitation, he seized that opportunity.

His experience with Braddock reveals more than just his ambition. Though Washington may not have expected it, he was about to be given a different kind of opportunity. On the road to Duquesne, Washington found himself in the midst of another military debacle. On July 9, 1755, Braddock's company began to cross the Monongahela River completely unaware that nearly 900 soldiers from Fort Duquesne were waiting for them on the other side. Indians attacked the British soldiers from the trees, causing mass confusion and friendly fire. Washington was given orders to send a party up an exposed hill and retrieve two lost cannons. Bravely riding back and forth amongst the chaos, two horses were shot from beneath him and four bullets pierced his coat, but he remained unshaken and carried out his orders. In a letter to his brother, Washington relayed the miraculous prospect of his survival, "By the all-powerful dispensations of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability and expectation; for I had four bullets through my coat, and two horses shot under me, yet escaped unhurt, altho' death

²² Chernow, 48.

²³ Washington to John Robinson, April 20, 1755. Chernow, 53.

was levelling my companions on every side.”²⁴ Another eyewitness account from James Craik remarks on Washington’s miraculous survival “I expected every moment to see him fall. His duty and station exposed him to every danger. Nothing but the superintending care of Providence could have saved him from the fate of all around him.”²⁵ Even General Braddock himself was killed in the chaos (but not before having four horses shot from under him). Washington eventually was able to organize a retreat, as he was the only one left to carry out orders.

Washington’s actions during the massacre at Monongahela illuminated two indispensable aspects of his nature: amazing courage in the face of great danger, and a miraculous aptitude for survival. Both of these traits would serve him well in years to come. The incident that came to be known as “Braddock’s defeat” became yet another example of a British defeat that served as a self-promotion for Washington. As Braddock became the clear source for the defeat, Washington’s courage and resourcefulness was the object of praise:

The dismal Defeat of our Forces by such a handful of Men gives me very great Concern, as also for the Death of the Genl & so many brave Officers entirely owing to the dastardly Spirit of the private Men their Panick I suppose made them deaf to all Commands & in course was the Bane of all our Misfortunes[.] The train of Artillery being in the Enemy’s Possessn is a monstrous Misfortune; however I was glad to receive Yr Letr & that You came safe off witht any Wound after Yr gallant Behavr on which I congra-

tulate You & thank You for the Acct You gave me of the Engagemt but I suppose You cd not tell the Numbtr of the Enemy that were killed.²⁶

Two things are evident in this letter from Dinwiddie. First, Washington’s bravery was the only positive prospect to draw from the incident; second, that the British regulars showed cowardice in their own actions, showing a disparity in courage between the colonials and the regulars. The British regulars panicked and retreated during the battle while the colonists stood their ground and fought. To Washington, this was a self-evident indicator that British superiority over the colonists was unfounded. In a letter to Dinwiddie on July 18, 1755, Washington complained of the British behavior:

The Virginians behaved like men and died like soldiers, the dastardly behavior of the British soldiers exposed all those who were inclined to their duty to almost certain death ... at length, in despite of every effort to the contrary, [they] broke and run as sheep before the hounds ... And when we endeavored to rally them in hopes of regaining our invaluable loss, it was with as much success as if we had attempted to have stopped the wild bears of the mountains.²⁷

Washington was developing a deep resentment for unfounded British superiority. In the eyes of the British, the colonists were vulgar simpletons, fit for peasantry. This conviction was the source of his frustration, not only during the French and Indian War, but also in the years leading up to the American Revolution. Washington believed it a grievous injustice that royally commis-

²⁴ Washington to John Augustine Washington, July 18, 1755.

²⁵ Marshall, *Life of George Washington*, 10.

²⁶ Robert Dinwiddie to Washington, July 26, 1755.

²⁷ Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, July 18, 1755.

sioned officers, by British policy, were superior to colonial officers. Under Mackay and Braddock, Washington got a taste of British opinion toward the colonists, but the pinnacle of Washington's frustration was yet to come.

The height of Washington's frustration and the cause of his major falling out with the British was realized when he was denied a royal commission. After his courageous exploits at Monongahela, Governor Dinwiddie rewarded Washington the position of Commander and Chief over Virginia's military forces. Washington's new position, allowed him to believe that he had an opportunity to attain a royal commission, which would solidify his authority as a superior officer and enhance his societal prominence. Before Washington could set out into the frontier, however, a royally commissioned Captain John Dagworthy arrived at the regimental headquarters. Because Dagworthy had a royal commission, he would see himself as the commanding officer even though Washington outranked him. This was another direct affront to Washington's authority and honor. Washington threatened to resign his commission if he would have to obey orders from Dagworthy. Dinwiddie shared Washington's sentiment and appealed to General Braddock's replacement, Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts. After waiting several weeks with no reply, Washington rode to Boston to demand an answer. After spending a copious amount of time waiting for an audience, Washington was able to meet with Shirley. Washington was denied a royal commission, but did get Shirley to rule that Dagworthy, being an officer for Maryland, had no jurisdiction over the Virginia Regiment. While a victory for Dinwiddie, Washington remained unsatisfied.

Washington, with the thought of a royal commission never far from his mind,

found another opportunity in March 1757, when Shirley's replacement as Commander of the British Army John Campbell, Earl of Loudoun arrived to Philadelphia. Washington immediately rode to Philadelphia with hopes of acquiring a royal commission and offering his strategy on how to liberate the Ohio Country. Washington waited impatiently for two weeks for an audience before meeting with Campbell only to receive orders to send part of his army to South Carolina and join the rest of his forces at Fort Cumberland in Maryland. Washington was not even given the opportunity to speak. Washington did not write about this experience, but it is not difficult to imagine the humiliation and anger he felt from this rejection.²⁸

With clarity, one can observe by these experiences how Washington developed disdain towards British authority during the French and Indian War. Washington could see that the British believed that the colonists were inferior and unable to take authority. Washington believed that this view was unfounded, in part because the Virginians had proven themselves to be capable warriors, and in part because he was most likely aware of his own superiority. The central theme of Washington's early life is his fierce determination to become a man of substance, and the British established a ceiling that prevented his elevation solely because he was born a Virginian. Washington's chief objective was to overcome his humble birth, and the British rendered his dream impossible by nature. His convictions regarding the importance of natural rights and merit-based elevation grew tremendously during this time in his life. Little did he know, however, that British tyranny in the military was only the beginning of his frustration.

²⁸ Ferling, 39.

Section 2: Revolutionary Rising

The next 16 years of Washington's life, after he resigned his commission in 1758, were devoted to perfecting the opulent lifestyle of a Virginia aristocrat. This period of Washington's life, though seemingly uneventful, reveals a time in which he realized that his destiny was even greater than his original aspirations of being a part of elite Virginian society. Based on the evidence available, Washington had no aspirations to be more than a private individual. He was quite content in spending his time improving his property. It may be safe to say that, in his mid-20s, Washington could have believed that he had achieved the status that his ambition drove him towards in the French and Indian War. He had fiercely done everything possible to overcome his humble birth and acquire wealth and social status; his ambition was complete. Washington had acquired fame, honor, wealth, and social status through his endeavors as a surveyor, and a soldier (marrying the wealthy widow Martha Custis did not hurt his wealth). Washington had reached the top rung of the social ladder in Virginia.

Washington's endeavors to perfect his lifestyle as a Virginia planter soon revealed that he and his fellow Virginians were ensnared in an imperial network of debt deliberately intended to reduce them all to bankruptcy and ruin. Through his business with London companies, his denial from the king to purchase western lands, and his observation of the acts of parliament, Washington began to understand that the British plan for the colonies was more insidious than anyone had anticipated. Washington believed that the Empire of Great Britain had developed a conspiracy against the liberty of the colonies, and that if they carried out their plan, the colonists

would be reduced to slaves. Through this realization, Washington eventually concluded that the only way to save his and his fellow countrymen's liberty was to take up arms.

The True Face of the Empire

During the time after his retirement from the military in 1758, Washington's focus on becoming a Virginia country squire led to his election to the House of Burgesses in Williamsburg, where he served on two standing committees and handled most of the veterans' claims to land. Washington also doubled Mt. Vernon from 3,000 to 6,500 acres before 1775 by buying any adjacent slots of land that became available. In a relatively short time, Washington had become the epitome of a Virginia aristocratic country gentleman. After all, being part of Virginia's elite was the product of his intentions in joining the military. It is reasonable to assert that Washington wanted more than anything to be a man of quality, which to Washington looked something like his stepbrother Lawrence, a polished elite planter in Virginia. The popular trend to sustain the opulent lifestyle expected of a Virginia planter was to purchase the finest furniture, clothing, and goods; and at the time, top quality goods came from London. Washington was no exception to this trend. He soon realized, however, that the service from London, though presumably needed by he and his fellow planters, was intentionally trapping the planters in a network of perpetual debt, and withholding from them the quality of goods and service for which they had paid.

Washington's source of London luxury came from Robert Cary's Cary & Company. Washington ordered from Cary the goods that he needed to properly renovate Mount Vernon and to attain the high style sets of furniture and accessories

befitting an elite Virginia planter. In doing this, Washington quickly exhausted his Custis inheritance (which he had obtained through his marriage to Martha Custis). After he had been married for only two years, Washington racked up a debt of nearly 2,000 pounds to Robert Cary. Washington believed that the service he received from Cary had not merited the debt he had acquired. Doing business with London companies proved to be a very tedious and slapdash endeavor, generally because the colonists relied upon the goods from London and were powerless to demand better service. This exploitation of the colonists was at the heart of resentment toward the British in America.

Another problem that affected Washington was that the Custis plantations were devoted to tobacco, producing the bulk of Washington's cash crop and making him eligible for the services of Cary & Company. Most growers in the colonies bought and sold their goods locally, but richer planters were partial to a consignment system, whereby they entrusted the sale of their crop to mercantile houses in England. This system gave Virginia's elite citizens, including Washington, access to London's shops and stores. Washington found himself in the same trap in which most other Virginia planters found themselves at the time. Thomas Jefferson, another victim who was even less successful than Washington in the plantation business, described this state of being as a chronic condition of indebtedness, which inevitably became "hereditary from father to son for many generations, so that planters were a species of property annexed to certain mercantile houses in London."²⁹ In 1766, Washington switched his cash crop from tobacco to wheat, an indicator that he valued his freedom over his luxury. This was no doubt in defiance to

²⁹ Ellis, 50. Thomas Jefferson, Answers to Demeunier's Additional Queries.

British authority, an act that would not be his last rebellion.

Washington took notice that the prices for goods were continuously ascending while the price for his tobacco remained the same, and the quality of the goods was not improving either:

...you may believe me when I tell you that instead of getting things good and fashionable in their several kind, we often have articles sent us that could only have been us[e]d by our forefathers in the days of yore. 'Tis a custom ... with many shopkeepers and tradesmen in London, when they know goods are bespoke for exportation, to palm sometimes old and sometimes very slight and indifferent goods upon us, taking care at the same time to advance 10, 15, or 20 p[er]c[en]t upon them.³⁰

This conviction that Cary was padding his prices can be seen even in Washington's early shipment as he wrote a letter saying, "woolens, linens, nails etc. are mean in quality but not in price, for in this they excel indeed far above any I have ever had."³¹ At this point, Washington's conviction was becoming more eminent that the British Empire was exploiting the colonists because it deemed them too ignorant to understand. This experience became yet another episode of the development of Washington's deep resentment for the British. The central, re-occurring theme in his thought process remains that the British believe that the colonists are inferior and therefore worthy of being subjugated, and that the entire mercantile system of Great Britain was a con-

³⁰ Chernow, 106-107. Washington to Robert Cary & Co., September 1760.

³¹ Chernow, 106. Washington to Robert Cary & Co., August 10, 1760.

spiracy designed to secure his reliance on the likes of Cary.

Washington's experience with Cary and Company was not the only source of his suspicions that the British Empire meant to reduce the colonists to the level of slaves. Another affront to colonist freedom, as Washington saw it, was the Proclamation of 1763 stating that the colonists were not to settle in the lands west of the Ohio River because they were set aside for Indian reservations. This was particularly personal to Washington because that land was meant to be settled by soldiers as payment for their service in the French and Indian War. It was evident that Washington believed that the British could not seriously mean to reserve that area for the Indians; instead, the British meant to settle that land themselves and establish the new aristocracy with the colonists as peasants.

It appears that Washington had a deep conviction that the future of the colonies was in the west. This conviction was foremost in his thoughts as his first renovation to Mount Vernon was switching the entrance from east to west in 1759. The idea that the future of America was in the west was likely personally important to him because he lived on the banks of the Potomac River. In the 18th century it was widely believed among the colonists that the Potomac River provided the most direct access to the interior waterways of North America.³² This was evidently a myth, but it was the inspiration for many claims made in that area. This belief compelled Washington to join and lead several organizations for improving navigation on the Potomac River. Washington also hoped to acquire some of the bounty lands he had earned from his service in the war. The Ohio Country was a huge prospect of interest to Washington as the French had been driven out and he was determined to make sure that he had claim to

the best lands in that country. In a letter to John Posey, Washington assures his friend that the virgin western lands will provide a new start with fresh opportunity, "there is a large Field before you, an opening prospect in the back Country for Adventures ... where an enterprising Man with very little Money may lay the foundation of a Noble Estate in the New Settlements upon the Monongahela for himself and posterity."³³

By 1763, it was clear that the future of the Ohio Country was unclear; the British wanted it closed off to settlers, the Indians believed it was their land, and the colonists believed that they had a right to settle it. As a result of the confusion, George III issued a proclamation that reserved the region from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico as an Indian reservation, closed to Anglo-American settlers. Washington saw the proclamation as a joke, "I can never look upon that Proclamation in any other light than as a temporary expedient to quiet the minds of the Indians."³⁴ It was obvious to Washington that the western lands would inevitably be overrun by white settlers. Washington believed that if it would eventually be taken, he might as well be among the first. After all, based on his experience in surveying and the war, he knew that land better than most.

In the same year as the proclamation, the Mississippi Land Company was launched. It was a proposal from investors to acquire land on both sides of the Ohio River. The British rejected the proposal on the grounds that it would violate the recently signed treaty with the Iroquois and the Cherokee, but a few years later in 1770, the British ministry accepted a similar proposal from a group of English investors. In light of these exploits, Washington began to understand that the British intended to create a feudal system in the Ohio Country with

³² Ellis, 54. The Potomac Myth.

³³ Ellis, 53. Washington to John Posey, June 24, 1767.

³⁴ Ellis, 55. Washington to William Crawford, September 17, 1767.

English lords and colonist peasants. In a letter to Thomas Lewis in 1774, Washington states that his investment in the Mississippi Land Company achieved him little in acquiring the lands he wanted, which proved the “malignant disposition towards Americans”³⁵ held by British officials.

Washington’s endeavors to secure the bounty of western land had been an ongoing struggle. Even as early as 1754 Washington had organized officers in the Virginia regiment to petition to settle these areas and even led a surveying expedition to reserve the land. The proclamation of 1763 undid all of Washington’s hard work. Washington refused to play by the British rules and settled the land anyway. Washington realized that regardless of the King’s proclamations, the land would be settled. Washington understood that human beings are by nature self-interested, and no law from a distant king will stop those who are willing to risk everything to be free and to live well. In a letter to George Mercer in 1771, Washington expressed this conviction “What Inducements have Men to explore uninhabited Wilds but the prospect of getting good Lands? Would any Man waste his time, expose his Fortune, nay life, in search of this if he was to share the good and the bad with those who come after him. Surely no!”³⁶ Washington understood that the Ohio Country was a bounty land, in which there was a race to occupy it, even if the King refused to acknowledge it. Ultimately, Washington’s solution was to regard the restrictive British policies as superfluous and that he could not be stopped from taking that for which he had worked. Undeniably, the colonies were growing. The British wanted to stifle that growth, but Washington believed that to do so was impossible. This is an important scenario in

the development of Washington’s thinking because he began to understand that the colonist’s interest was no longer compatible with the interest of the British Empire.

The disparity between the colonists and the British Empire grew even larger throughout the 1760s as the debt from the Seven Years War caused the British ministry to implement high taxes on the colonists. To pay for the debt and the British troops stationed in America, parliament issued a series of laws that implemented direct taxation on the colonies. Among these were the Stamp Act, making colonists buy English stamps for all paper materials, and the Townshend Acts, designed to raise revenue within the colonies. These acts were met with much resistance from the colonists, triggering events that lead to the Revolutionary War (i.e. British occupation of Boston in 1768 and the Boston Massacre in 1770). It was through these events, that Washington realized that the colonists in Virginia were not the only ones being mistreated. Washington began to see that the 13 colonies were all subject to the same economic tyranny, and that something must be done, or they risked becoming slaves.

The Stamp Act of 1765, was a blatant violation of a long-standing tradition of deferring the power of taxation to colonial legislatures. This caused a particularly heated response from Washington because of his experience with Robert Cary’s unjust, extorting business style. In a lengthy letter to Cary, Washington listed his grievances against the British economic system and the Stamp Act saying, “this unconstitutional method of taxation as a direful attack upon their [the colonists] liberties.” In 1766, the Stamp Act was repealed, “to the Thanks of every British Subject,” according to Washington.³⁷ What was so grievous about the Stamp Act is that it solidified Washington’s

³⁵ Ellis, 56. Washington to Thomas Lewis, February 17, 1774.

³⁶ Ellis, 57. Washington to George Mercer, November 7, 1771.

³⁷ Washington to Robert Cary & Co., July 21, 1766.

and many other colonists suspicion of a British conspiracy against colonial liberty, was that the British ministry was trying to perpetuate colonial ignorance to their actions by taxing paper forms knowledge and communication. The Stamp Act was a blatant attempt to fool the colonists, and it did not go unnoticed. After the repeal of the Stamp Act, it would seem that parliament was back on track until the Townshend Acts were implemented the following year. Washington did not involve himself in the public debate against them until 1769, when he entered the deliberation in a distinguishing way.

In the years between 1766 and 1769, Washington's focus was more personal than public as he spent his time cultivating his wheat (his new cash crop), and lobbying for the "bounty lands" in the Ohio Country. In 1769, Washington seemed to determine that all of the petitions and complaints to the British government were completely ineffectual. In a letter to George Mason, Washington reveals his true feelings about the relationship between the colonists and the British Empire, "At a time when our Lordly Masters in Great Britain will be satisfied with nothing less than the deprivation of American Freedom, it seems highly necessary something should be done to avert the stroke and maintain the liberty which we have derived from our ancestors." Washington began using the perspective language of a revolutionary by alluding to, though a "dernier resort," the prospective chance of war. At this time, however, Washington believed that the best plan of action was to develop a comprehensive program of non-importation, which "by starving their trade and manufacturers" would exert pressure on the British government to alter their course. Washington began urging Virginians to become economically independent and sufficient. On May 18, 1769 Washington presented to the House of Burgesses the proposal calling for a colony-wide boycott of

British goods, including the slave trade. By doing this, Washington had removed himself from the sidelines and became an acknowledged front-runner in the resistance movement of Virginia's planter class.³⁸

After the boycott was established, the British ministry disavowed all of the Townshend Acts, except for the Tea Act, which was meant to remain a symbol of British authority. This eventually led to the Boston Tea Party. Washington responded to the Boston Tea Party in a letter to George William Fairfax in 1774, saying, "the cause of Boston... ever will be the cause of America (not that we approve of their conduct in destroying the Tea)."³⁹ The coming of the "intolerable acts" further accentuated Washington's conviction that there was a full fledged conspiracy against American Liberty, "Does it not appear as clear as the sun in its meridian brightness, that there is a regular, systematic plan formed to fix the right and practice of taxation upon us?" To his friend, Bryan Fairfax, Washington wrote that Great Britain would "make us as tame & abject Slaves, as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway."⁴⁰

This was a particularly decisive time in Washington's life. Whether it was surveying land, gaining military prestige, marrying one of the wealthiest women in Virginia, buying all the top quality goods, or securing claims to a colossal amount of land, everything that Washington did in his early life was concentrated on self-elevation to reach elite status in Virginia. After he had reached that status, he was inclined to keep it, which eventually meant taking a stand against the very system he had used to elevate himself. In this crucial time in his life, Washington ascended from being a private figure to a

³⁸ The quotations in this paragraph are found in Washington's letter to George Mason, April 5, 1769.

³⁹ Ellis, 61-62. Washington to George William Fairfax, June 10-15, 1774.

⁴⁰ Ellis, 62. Washington to Bryan Fairfax, July 4, 1774.

public figure. He would now have the opportunity to, once again as he did in the French and Indian War, involve himself in a world issue that was much greater than himself. The stage that lay before Washington was appropriate for an admirer of Joseph Addison's *Cato*, as he would very soon be given an opportunity to display the same public virtue, which he had admired throughout his youth.

The "Dernier Resort"

In the summer of 1774, Washington underwent a political education as he spent time with George Mason. In fact, Washington chaired the meeting in Alexandria where the Fairfax Resolves (Madison's draft warned of a concerted British plan to make the colonists into slaves – important because it recommended that the Continental Congress approve a comprehensive boycott of British goods) were adopted. Washington knew he was undereducated concerning politics, but his self-made-man mentality caused him to take these opportunities to understand what was going on around him. In a letter to Bryan Fairfax in August of 1774, Washington expressed the development of his mindset, "much abler heads than my own hath fully convinced me that it [current British policy] is not only repugnant to natural right, but subversive of the Laws & Constitution of Great Britain itself.... An Innate Spirit of freedom has told me that the measures which [the] Administration hath for sometime been, and now are, most violently pursuing, are repugnant to every principle of natural justice."⁴¹ This "Innate Spirit of freedom" that he mentioned was clearly awakened during the most recent 20 years of his life. British policy had been the

source of his frustrations since his struggle of authority with Captain James Mackay, Dagworthy, Shirley, and Campbell. Through Washington's newly found understanding of "natural right," it appears he determined that his treatment as a colonial officer in the war, and his denial of a royal commission were all symptoms of the British government violating his natural right of equality. The central theme throughout his years in the war, his dealings with British merchants, and British reservation of western lands still remained the problem of unfounded British superiority over the colonists. The principle manifest in the Declaration of Independence of "all men are created equal" obviously was being violated by the Great Britain. Washington's experience with George Mason in the summer of 1774 arguably put all of this in perspective.

Not only had the British ministry violated the colonist's natural right to equality, but it had also violated their natural right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness by making them financially dependent through taxation and exploitative trade. Washington, being a self-made man, was a fiercely independent individual, and the British ministry had continuously created situations that forced his dependence upon them. Washington experienced firsthand the British trap of dependency through his business with Cary & Company, where he was required to sell only the products that they allowed for less than what the items were worth, and he had to settle for the poorness of their service; further, Cary & Company made him dependent through taking unreasonable interest on his debt. It is reasonable to allege that Washington had a sense of his own self-worth and he despised dependence, and distrusted authority that was beyond his own control. In light of his most recent education from George Mason, Washington could most likely understand that he has a natural right to liberty and the

⁴¹ Ellis, 63. Washington to Bryan Fairfax, August 24, 1774.

pursuit of happiness, which was being violated by the British.

At the Virginia Convention in August, Washington was elected as one of the seven delegates to represent Virginia in the first Continental Congress, where a response to the Intolerable Acts would be adopted. Prior to his departure, Washington began to pre-prepare for the last resort (war) by buying a new sash and epaulets for his military uniform, looking into musket prices, and ordering *A Military Treatise on the Appointments of the Army* by Thomas Webb. Although he hoped it could be avoided, he prepared himself for the worst-case scenario.⁴²

The first Continental Congress resulted in a petition of grievances to the British ministry in hopes that it would change its course. In a letter to John Connolly, Washington exposed the truth of the situation; “There is reason to believe the Ministry would willingly change their ground, from a conviction the forcible measures will be inadequate to the end designed. A little time must now unfold the mystery, as matters are drawing to a point.”⁴³ The Continental Congress decided that if the Crown would not respond favorably to the petition, a second Continental Congress would be called to most likely declare war. During the spring of 1775, country militia units were organizing within the colonies, the men were “forming themselves into independent companies, choosing their officers, arming, equipping, and training for the worst event.”⁴⁴ Five of which asked Virginia’s greatest war hero to lead them. The British ministry, however, did not change its course as Washington had hoped, and the colonies were preparing for war. Receiving 106 of 108 votes, Wash-

ington was elected to represent Virginia at the second Continental Congress. With the colonies preparing for war, Washington became the most popular candidate for the delegation based on his military experience and reputation. At this time, Mount Vernon became an unofficial headquarter for planning Virginia’s response, making Washington an even more prominent figure.

An act that further illuminates Washington’s theatrical nature, and value of symbolism, is that he wore his military uniform to the second Continental Congress. Washington believed that war was inevitable, and he was ready to take responsibility for it. In Washington’s mind, the English escalated the inevitability of war when British troops occupied Boston in 1774. The shots fired at Lexington and Concord were described by Samuel Adams as an event that, “changed the instruments of warfare from the pen to the sword.”⁴⁵ It was an important line that had been crossed. After this point, war became a distinct possibility unless the British Ministry altered their course. In a letter to George Fairfax in 1775, Washington expresses the magnitude of the situation with Great Britain, “Unhappy it is though to reflect, that a Brother’s sword has been sheathed in a Brother’s breast, and that, the once happy and peaceful plains of America are either to be drenched with Blood or inhabited by slaves. Sad alternative! But can a virtuous Man hesitate in this choice?”⁴⁶ In the second Continental Congress, Washington was the only delegate dressed in a military uniform, and he was immediately given the assignment to chair several committees having to do with military readiness. Washington was unanimously selected to lead the Continental Army.

Washington’s unanimous election to be the Commander-in-Chief of the Conti-

⁴² Ellis, 65. William Milnor to Washington, November 29, 1774.

⁴³ Ellis, 65. Washington to John Connolly, February 25, 1774.

⁴⁴ Chernow, 175. Longmore, *Invention of George Washington*, 149.

⁴⁵ Chernow, 181. Stoll, *Samuel Adams*, 157.

⁴⁶ Chernow, 181. Washington to George William Fairfax, May 31, 1775.

mental Army was extremely significant in understanding the development of his image in the eyes of his contemporaries. It was at this point in his life that his contemporaries began to realize that George Washington was no ordinary man. Politically, a Virginian needed to lead the army to secure the interest of southern states by symbolizing that the war was a colony-wide revolution instead of being limited to Massachusetts, and Washington was the most qualified candidate from Virginia. The reason that he was elected, however, extends much more deeply than this initial superficial requirement. The more significant truth of Washington's unanimous appointment resides in his outward appearance and inward reservation. Washington was the obvious choice for the position, not only for his military fame and experience, but also for the fact that when he entered the room, everyone could see that he was the greatest man present.

Washington's physical appearance played a large role in this perception. He was nearly six feet and three inches in a time when the average height for European-born men was around five feet and five inches. John Adams had a running joke that Washington was selected by deliberative bodies to lead because he was always the tallest man in the room. The seriousness of this joke was that Washington was physically majestic. One physician said, "He has so much martial dignity in his deportment that you would distinguish him to be a general and a soldier from among ten thousand people."⁴⁷ Washington's physicality made his reserved demeanor a sign of strength and sagaciousness in the eyes of his contemporaries. As many delegates at the convention appeared to be long-winded and overly talkative, Washington's silence earned him respect from his colleagues.

At this point in his life, Washington had perfected the principles he learned from *Rules of Civility*. He was the embodiment of a gentleman, carrying himself with unparalleled dignity and grace. Washington carried his six-foot-three, 175-pound frame with a composure that impressed his colleagues. A fellow officer from the French and Indian War describes Washington's demeanor with great insight saying, "In conversation, he looks you full in the face, is deliberate, deferential, and engaging. His voice is agreeable rather than strong. His demeanor at all times composed and dignified. His movements and gestures are graceful, his walk majestic, and he is a splendid horseman."⁴⁸ Washington's physique combined with his posture, movement, and style made him appear majestic and heroic. In a letter to her husband, Abigail Adams describes her first impressions of Washington:

I was struck with General Washington. You had prepared me to entertain a favorable opinion of him, but I thought the one half was not told me. Dignity with ease, and complacency, the Gentleman and Soldier look agreeably blended in him. Modesty marks every line and feature of his face. Those lines of Dryden instantly occurred to me:

"Mark his Majestick fabrick! He's a temple
Sacred by birth, and built by hands divine
His Souls the Deity that lodges there.
Nor is the pile unworthy of the God."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Benjamin Rush to Thomas Rushton, October 29, 1775 in *Letters of Benjamin Rush, Vol. I*, L.H. Butterfield, ed. (Princeton: 1951), 92.

⁴⁸ Albert Bushnell Hart, ed., *Tributes to Washington, Pamphlet No. 3* (Washington, DC: George Washington Bicentennial Commission, 1931), 6-7.

⁴⁹ Abigail Adams to John Adams, July 16, 1775.

Benjamin Rush, also gives a revealing description of Washington's appearance in saying, "Not a king in Europe but would look like a valet de chambre by his side."⁵⁰ It is clear that Washington's magnificent appearance and composure was a determining attribute that made him the best choice available to lead the army.

Washington's outward appearance seemed to inspire his contemporaries to believe that his inward virtue was valuable enough to make him a leader. In 1789, Jedidiah Morse described Washington as:

tall, upright, and well made; in his manner easy and unaffected. His eyes were of a bluish cast, not prominent, indicative of deep thoughtfulness, and when in action, on great occasions remarkably lively. His features strong, manly, and commanding; his temper reserved and serious; his countenance grave, composed, sensible. There was in his whole appearance an unusual dignity and gracefulness which at once secured him profound respect, and cordial esteem. He seemed born to command his fellow men.⁵¹

The outward qualities that Washington exhibited reflected the qualities of his mind and character. His physical presence was a significant and determining part of Washington's greatness. He was able to play the necessary part of a hero in times of crisis, generally because his image was an inspiration to the American people.

As Washington assumed the role of Commander-in-Chief, he understood that he was making himself synonymous with the republican cause of the revolution. There was truly no one else who could have embodied the principles, for which the colo-

nists were fighting as he did. He not only embodied these principles physically, but philosophically as well. Washington embodied the conviction that natural rights were being violated within the colonies. He understood the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; this is shown in the way he vigorously labored to attain and improve his estate. Washington was, in every sense of the word, a self-made man. He rose from obscurity through hard work and determination to become the most prominent man in Virginia. He embodied what would later be known as the American dream. His cause, throughout his entire life, embodied the cause of the rest of the colonies. Washington found himself limited and oppressed by the aristocratic policies of Great Britain. Washington understood the revolutionary principle that all men are created equal through his experience with British superiority. The British treated Washington as an inferior based on the fact that he was born in the colonies, a trait that was beyond his control. He saw the injustice in this way of thinking through knowing his own worth, and realizing that all men are born with the same opportunity to be great, but not all men seize that opportunity. The way that he conducted himself through his experiences was indicative of a colonist who desired to be free and independent of a limiting and oppressive government. He was the physical manifestation of the American Revolution itself.

A final trait to speak for Washington's appointment, and his embodiment of American ideals, resides in his tremendous ambition. The speech he gave after his election as Commander-in-Chief reveals his understanding of his responsibility as he expressed that he felt unqualified for the job and that he would serve without pay, "But lest some unlucky event should happen unfavourable to my reputation, I beg it may be remembered by every Gentn in the room, that I this day declare with the utmost

⁵⁰ Benjamin Rush to Thomas Rushton, October 29, 1775.

⁵¹ Hart, 7.

sincerity, I do not think myself equal to the Command I (am) honoured with.”⁵² From this speech, some scholars have suggested that Washington was attempting to conceal his ambitions for power through a gesture of modesty, or that he was denying his ambition all together. What seems more likely is that Washington was attempting to defend his reputation. One cannot truly understand Washington until his internal struggle of defending his reputation and responding to public duty is examined within the context of his true ambitions. No one can deny that Washington at the Continental Congress was the most ambitious man in a room of ambitious men, but it is important to understand that Washington’s ambition cannot be defined by the traditional standard of a lust for power and control. Washington’s ambition was dominated by an insatiable desire to be seen a virtuous and great man.

It is evident through Washington’s continuous reluctance to accept positions of power throughout his life that he was facing a constant struggle between the call to public duty and his desire to maintain his reputation. The same is true from Washington’s speech upon his election as Commander-in-Chief. Washington’s core instinct was always to defend his reputation, which defined his place in society, but he also seemed to possess an understanding of his own capabilities to serve his country. It is reasonable to assert that Washington believed that he was the most capable person present to lead the army, but he also understood that his agreement to become the symbol of the American Revolution was a wager that could either secure his place in history, or completely destroy his reputation forever. When Washington asked his colleagues to remember that if his reputation was damaged in the process of his service

that he did not think himself equal to the command he had been given, he was really saying, in his own way, that he was binding himself to public duty for better or for worse. In his speech, Washington was making the assertion that he wants to be seen as a servant who is putting his reputation on the line for the sake of his country rather than a dictator seeking individual glory. It was an indication that Washington believed that power should not be given to those who seek it, but rather that the worthiness to assume power is defined by ability and the reluctant willingness to serve. What was truly unique about Washington’s character is that even when he knew that his reputation and place in history as a virtuous hero was in jeopardy, his service to the public always took precedent. The internal battle between defending his reputation and the call to public service was a constant entity in his life. The element about Washington’s character that is important to understand is that his ambition to propel his reputation and to be seen as a virtuous leader always led him to accept positions of service. It was the element within Washington that made him a true statesman and the exemplar of republican virtue.

By accepting the position of Commander-in-Chief, Washington was risking not only his reputation, but also his life and the lives of everyone in the colonies. Washington fully recognized that he was the first man in war with the British Empire. His commitment to the cause needed to be greater than anyone’s. Consequently, he had made himself synonymous with the Revolution, for better or for worse. It was the highest call to duty, but it was also a gamble that risked everything that he cared about, and he understood that better than anyone. Hence, it was his highest prerogative to cling to the cause of American Revolution, because his life, reputation, and place in history depended on victory. Without a doubt, there was no one better suited by

⁵² Address to the Continental Congress, June 16, 1775.

nature to lead his country through a nearly impossible war, while preserving the cause of self-government than Washington.

PART II: Greatness Manifest

The true elemental greatness of George Washington is best exhibited in his actions throughout the American Revolutionary War. All the experiences of Washington's early life had prepared him for leadership of the Continental Army. Washington's greatness was unconventional, but completely necessary to the success of the Revolution. He was clearly not a military genius; in fact, he lost more battles than he won. The true nature of Washington's virtue resided in the soundness of his character. His ability to learn from his mistakes, to be indefatigable, and to preserve the cause of the Revolution combined to be absolutely indispensable to American victory. As it turned out, the colonies did not need a great military genius; had they had one, he would have found that there were no resources with which to conduct a proper and successful campaign. The colonies needed someone who could create something from nothing, someone with the ability to make the best of a bad situation. They needed someone who was unwilling to give up the fight for the republican experiment of self-government, even when the odds of success were stacked against it, the cause appeared lost, or it seemed like it was not worth the fight. They needed a man who could inspire unity under eternal principles and in the face of great adversity. George Washington wasn't only the man closest to fit this description at the time; he was the undeniable manifestation of these traits. Without George Washington, there could not have been an American victory. He was truly, in every sense of the word, "the indispensable man."

Many scholars have attributed Washington's willingness to accept the role of Commander-in-Chief to his boundless ambition. The idea that Washington continuously denied power for the sole reason of acquiring it, and that he understood the art of power and the political game of putting on a false face to fool people into relinquishing more power to him, seems to be prominent among modern inclinations. Through the evidence available, it is more palpable that Washington's ambition pulled him away from power. Washington continuously, throughout his life, found himself in situations where power was being offered to him freely and he only accepted power with great reluctance. Washington's ambition drove him to pursue a great reputation, and in many cases the power offered him placed him in situations where his reputation would undoubtedly be at risk. Whenever Washington accepted great power, he did so because he believed that it was his duty to the public. This is most evident in a letter to Colonel Bassett, wherein Washington expressed his true feelings towards accepting the position of Commander-in-Chief:

I am now Imbarked on a tempestuous ocean, from whence perhaps no friendly harbor is to be found. I have been called upon by the unanimous voice of the Colonies to the command of the Continental Army. It is an honor I by no means aspired to. It is an honor I wished to avoid, as well as from an unwillingness to quit the peaceful enjoyment of my Family, as from a thorough conviction of my own Incapacity & want of experience in the conduct of so momentous a concern; but the partiality of the Congress, added to some political motives, left me without a choice. May God grant, therefore, that my acceptance of it, may be attended with some good to the common

cause, & without injury (from want of knowledge) to my own reputation. I can answer but for three things: a firm belief of the justice of our cause, close attention in the prosecution of it, and the strictest Integrity. If these cannot supply the place of ability & Experience, the cause will suffer, & more than probable my character along with it, as reputation derives its principal support from success.⁵³

This passage is evidence that Washington, while he resolved that it may be inevitable as seen by his preparation prior to the Continental Congress, never wanted to take the position; he believed that he did not have a choice. He did so because he was summoned by the public to lead. Washington was fully aware that his reputation would be put in jeopardy as a result, but public duty took precedent over his own pride and ambition. In fact, Washington's pride was an important factor in motivating him to victory as he said, "reputation derives its principle from success." In this instance, as a trait of his own nature, Washington's ambition was perfectly aligned with his duty; the success of Washington's reputation relied on the success of the Revolution. Washington understood this and was willing to do whatever it took to secure victory, even if it meant doing the unpopular thing. This is how Washington became synonymous with the cause; his involvement was much more personal than political. Washington's devotion to the cause of the Revolution was completely unwavering; through triumph and disaster the element that kept the cause alive was Washington. He was truly the embodiment of republican virtue in the sense that the public duty to secure the natural rights of

citizens took precedent over his own ambitions.

Section 1: Keeping Independence

Washington's actions during the year of 1776 were not only absolutely essential to the survival of the Continental Army, but also revealing of his great virtue. Ironically, Washington's early decisions in this year were nearly fatal for the army. Washington showed true virtue in being able to learn from his mistakes and swallow his pride to do what was necessary to protect the survival of the Continental Army and the ideals of the Revolution. Washington had to come to the realization that taking a European strategy of open-field warfare (what he believed was most honorable) against the British was not going to harbor victory. In order to survive, Washington had to suppress his pride and indoctrination of European warfare protocol and accept a strategy that he believed to be cowardly. The simple fact that loomed over Washington was that the men in the army were not professionals and had little chance to succeed in head-to-head battle with the British regulars. Washington had to adopt the strategy of fighting a "war of posts." Washington was reluctant to accept this at first, but proved that he had the aptitude to let go of his own sense of honor for the practicality of preserving something that was much bigger than himself. In his General orders for the army on February 27, 1776, Washington expressed the importance of the cause, "it is a noble Cause we are engaged in it is the Cause of virtue and mankind, every temporal advantage and comfort to us, and our posterity, depends upon the Vigour of our exertions; in short, Freedom or Slavery must be the result of our conduct, there can therefore be no greater

⁵³ Washington to Colonel Bassett, June 19, 1775.

inducement to men to behave well.” He ends the message with the warning that deserters “will be instantly shot down.”⁵⁴

Lacking the resources to commission professional soldiers appeared to be the greatest source of frustration to Washington throughout most of the war. It appears that the true obstacle of the war was not so much the British army as it was the challenge of attaining money, clothing, food, supplies, and men from Congress. Washington, through his experience in the French and Indian War, had developed a sense of reality for militia forces that he relayed in a letter to John Hancock in February of 1776, “To expect then the same service from raw, and undisciplined Recruits as from Veteran Soldiers, is to expect what never did and perhaps never will happen.”⁵⁵ In September of 1776, Washington made a similar complaint “To place any dependence upon militia is assuredly resting upon a broken staff. Men just dragged from the tender scenes of domestic life, unaccustomed to the din of arms, totally unacquainted with every kind of military skill ... makes them timid and ready to fly from their own shadows.”⁵⁶ Washington knew that a militia was not going to be sufficient in maintaining a competitive edge against the British. The source of the problem was that Congress was reluctant to support the prospect of a standing army. Standing armies had been protested by the colonies in prewar years believing them to be incompatible with republican principles. This was not completely unreasonable given the pattern in the history of republics: that strong standing armies have always had the ability to dissolve republican institutions of civilian authority. Washington believed that in order to have republican principles, the war had to be won and that

could not happen without trained regulars. It was exceedingly clear to Washington that a standing army was a risk Congress would have to take if they had any hope of success.

In August of 1775, Washington publicly revealed his opinion of militia forces as he made several critical comments about the lack of discipline in the New England militia. He described New Englanders in general as “an exceedingly dirty and nasty people.” This was an important learning experience for Washington because his comments ended up creating political firestorms in the Massachusetts legislature and the Continental Congress. Washington ended up apologizing for his comments as he realized that he was no longer a mere Virginia planter with the aptitude to make regional criticisms. Now Washington was the representative for what was being called “the United Colonies.” Washington realized at this point that he needed a self-contained and reserved personality to maintain his image as the face of the Revolution. Any glimpse of humanity or personal opinion he revealed henceforth was most likely between he and Martha. Unfortunately for scholars, and most likely more fortunately for Washington’s public image, Martha burned all of their correspondences after his death.⁵⁷

Though Washington had little faith in militias, they showed remarkable success against the British at Bunker Hill. The British sailed away from Boston on March 17, 1776. Consequently, Washington received high praise for this perceived victory over the English from Bostonians. He was also given an honorary degree by Harvard College. At this point the Massachusetts and New York legislatures were sending Washington letters addressing him as “His Excellency.”⁵⁸

After the British evacuated Boston, there appeared to be three options that

⁵⁴ General Orders, February 17, 1776.

⁵⁵ Washington to John Hancock, February 9, 1776.

⁵⁶ Washington, Letter to the Continental Congress, September 24, 1776. J. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, 110, 112.

⁵⁷ Ellis, 78-79.

⁵⁸ Ellis, 77.

Washington and his generals had before them: First, was taking the continental army over the Alleghenies in favor of a hit and run guerilla warfare strategy; Second, was a “War of Posts” or the “Fabian Strategy,” which is to avoid direct conflict by harassing the enemy with minor skirmishes causing attrition, and disrupting supply lines; Third, was direct conflict from a favorable defensive position. Washington believed that the first was a desperate last resort, and the second was only a more deluded form of cowardice. It is evident from his actions in New York that Washington’s sense of honor and aggressive nature lead him to favor the strategy of direct conflict. Washington attempted to put the open field warfare strategy to use in New York as he prepared to meet the British forces head on in Manhattan and Long Island. It seems that even though Washington had great reservations with militia, he still believed that it was destiny that the purity of the American cause would prevail. Washington eloquently expresses the importance of the American cause in his address to the army before the Battle of Long Island, August 27, 1776:

The time is now near at hand which must probably determine whether Americans are to be freemen or slaves; whether they are to have any property they can call their own; whether their houses and farms are to be pillaged and destroyed, and themselves consigned to a state of wretchedness from which no human efforts will deliver them. The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the courage and conduct of this army. Our cruel and unrelenting enemy leaves us only the choice of brave resistance, or the most abject submission. We have,

therefore, to resolve to conquer or die.⁵⁹

Washington's words expressed a belief that his army would prevail based on the severity of the circumstances and the justified perspective of the colonists. It was a romantic and noble idea, but it lacked practicality. Washington was about to learn perhaps his most important lesson of the war; that patriotism and a pure cause will avail little without the proper resources.

This reality would change his approach to the way he would conduct his strategy, but it never had an effect on his understanding of his own relationship to the cause itself. In understanding how Washington was the sole reason for American victory in the Revolutionary War, it is important to examine what he believed his relationship to the cause was really like. Washington’s way of thinking about the American cause and how much he related to it can be seen most clearly in an event that happened prior to the Battle of Long Island. Before the engagement, the British General Howe sent Colonel Patterson as an envoy to discuss peace terms with Washington. Patterson bore a letter for “George Washington Esq.,” but Washington’s staff informed him that there was no one existing in the camp by that name, and that the only Washington in the camp was “His Excellency General Washington.” Patterson explained that General Howe could not recognize that title without endorsing the rebellion. Patterson was eventually admitted to speak with Washington where Washington explained that the document is addressed to a private person, with which he can no longer identify. Washington had transcended the ability to be a private person. This is exhibited in his reserved, aloof, and extra-personal demeanor, and his iconic status within the

⁵⁹ Address to the Army before the Battle of Long Island, August 27, 1776.

colonies. Washington was now the standing symbol of the American Revolution; he could no longer afford to be merely a man.⁶⁰ It was only after the British evacuated Boston that the Massachusetts and New York legislatures start sending Washington letters, addressing him as “His Excellency.” This is somewhat controversial because the title, “His Excellency,” sounds quite monarchical. At first glance, it would seem that Americans were already attempting to replace the old George with the new one, and that would not be a ridiculous notion. After all, by the 18th century monarchy, in one form or another, was the most popular form of government found in the world. The possibility of America creating its own monarchy with George Washington at the head was not as far-fetched as it may seem. In spite of this possibility, aligning the title of “His Excellency” with George Washington was not so much monarchical as it was a term of great respect for Washington’s position and his personal conduct. This title seemed to indicate the republican virtue of the excellence in public service. As the Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, Washington was in the perfect position to represent this title as he had become more than a citizen, but not a monarch; he was simply the human representative of the eternal principles of the Revolution. He embodied true republican principles in the sense that he was the temporary sovereign of a republican army, selflessly giving his efforts as a servant to the public. It was a part that suited Washington personally because of his admiration of characters such as Cato and Cincinnatus. Evidently, in light of the situation of the time, the title of “His Excellency” was conceivably more suiting for a republican hero rather than a monarch. The American Revolution needed someone who could protect and preserve the cause by taking the position of a monarch without

being corrupted by the subsequent power. Washington fit this position perfectly.

This republican hero, however, still had much to learn about war strategy and the capability of his own army. Long Island was lost in a day, and Washington had given General Howe a chance to destroy the Continental Army by dividing his forces between Manhattan and Long Island. Evidently, Washington had made a series of tactical errors by refusing to retreat until a mass amount of damage was already done to his army’s supplies and men. It was a wonder that General Howe, most likely being cautious because of what happened at Bunker Hill, did not completely destroy the Continental army. Instead, Howe somehow found a way to give Washington an escape route across the Hudson at Peekskill. Washington was soon in full flight across New Jersey.

It was at this moment that Washington abandoned his hope for a quick victory. With the Continental Army in shambles it would take time to build it back up. Henceforth, Washington decided to fight a war of attrition, and to adopt the strategy of the famous Roman General, Fabius Cunctator, who used hit-and-run tactics successfully against the Carthaginians. In a letter to John Hancock in September of 1776, Washington promised, “on all occasions to avoid a general Action” and to refrain from risking any forces, “unless compelled by a necessity into which we ought never to be drawn.”⁶¹ Washington had made a mistake by keeping his forces in Manhattan; a mistake that was most likely due to his confidence in justice and his belief that good would triumph over evil (as demonstrated in his address to the army). It is reasonable to assume that Washington was hit with reality after this devastating loss in New York. After the defeat, Washington abandoned his romantic idea of a

⁶⁰ Ellis, 94.

⁶¹ Ferling, 111-112.

glorious American victory on the biggest stage, and started thinking about what was practical. What was clear after the battles of New York was that the Continental Army could not compete with the highly trained and more experienced British regulars. Practicality called for a more defensive strategy, but Washington seemed to understand that an offensive move needed to be made to regain the honor that he had lost from the humiliating defeat.

Washington's mistakes in New York unquestionably put his honor and reputation in jeopardy. The Continental Army barely made it out of New York, and with the damage taken there was hardly an army left. When Hancock inquired to the state of the army, Washington replied, "Give me leave to say Sir ... that our Affairs are in a more unpromising way than you seem to apprehend. ... Your Army ... is upon the eve of its political dissolution."⁶² As much as Washington could try to shift the blame to someone else, he would inevitably be held responsible and possibly replaced. Not only was his honor on the verge of being disgraced in the eyes of posterity, the cause of the Revolution was destined to fail with such low morale (seeing that morale would be a determining factor in recruiting a standing army in 1777) going into winter quarters. The Continental Army and George Washington's place in history had been compromised by his mistakes at New York; the survival of both was surely in peril. It was at this point that Washington made perhaps the most important tactical decision of the war: while the British retired to winter quarters around Trenton, New Jersey, Washington decisively launched an audacious 10-day campaign against British camps in the area. His decision to attack the British at this time was an all or nothing

wager that proved to be essential in securing the survival of the Continental Army.

The first engagement of this campaign was the famous Delaware River crossing to attack the Hessians in the middle of the night in Trenton. Though the famous Leutze painting of this moment is inaccurate in its depiction of the boats, the symbolic truth of the painting is that Washington personally led the vanguard across the icy river and into battle. It was a clear sign that Washington had taken full responsibility for any outcome that was bound to happen, and that not only his reputation, but also his life, was bound to the American cause. In a letter to Hancock, Washington expresses his conviction for the action, "I conceive it my duty, and it corresponds with my Inclination, to make head against them [the British] so long as there shall be the least probability of doing it with propriety."⁶³ Washington's resolve to act without caution in this instance has been considered by many historians to be the greatest move of his entire military career. His decisiveness and bravery in these engagements were essential to reclaiming the honor, which he had lost in New York. Not only does this instance demonstrate Washington's ability to learn from his mistakes, it shows virtue in his ability to persist in the face of failure, a trait that has been valued by Americans ever since. An aspect of American greatness that Washington exhibits in this situation is the ability to overcome overwhelming adversity. Washington set the precedent, at this moment in his life, for the American value of refusing to give up the cause for freedom and justice, even when all odds were against him. The ability to do the right thing, even when it is hard, was part of Washington's character, and perhaps it was best demonstrated in this instance.

⁶² Washington to John Hancock, October 4, 1776.

⁶³ Washington to John Hancock, December 27, 1776.

The last American campaign of 1776 was the perfect example of General Washington's unique quality. Again, what must be noted is that Washington was not a military genius. His quality, as it turned out, was tremendous character, and virtue. The unwillingness to go down without a fight turned out to be a winning factor in the war. Steadfastness and tenacity rather than military strategy proved to be the harbingers of American victory. Through the events that transpired, it is palpable to say that Washington's bravery served as an inspiration for the Colonial Army. After the Colonial Army had defeated the Hessians, the British sent Cornwallis to attack Washington at Trenton. Washington, however, caught wind of the impending assault and slipped away in the middle of the night to attack Princeton, where Cornwallis' rear guard was stationed. It was another unexpected victory. With clarity, one can understand that Washington's personal bravery in battle must have played a crucial role in the victory:

The Pennsylvania Militia have just broken in the face of heavy musket fire and grape shot; suddenly Washington appears among them, urging them to rally and form a line behind him. A detachment of New England continentals joins the line, which first holds and then begins to move forward with Washington front and center stride his white English Charger. The British troops are placed behind a fence at the crest of a hill. Within fifty yards bullets begin to whistle and men in the front of the American line begin to drop. At thirty yards Washington orders a halt and both sides exchange volleys simultaneously. An aid, colonel Edward FitzGerald covers his face with his hat certain that his commander, so conspicuous a target, was cut down. But while men on both sides

of him have fallen Washington remains atop his horse untouched. He turns toward Fitzgerald, takes his hand and says: "Away my dear colonel, and bring up the troops. The day is ours."⁶⁴

By his daring actions in battle, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that Washington believed one of two things, or perhaps both: that he physically could not be killed, or that the cause of American freedom was greater than his own life. Whether he was scrambling to save his own reputation is irrelevant; the overarching truth of the situation is that Washington believed that it was his duty (as expressed in the letter to Hancock) was to attend to the survival of the Continental Army. This was another instance when Washington's ambition was in perfect alignment with public duty. The actions that Washington took to recover his reputation were evidently beneficial to the survival of the army, and further proof that Washington had become simultaneous with the American Revolution. It is a true example of American greatness and Republican Virtue in the sense that his own ambition to maintain a virtuous reputation drove him to do what was in the best interest of his public duty.

Even though these victories by no means caused the British any substantial damage, it had a significant impact on American public opinion. What was seemingly a defeat had been turned into a victory and the morale of the army and support of public opinion had been rekindled before the transition into the New Year. Now that the cause had been refurbished, Washington could focus on what needed to be done to ensure the further survival of the army. Before entering the winter camp at Morristown, Washington made a non-negotiable demand that Congress would implement a

⁶⁴ Ellis, 98-99.

permanent standing army, “It may be said, that this is an application for powers, that are too dangerous to be intrusted. I can only add, that desperate diseases require desperate remedies, and with truth declare, that I have no lust for power but wish with as much fervency as any man upon this wide extended Continent for an Opportunity of turning the sword into a ploughshare.”⁶⁵ Washington understood better than anyone that the army could not survive with the instability of temporary commissions, and the inexperience of militiamen. The idea of having a standing army had been considered anti-republican by many members of the Congress, but Washington understood that if they wanted to have a republic at all, the war needed to be won.

Section 2: The Phoenix at the Forge

Though 1776 was a crucial year for the survival of the Continental Army, the true test of George Washington’s character had only just begun. In the years following 1776 until 1780, Washington had to balance the survival of the army with his own survival as Commander-in-Chief. The major dilemma, which most likely preceded the others, was that the Continental Congress refused to tax the colonies to support the Continental Army. In these years, Washington faced a constant struggle to gain financial support from the Congress. In reality, Washington could not win battles because the Continental Army was under-trained, undermanned, and underequipped. As a result of losing numerous battles that should have been won, the brunt of criticism was being attributed to Washington. Washington had to evade conspiracies to replace him within the Congress and amongst his

generals, while simultaneously holding a war of attrition against Great Britain, and maintaining enough military competence to hold the interest of the French. In the years between 1776 and 1780, Washington was singlehandedly balancing the expectations of three different nations. He needed to make it clear to the British that the Continental Army was not going to crumble; to make it obvious to the French that helping America would be beneficial to French interest; and to convince Americans that it was worth fighting for the cause of self-government. An amazing display of self-control, indefatigableness, and determination allowed him to keep the Continental Army together during this time.

Though the way Washington conducted himself throughout the rest of the war was a great feat, there are two situations that distinctly stand out in exhibiting the great virtue of Washington during these years. The first is when Washington refrained from action when General Howe occupied the American capital of Philadelphia, and the second is how Washington was able to keep his army together in the winter quarters at Valley Forge in 1777. The former indicates that Washington was able to put aside his personal honor to do what was best for the survival of the army, and the latter shows Washington’s unwillingness to give up the American cause in the face of overwhelming adversity. These two events are particularly important because they both clearly exhibit that Washington’s sense of public duty took precedent over his own inclinations, and that he would live and die with the cause that he was chosen to lead. He personally bound himself to the fate of the Continental Army. It was an unprecedented act of public service that, from the perspective of history, set him apart from any that had come before him. Washington was a man of the ideals of his time, and he put the lofty principles of freedom, public

⁶⁵ Washington to John Hancock, December 20, 1776.

duty, and devotion to one's country into action.

The campaign of 1777 turned out to be an even more trying time for Washington than the previous year. General Howe left New York and was preparing to march on the capital of Philadelphia. With much pressure from Congress and his generals, Washington did everything within his power to stop Howe's advance. After being defeated first at Brandywine and second at Germantown, Washington's ability to lead the Continental Army was called into question. What did not help Washington's reputation was that General Horatio Gates led a successful campaign at Saratoga that seemed to overshadow Washington's unsuccessful efforts in the Philadelphia operation. The lesson to be learned from these losses was that the undertrained Continental Army was no match for General Howe's regulars. Congress was forced to evacuate Philadelphia, bringing Washington's reputation and position into jeopardy because of his failure to protect the capital. Several members of Congress were beginning to express that the "Fabian Strategy" was not working and that a change must be made. At this point, there were many that wanted Washington to march on Philadelphia to make an effort to reclaim the capital and the honor of the army.

Based on the consistency of Washington's attention to how he was perceived, one can determine with significant clarity that his reputation was severely important to him, as it was with most men of his era. There is little doubt that General Howe's presence in Philadelphia was a standing challenge to Washington's reputation, and to the reputation of his army, to which he felt personally connected. The truly great act that Washington did in the face of this challenge was nothing. When he was being pressed to meet General Howe in Battle, he was able to act against his own aggressive tendencies. His resolve to do nothing in this

situation merits some attention because it illuminated his ability to be prudent and to put the interest of the army ahead of his own reputation. This was a situation in which Washington allowed himself to be influenced by General Nathaniel Greene. At the time, many believed that Greene was wrong by suggesting inaction, but Washington was able to see the wisdom behind Greene's advice. In a letter to Washington, Greene advocated patience for the survival of the army, "I wish that it was in our power to give that army some capital wound – the reputation of the Army and the happiness of the country loudly calls for it – but in consulting our wishes rather than our reason, we may be hurried by an impatience to attempt something splendid into inextricable difficulties."⁶⁶ Wisely Nathaniel Greene told Washington that, "your Excellency has the choice of but two things, to fight the enemy without the least prospect of success... or remain inactive, & be the subject of Censure of an ignorant & impatient populace."⁶⁷ The melancholy truth of the situation was that meeting Howe at Philadelphia with the Continental Army would have most likely resulted in the loss of the war. This was the moment when Washington fully overcame his own desires through extraordinary self-control, and was one of his most significant decisions, even in the face of unofficial criticisms. Joseph J. Ellis, a Washington scholar, most eloquently stated that these decisions "completed his transformation into a public figure whose personal convictions must be suppressed and rendered subordinate to his higher calling as an agent of history, which in this case meant that winning the war was more important than being himself."⁶⁸

In late 1777, the deciding factor of the war would be the survival of the Conti-

⁶⁶ Nathaniel Greene to Washington, November 24, 1777.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Ellis, 109.

mental Army, and Washington did the difficult right thing in conserving the army. After General Gate's victory at Saratoga, the British Army needed to readjust its strategy. Not only had it made a debacle of the organization of the British Army, it was also most likely a deciding factor in securing French involvement for the following year. Outside Philadelphia, Howe's army made several attempts to draw Washington into battle, but he would not allow himself to be fooled, even in the face of the reality that he had not secured a victory for the entire campaign.⁶⁹

Considering Washington's aggressive actions at Trenton and Princeton a year earlier, General Howe most likely believed that Washington would attempt a repeat that would lead to his defeat this time. Washington was known as a man of action, and it was uncharacteristic for Washington to resist an opportunity to be aggressive. The important trait of Washington's character that can be seen in this instance is his ability to understand the greater picture of things, and to put that greater picture above his own instincts. Again, Washington allowed his public duty to take precedent over his own ambitions.

The point, at which survival became most crucial for the army, was in the winter quarters of Valley Forge, where starvation, exposure, and disease claimed the lives of nearly 2,500 American soldiers. Valley Forge was a plateau, 20 miles northwest of Philadelphia that Washington described as "a dreary kind of place and uncomfortably provided."⁷⁰ It was a strategic position to hold because it was close enough to Philadelphia that the Continental Army would be able to hold the defense if General Howe decided to attack, and the surrounding agriculture was abundant. The true hardship at Valley Forge, however, did not come from

the location or the harshness of winter; it came from Congress' inability to provide sufficient supplies. The soldiers of the Continental Army were severely in want of clothes and food, and Congress, even through Washington's continuous petitions, failed to deliver the proper supplies until February. In a letter to Henry Laurens, Washington expresses the seriousness of the army's need of supplies, "I am now convinced beyond a doubt, that unless some great capital change suddenly takes place in that line, this Army must inevitably be reduced to one or other of these three things. Starve – dissolve – or disperse."⁷¹ This request was the central plead of Washington to Congress for the entire winter. This was not the first time Congress had been the source of the army's frustration, and it would certainly not be the last, but it was certain from the events of this winter at Valley Forge that Congress had inspired distrust and doubt within the minds of the soldiers and officers; a distrust and doubt that would eventually culminate into something potentially disastrous. Another element that became evident at Valley Forge was that George Washington, through his own example of steadfastness and strength of character, became the glue that held the Continental Army together in a time when they were most likely to fall apart.

The ghastliness of the scene that was Valley Forge during that winter must have been one of the lowest points in American History in terms of depravity and anguish. The men were so improperly clothed that only one in three of them had shoes to wear, causing them to track blood through the snow. Disease and frostbite were commonplace within the camp and even hundreds of horses died causing a grotesque spectacle that could not have been forgotten. The nightmarish scene most conceivably had a

⁶⁹ Ferling, 147-148.

⁷⁰ Washington to John Park Custis, February 1, 1778.

⁷¹ Washington to Henry Laurens, December 23, 1777.

huge impact on Washington as he said that the scene of Valley Forge “will not be credited but by those who have been spectators.”⁷² Dr. Albigeance Waldo of Connecticut also gives a telling description of the horrible sight:

Poor food – hard lodging – cold weather – fatigue – nasty clothes – nasty cookery – vomit half my time – smoke out of my senses – the devil’s in it – I can’t endure it ... There comes a bowl of beef soup – full of brunt leaves and dirt, sickish enough to make a Hector spew ... There comes a soldier, his bare feet are seen through his worn-out shoes, his legs nearly naked from the tattered remains of an only pair of stockings; his breeches not sufficient to cover his nakedness; his shirt hanging in strings; his hair disheveled; his face meager; his whole appearance pictures a person forsaken and discouraged.”⁷³

In late December, the situation appeared to be deteriorating on a daily basis. Washington continued to press Congress to make some action to gain supplies as he testified that “not a single hoof of any kind to slaughter and not more than 25 barls of flour! ... three or four days bad weather would prove our destruction.”⁷⁴ It seemed that Congress lived in constant fear of becoming the very thing from which they had declared independence a few years earlier. It is plain that Washington understood that to preserve the ideals of republicanism preserving the army at all costs was necessary, “I do not mean to exclude altogether the idea of patriotism ... But I will venture to assert that a great and lasting war can never be sup-

ported on this principle alone.”⁷⁵ Congress needed to find a way to stabilize currency and tax the colonies for enough money to feed and clothe the army. Even the farmers on the Pennsylvania countryside resolved to sell their goods to Philadelphia rather than the Continental Army. Valley Forge was chosen as winter quarters in part because of the rich, surrounding agriculture, but continental currency was depreciated and debased while the British paid in solid pounds sterling. This was a particularly disheartening time for Washington as he saw a general lack of public virtue within the citizens. Washington found the lack of patriotism in the face of pure greed to be particularly disenchanting among those who had called themselves patriots “Is the paltry consideration of a little dirty pelf to individuals to be placed in competition with the essential rights and liberties of the present generation and of millions yet unborn? ... And shall we at last become the victims of our own lust of gain? Forbid it heaven!”⁷⁶

What was certain, was that the man who promised to “share in the hardship and partake of every inconvenience”⁷⁷ was telling the truth in the sense that George Washington was the representative and defender of the army to Congress, and there is no doubt that he felt a deep personal connection to his men. In response to criticism from the Pennsylvania legislature about retiring to supposedly comfortable winter quarters, Washington crossly stated, “I can assure those gentlemen, that it is a much easier and less distressing thing to draw remonstrances in a comfortable room by a good fireside than to occupy a cold bleak hill and sleep under frost and snow without clothes or blankets. However, although they seem to have little feeling for the naked, distressed soldiers, I feel superabundantly

⁷² Washington to John Bannister, April 21, 1778.

⁷³ Chernow, 325.

⁷⁴ Washington to Henry Laurens, December 23, 1777.

⁷⁵ Washington to John Bannister, April 21, 1778.

⁷⁶ Washington to John Warren, March 31, 1779.

⁷⁷ General Orders, December 17, 1777.

for them and from my soul pity those miseries which it is neither in my power to relieve or prevent.”⁷⁸ This personal connection and treatment of his soldiers began to resemble that of a father to his children. This was evident among camp as Henry Knox told Washington that, “The people of America look up to you as their father, and into your hands they entrust their all, fully confident of every exertion on your part for their security and happiness.”⁷⁹ Washington had transcended the persona of general and had become a paternal figure to which the army looked for guidance and protection.

This remarkable display of character is what separated Washington from the traditional idea of a general. What must be reiterated is that Washington was not evidently a great military genius, he contained extraordinary moral character and virtue. This greatness of character is exhibited at Valley Forge as he became more than just a general; he became the father of his army. One Frenchman was able to capture Washington’s persona at Valley Forge the best:

I cannot describe the impression that the first sight of that great man made upon me, I could not keep my eyes from that imposing countenance: grave yet not severe; affable without familiarity. Its predominant expression was calm dignity, through which you could trace the strong feelings of the patriot and discern the father as well as the commander of his soldiers.⁸⁰

There are many who attribute the survival of the Continental Army to this aspect of Washington’s character. John Marshall, a staunch Washington supporter wrote, “Happily, the real condition of Washington was

not well understood by William Howe, and the characteristic attention of that officer [i.e., Washington] to the lives and comfort of his troops saved the American army.”⁸¹

The particular attention that Washington gave to his soldiers during their darkest hour inspired a love and respect towards him that lasted throughout and after the war. It would not be unreasonable to assert that without Washington’s leadership, the Continental Army would have dissolved and French influence would have dissipated causing the loss of the war and American Independence. The prospect that the Continental Army was able to survive through this winter was one that even Washington considered miraculous:

If Historiographers should be hardly enough to fill the page of History with the advantages that have been gained with unequal numbers (on the part of America) in the cause of this contest, and attempt to relate the distressing circumstances under which they have been obtained, it is more probable that Posterity will bestow on their labors the epithet and marks of fiction; for it will not be believed that such a force as Great Britain has employed for eight years in Country could be baffled ... by numbers infinitely less, composed of Men oftentimes half starved; always in Rags, without pay, and experiencing, at times, every species of distress which human nature is capable of undergoing.⁸²

One of the dominant themes in Washington’s early life had been the elemental fact that success followed survival. After Valley Forge, reenlistments and new recruits bolstered the army’s numbers to 12,000 with around 5,000 battle-tested veterans. It seem-

⁷⁸ Washington to Henry Laurens, December 23, 1777.

⁷⁹ Chernow, 324.

⁸⁰ Chernow, 326.

⁸¹ Jean Smith, *John Marshall*, 63.

⁸² Washington to Nathaniel Greene, February 6, 1783.

ed that many of Washington's successes came from his ability to outlast those around him; this is seen in the transformation of his reputation after the Braddock debacle in the French and Indian War, His inheritance of Mount Vernon after Lawrence's death, and his marriage to Martha Custis which brought him a large part of his wealth. All of these instances, which played a big role in Washington's success in life, happened when others died leaving him standing. Washington regarded the Continental Army as an extension of his own personality, and in this instance, that meant that success follows survival.

In February, Congress finally started circulating a sufficient amount of supplies within the camp. Things were beginning to look up. Washington's ability to inspire his men to stay together at Valley Forge was surely a determining factor in the survival of the army, but the success that followed in the first months of the next campaign can, in large part, be attributed to the arrival of Friedrich Wilhelm August Heinrich Ferdinand, Baron Von Steuben. While validity of his title has been the subject of debate amongst historians, as he claimed to have served under Frederick the Great as a general in the Prussian Army, Von Steuben's knowledge of Prussian and French military procedures and an infectious enthusiasm for drilling troops in marching formations was unquestionable. This provided remedy to the army's severely untrained and unfit to fight regular soldiers.⁸³

In May, Congress ratified the treaty with France (which promised to alter the strategic chemistry of the conflict), and passed legislation providing financial incentives. Also, the British Army was preparing to evacuate Philadelphia, proving Washington right about his presumption that "the possession of our towns, while we have an

Army in the field, will avail them little."⁸⁴ General Howe was forced to resign and was replaced by Sir Henry Clinton. It seems that public approval of the war in England was diminishing to the point that the British ministry, in an attempt to create favorable propaganda, released forged documents disclosing that Washington was really a secret agent who sold out the American cause for money. This prompted newspaper editorials to joke that Howe's record of failure suggested that he must be an American spy.⁸⁵ These were all signs that the war was entering a new and climactic phase.

In June, Washington led his army to attack General Clinton's forces at Monmouth Courthouse as they were heading toward New York. Despite an untimely retreat by General Lee, Washington was able to rally the troops and march them into battle. In general, the battle was more of a draw than it was a victory, but the Americans caused the British to withdraw and for the first time, it seemed that the Continental Army could compare to the British regulars. It may not have been an outright victory, but it proved that Von Steuben's drilling techniques at Valley Forge were a success and now it was clear that the Continental Army was ready to face the British in the field. After Monmouth Courthouse, General Clinton barricaded his Army in New York, and Washington set up defensive positions around the city. It appeared that the tables had turned with Washington now at the advantage.

Though the Continental Army had cured its lack of training and proved that they were ready to face the British, the central impediment endured. In the following years before Yorktown, the weakness of Congress was becoming more and more evident. In this time, the Continental Congress claimed to be powerless to reverse the

⁸³ Ellis, 116-117.

⁸⁴ Washington to Henry Laurens, October 3, 1778.

⁸⁵ Washington to Richard Henry Lee, May 25, 1778.

course by providing revenue, the treasury was empty, and profiteers and “forestallers” were hoarding supplies needed by the army and selling them for outrageous prices. Congress did not have the power to stop them. One of the chief impulses of the Revolution was that Parliament was over-taxing the colonists, but Congress needed to invoke taxes to maintain an army. This led to similar criticism that was imposed on Parliament. It would appear that Washington believed that the difference is that Parliament’s taxing was for the purpose of creating dependency and ignorance, while Congress’s taxing power was to secure liberty. By 1780, Washington was speaking with the language of an advocate of expanded national powers, “Certain I am, that unless Congress speaks in a more decisive tone, unless they are vested with powers by the several States competent to the great purposes of War, or assume them as a matter of right ... that our Cause is lost. We can no longer drudge on in the old way. I see one head gradually changing into thirteen.”⁸⁶

In 1781, the Continental Army was on the verge of extinction. This had to be the last campaign or the British would win the war. Fortunately, at this time the French finally sailed north and agreed to help the colonists in the field. There was a large British force in the South and Washington still remained obsessed with obtaining New York. The French fleet was not going to New York, however, and Southern Governors were asking Washington to bring his force south. It would appear that Washington began to understand that Virginia, not New York, was now the focus of the war, and he had to make Virginia his focus as well. It was among Washington’s chief characteristics to cling to personal convictions, but it was also a chief characteristic to abandon those convictions in the face of

reality and duty. What seemed to be evident from his actions in the war was that Washington faced a constant internal struggle between his own convictions and the practicality of what truly needed to be done. What made Washington great was his ability to overcome his own impulses for the sake of the common cause of his country.

As soon as Washington reached Yorktown the French fleet arrived at the Chesapeake, blocking Cornwallis’s escape route. French engineering brought siege to Yorktown and Washington was finally able to be the aggressor. With the combined effort of advanced French siege techniques and American artillery it did not take long to force Cornwallis to surrender. Over 7,000 British soldiers were captured and the negotiations of peace had begun. The war was virtually over, and American Independence was nearly solidified.

It is clear that the French played a large role in the American victory of the war. Without French involvement in 1781, the Continental Army most likely would not have been able to continue fighting due to lack of resources. Plainly, there are two things that are for certain about Americans after Yorktown: first, George Washington clearly, and singlehandedly held the army together throughout the entire war; second, that the Continental Congress’s weakness had nearly, and continuously, caused the Continental Army to dissolve. In observing the former, it is reasonable to assert that Washington’s quality of great character, his understanding of the cause of the Revolution, and his relationship to it made him the perfect, and perhaps the only, person who could have kept the army together long enough and efficiently enough for the French to enter the stage. What is clear about the latter is that Americans, especially the men in the army, had acquired great doubt in the abilities of Congress and an inclination towards the idea that republi-

⁸⁶ Washington to Joseph Jones, May 31, 1780.

canism may not be the best course for American government. What would become apparent in the following years was that the savior of the Revolution would soon need to be the savior of the Republic.

Section 3: Unnatural Immunities: Newburgh

As peace negotiations were taking place in Europe, Washington insisted on keeping the army in a state of readiness until the British had signed a treaty fully acknowledging American Independence. Washington remained skeptical even though Cornwallis's army had surrendered, "From the former infatuation, duplicity, and perverse system of British policy, I confess I am induced to doubt everything, to suspect everything."⁸⁷ The Continental Army held quarters in Newburgh, New York while waiting on the treaty and monitoring British-occupied New York City.

As anticipation for peace grew, the anxiety of the Continental Army was also growing to a climax. The soldiers understood that disbanding the army would come with peace and they were concerned that Congress would not fulfill its promises of back payment and pensions. By 1780, Congress began to see the unrest within the army as a few mutinies had formed. Benedict Arnold, one of Washington's best officers, betrayed the Continental Army by attempting to turn West Point over to the British. In an effort to prevent any more incidents within the army, Congress promised the officers a lifetime pension of half-pay upon their decommission. In 1782, however, Financier Robert Morris discontinued pay to the army as a cost-saving measure with the idea to make up the arrears once the treaty was signed. In 1783, officers organized to draft a petition to convert the lifetime half-

pay pension to a five-year full-pay pension indicating that they had "borne all they can bear"⁸⁸ in service to their country. General Alexander McDougall and two colonels brought the petition to Congress to represent the united struggle of the officers and to express the seriousness of the situation. It was obvious to Congress that the officers in the Continental Army were contemplating mutiny.

Congress was in an extremely unfortunate situation. The treasury was empty and the Articles of Confederation did not provide Congress with the power to tax the states for the appropriate amount of money to meet their promises. The states also rejected Congress's proposal to impose an import tariff. Congress had no conceivable way to meet the impatient officers' request. Congress selected a committee to address the petition, but Robert Morris emphatically told the committee that there were no funds available to meet the demands of the army. When the committee met with McDougall and his colonels, they made it clear that a "disappointment might throw them [the army] into extremities."⁸⁹ When Congress met to discuss the resolution of the committee, Robert Morris shockingly turned in his resignation. Congress was powerless to meet the demands of the army.

The whispers of a mutiny were even more prevalent at Newburgh. In May 1782, Officer Lewis Nicola wrote a letter that expressed what many of the officers were thinking, suggesting that the Continental Congress's weakness is the weakness that has been evident in all republics and that Washington needed to assume a royal position, march to Philadelphia, and order Congress to dissolve to prevent a disastrous post-war America.⁹⁰ What Nicola was most ominously suggesting is that Washington

⁸⁷ Washington to Nathaniel Greene, August 6, 1782.

⁸⁸ Ferling, 229.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Ellis, 139.

would crown himself king, and dismiss the notion that monarchy is a tyrannical and unjust form of government. This letter merits significant attention because it could have been a turning point in American history. What must be noted, and is difficult to comprehend in modern times, is the possibility of a monarchy developing in the United States. The government established by the Continental Congress with the Articles of Confederation, and later the American Constitution, was believed to be a republican experiment without a guarantee of success. The most successful government in the history of the world to this point had been the English government, which happened to be monarchical. It was not unreasonable for the officers of the army to assert that America needed a strong central government in order to survive. In fact, it was likely viewed as the most practical path, especially in light of the weakness of Congress. Washington's response to this letter was monumental and, perhaps, altered the course of history.

Washington was absolutely appalled and disturbed by Nicola's suggestion. He responded, saying, "With a mixture of great surprise and astonishment I have read with attention the Sentiments you have submitted to my perusal. Be assured Sir, no occurrence in the course of the War, has given me more painful sensations than your information of there being such ideas existing in the Army as you have expressed, and I must view with abhorrence, and reprehend with severity." Washington then asserted that this conspiracy is "big with the greatest mischiefs that can befall my Country." Clearly the thought of abandoning the republican experiment could not have been farther from Washington's mind as he affirmed that Nicola "could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable." Washington did proclaim his own understanding of the state of the army and his desire to amend it by adding "that no Man possesses a more

sincere wish to see ample justice done to the Army than I do," and that he would do everything within his ability to see that justice fulfilled. Washington finished the letter by expressing that if Nicola had any respect for the hard work the army had done within the last seven years, he needed to drop all thoughts of this conspiracy, "Let me conjure you then, if you have any regard for your Country, concern for yourself or posterity, or respect for me, to banish these thoughts from your Mind." His response to Nicola sheds light to the fact that Washington's devotion to the republican experiment was completely unwavering and that there was no disposition within him to take any royal power. It is clear at this point that Washington refused to see himself as anything more than a steward of the cause of self-government and natural rights.⁹¹

It was obvious through his constant petitions that Washington believed Congress needed more power than it had. To the Governor of New York, Washington expressed this conviction writing, "I am decided in my opinion, that if the powers of Congress are not enlarged, and made competent to all general purposes, that the Blood which has been spilt, the expense that has been incurred, and the distresses which have been felt, will avail in nothing; and that the band, already too weak, which holds us together, will soon be broken; when anarchy and confusion must prevail."⁹² Washington experienced firsthand the effects of the insufficient authority of a weak government by just barely surviving the war. Above all else, Washington understood that the Continental Congress could not keep its financial promises to the army. By 1783, Washington was convinced that Congress's fear of a standing army made them treat the army as if it were a joke, "The Army, as usual, are

⁹¹ All quotations from this paragraph are from Washington's letter to Lewis Nicola, May 22, 1782.

⁹² Washington to Benjamin Harrison, March 4, 1783.

without pay; and a great part of the Soldierly without shirts, and if one has to hazard for them [Congress] an opinion, it would be that the Army had contracted such a habit of encountering distresses and difficulties, and of living without money, that it would be impolitic and injurious to introduce other customs into it.”⁹³ Despite his dispositions against the weakness of Congress, Washington remained unwilling to subvert civilian authority. Washington’s submission to civilian authority was extraordinary in the sense that the true dissolution of republics from a historical perspective had always been the claim of power by an individual (i.e. Julius Caesar, Oliver Cromwell, Napoleon Bonaparte) to subvert the consent of the people.

Washington had shown his true feelings in his response to Nicola, but whether Washington condoned it or not, the conspiracy against Congress was approaching. On March 10, 1783, an anonymous letter was circulated through the camp, asserting that an ultimatum must be made to Congress. This letter was released at the same time as an anonymous call for an all-officer meeting the next day to discuss a strategy. When Washington caught wind of this he counteracted by calling an all-officer meeting on March 15. In his general orders, Washington asserted that the meeting would be presided over by the senior officer present, and that he expected a full report of the meeting, implying that he would not be present. On March 12, another anonymous letter was sent asserting that Washington’s orders were an endorsement of the conspiracy.⁹⁴

What happened in that meeting would be one of the most important events of Washington’s life and perhaps even history. As it was told by those who were there, the meeting was held in a building called the “Temple,” and chaired by General Horatio Gates, who was the senior officer

present. Apparently, after Gates opened the meeting, Washington unexpectedly entered through a side door and asked to speak. Gates, obviously struck with surprise, relinquished the chair. Washington proceeded to give a speech, in which he made a direct link between his own honor and the principles of the Revolution. His central message to the army was that an attempted coup would not only be an insult to the reputation of the army and of Washington (which were synonymous), but it would also be a repudiation of the principles for which they had been fighting. In this address, Washington relayed his feelings that his reputation and honor were directly connected with that of the army:

But as I was among the first who embarked in the Cause of our common Country. As I have never left your side one moment, but when called from you on public duty. As I have been the constant companion and witness of your Distress, and not among the last to feel, and acknowledge your merits. As I have ever considered my own military reputation as inseparably connected with that of the army. As my Heart has ever expanded with Joy, when I have heard its praises, and my indignation has arisen, when the mouth of detraction has been opened against it; it can scarcely be supposed at this late state of the War, that I am indifferent to its interests.

By saying this, Washington was asserting that his service to his country meant that he had bound himself to the American cause, the same cause for which all of them had been laboring for the extent of the war. Washington was relaying that he, being the personification of the army, understood the anguish of the situation better than anyone. Washington strongly asserts that the anony-

⁹³ Washington to John Armstrong, January 10, 1783.

⁹⁴ Ellis, 142.

mous writer in charge of staging the conspiracy is acting against his country and the interests of the army, “Can he be a friend to the Army? Can he be a friend to this Country? Rather, is he not an insidious Foe? Some Emissary, perhaps from New York, plotting the ruin of both, by sowing the seeds of discord and separation between the Civil and Military powers of the Continent?” Washington attempted to call the audience to its senses saying, “A moment’s reflection will convince every dispassionate Mind of the physical impossibility of carrying either proposal into execution.” Washington plead his case that the army had achieved a great thing in its efforts to this point, and by failing to see the principles for which they had all fought through and endured would be to fall short of the final victory; Greater personal interest would be satisfied in final achievement of establishing a Republic.

Washington continued the speech by urging the army to put aside their short-sited issues for the sake of preserving something greater than themselves:

And let me conjure you, in the name of our common country, as you value your own sacred honor, as you respect the rights of humanity, and as you regard the Military and National Character of America, to express Your utmost honor and detestation of the Man who wishes, under any specious pretenses, to overturn the liberties of our Country, and who wickedly attempts to open the flood gates of civil discord, and deluge our rising Empire in Blood.

In saying this, Washington demonstrated that he understood the core principles of a republic: That the power of government is derived from the consent of the people, not from executive or dictatorial power. The

“republican experiment” was meant to establish a type of government that would protect the natural rights of its citizens through the law rather than relying on a corruptible sovereign. This “National Character of America” that Washington spoke of is the prospect that the American people are not subjects, but sovereign citizens with the ability to govern themselves. Washington believed that by doing this, Americans will have created the most enlightened government that the world has ever seen, but the army played the most crucial part in securing that future:

You will give one more distinguished proof of unexampled patriotism and patient virtue, rising superior to the pressure of the most complicated sufferings; And you will, by the dignity of your Conduct, afford occasion of Posterity to say, when speaking of the glorious example you have exhibited to Mankind, “had this day been wanting, the World had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining.”⁹⁵

Essentially, as Washington closed with this statement he was urging the army to take the more difficult, but rewarding path by putting aside their temporary distresses for the sake of preserving what had the potential to be “the last stage of perfection” available to human beings, which was completing the “republican experiment.” As Washington viewed the army as an extension of himself, he expected them to accept that to which he had already committed: acting as a steward to the type of government to which the people had consented. In his last lines of the speech, it is clear that

⁹⁵ All quotations from the previous two paragraphs are from Washington's Address to the Officers of the Army, March 15, 1783.

Washington foresees that if the army would fail in upholding the cause, the cause would be lost forever. What remained the same was that Washington saw the army's role as he saw his own: to harbor the will of the people and nothing more.

Washington's speech was significant in understanding his perspective on the role of the army and the national identity of America, but this articulate rendition of the understanding of republican principles is overshadowed by his following gesture. After he gave his speech, Washington pulled a letter from his coat containing the promises of Congress to meet the army's demands. Washington appeared to be struggling to read the letter after stumbling over words in his attempt to read the first two lines. Then he reached into his coat to pull out a pair of spectacles and said, "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown grey, but almost blind in the service of my country." As told by those present, at this moment many of the officers began to openly sob and all thoughts of a mutiny were banished with that one sentence. None of the officers had ever before seen Washington wear spectacles in public. The powerful meaning behind this gesture was twofold: the first is that Washington had given the same service to his country and that he too was made "grey" from his associated tribulations having to do with the shortcomings of Congress; the second aspect of Washington's symbolic performance was that the reason for his service had been to protect and harbor the cause of self-government and republicanism, and he was so surprised at his fellow comrade's willingness to turn their back on everything that they had fought for that he had grown "almost blind" to their recent intentions. With this simple sentence, he said everything that he had presented in his address and nothing could

have resonated with his men more than that gesture.⁹⁶

What is clear about his philosophy of life in this scenario (and many others) is that Washington lived his life as if he were on a stage; his taste for dramatization has been shown in many of his entrances and his exits. It is reasonable to assert, through the consistency of his actions, that George Washington believed that posterity continuously gave him a stage on which to give a performance worth posterity's time and remembrance. Washington exhibits his idea of the symbolism of actors on a stage as describing the citizens of America as, "Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designed by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity."⁹⁷ His thoughts on the American citizens are likely to be the same as how he viewed his own destiny; Providence calling George Washington to be the symbol of greatness for humanity by becoming the American Cincinnatus and harboring the freest and most just government that the world had ever witnessed. Washington believed that, "At this auspicious period" the "New Empire" of the United States had come into existence. This was a peculiarly suitable time for a republic to be born because "The foundation of our Empire was not laid in the gloomy age of ignorance and Suspicion, but at an Epoch when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period." Washington clearly believed that the United States had been developed through miraculous circumstance, and he was the harbinger of a new era of enlightenment and human excellence that was destined to come at this exact moment in history. It was at such opportunistic time that "if their citizens

⁹⁶ Ellis, 144. Ferling, 223 – There is some debate amongst witness accounts as to the timing of Washington's spectacle act, so I presented the account that makes the most sense to me.

⁹⁷ Circular Letter to the States, June 8, 1783.

should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own.”⁹⁸

The culmination of Washington’s magnanimous feats at Newburgh was best exhibited in his actions after the Treaty of Paris was ratified. In Annapolis on December 22, 1783, Washington surrendered his commission to Congress, even as his toast of the night was “competent powers to Congress for general purposes.” In doing this, Washington solidified his devotion to the republican experiment, and established one of the most important and long-standing military traditions in American History: military subordination to civilian authority. Washington’s exit was the greatest exit in American History; he solemnly said, “Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great Theatre of Action. . . . I here offer my Commission, and take my leave of all the enjoyments of public life.” Horses were at the door waiting for him after he finished his statement, and the crowd gathered at the doorway to wave him off. It was yet another symbolic gesture by the greatest actor on the greatest stage.⁹⁹

It was at this moment that Washington’s fame and greatness were solidified. Washington shocked the world by surrendering his sword to Congress and becoming a modern-day version of Cincinnatus by returning to private life when his duty to the public was fulfilled. He did what Caesar, Cromwell, and Napoleon were not capable of doing by refusing to seize the opportunity for power. It was a gesture that King George III believed made Washington “the greatest man in the world.” It seems that there are some historians who would make the claim that Washington was constantly facing an internal struggle to deny that he truly desired power, but what appears to be more likely is that Washington truly wanted to be seen as a

Cato or Cincinnatus-like hero. His act of leaving the public stage and promising the states that he intended to refrain from returning to a career in politics (a promise that would prove to be impossible) was symbolic of his overarching desire to be viewed as a virtuous advocate and steward of republicanism and natural rights. It is reasonable to assume that Washington had a clear awareness of his own worth and potential, but it is shown through the consistency of his actions that he refused to see himself as the “indispensable man.” Washington understood that in a republic, there could be no indispensable men, and it was that belief which allowed him to resist the seductions of power for the preservation of a greater cause; a cause he believed to be the most worthy of the age. It was in this sense that Washington understood, and embodied republican virtue; that he was able to understand the importance of the cause of freedom properly understood, and his own role in his duty to the public.

Conclusion

It did not take long for George Washington’s exploits at Newburgh and Annapolis to reach ears across seas. Soon, Washington was celebrated as an international hero. The Marquis de Lafayette expressed Washington’s international fame upon arriving home to France saying “The conduct you had on that occasion was highly praised throughout all Europe, and your returning to a private station is called the finishing stroke to an unparalleled character.”¹⁰⁰ Other Frenchmen were calling Washington “the Great Hero of the Western World” and the “Savior of His Country, the Benefactor of Mankind, the Protecting

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Washington’s Address to Congress on Resigning his Commission, December 23, 1783.

¹⁰⁰ Lafayette to Washington, July 22, 1783.

Angel of liberty, the pride of America.”¹⁰¹ Upon his retirement, Washington’s fame had grown to the point of deification. A poet, Francis Hopkinson, described Washington as “the best and greatest man the world ever knew” and that “had he lived in the lap of idolatry, he had been worshipped as a god.”¹⁰² Washington most likely thought that the prospect that he was a god was ludicrous and somewhat comical, but it is reasonable to assert that he saw himself as a beneficiary of providential forces, which guided him through insurmountable odds. Washington’s eternal greatness was solidified through his demonstration of republican virtue, and he became a celebrated modern day version of Cincinnatus. It was the fulfillment of his ambitions to the greatest extent as he was acknowledged for being what he wanted more than power: To be seen as a great patriot and republican hero.

At this point in his life, Washington had gained his desired reputation and it is not reasonable to suggest that he had any intentions of entering the public sphere again. It is evident that Washington began to believe that his time on Earth was coming to a close. Washington’s family was notorious for dying early and Washington had now lived into his fifties. In a letter to Lafayette, Washington reflects that his days are nearly full:

I called to mind, the days of my youth, & found they had long since fled to return no more; that I was now descending the hill, I had 52 years been climbing – & that tho’ I was blessed with a good constitution, I was of a short lived family – and might soon expect to be entombed in the dreary mansions of my father’s – These things darkened the shades & gave a gloom to the picture...

¹⁰¹ Duportail to Washington, March 3, 1784; Chastellux to Washington, March 6, 1784.

¹⁰² Francis Hopkinson, "A Political Catechism" (1777).

but I will not repine – I have had my day.¹⁰³

Washington was most likely satisfied with the reputation he had acquired and was ready to live out the rest of his days in the peace of private life. It is reasonable to assert that Washington would have never expected that his call to public duty was far from over.

In 1787, Washington (due to the urges and convincing of James Madison) entered the public sphere once more to chair the Constitutional Convention, and in 1789 Washington was selected to be the first President of the United States. With much reluctance, Washington agreed to serve as Commander-in-Chief once again, even at the risk of his well-acquired reputation. It is important to understand that his decision to reenter politics was not an indication that he sought after power, but rather a further testament that he placed the call of public duty above his own aspirations. Washington’s two-term presidency further solidified his place in history as he had to set the precedent for the policies of a developing nation, but his political career was anticlimactic compared to the greatness he had acquired from his actions at Newburgh and Annapolis. Out of all the precedents set by the father of his country, perhaps the most important was the American tradition of civilian control over the military.

Washington’s actions of stopping the Newburgh conspiracy and surrendering his commission to Congress established a long-standing tradition of military subordination to civilian authority that has been followed in America even in modern times when advancements in technology have led to the formation of a long-term standing army. Even in a time when American forces are vastly spread abroad, and the intricacies of constitutional separations of power between

¹⁰³ Washington to Lafayette, December 8, 1784.

the President as Commander-in-Chief and Congress having the power to raise armies and declare war make civilian control of the army more difficult, Americans have kept this tradition. The best example of American steadfastness to this tradition is seen when General Douglass MacArthur displayed insubordinate behavior towards President Harry Truman. In 1951, MacArthur released a series of private statements to Congress criticizing the priorities of the Truman administration in regards to the strategy of the military situation of the time. Upon notice of these statements, Truman relieved MacArthur from the position of Supreme Commander. Even though MacArthur had valid military points, he was relieved out of the concern that "if MacArthur were not relieved, a large segment of our people would charge that civil authorities no longer controlled the military."¹⁰⁴ Thus, it still stands today that the American understanding of the security of a republic was defined through the precedent that was set by George Washington. It is upon this tradition that the establishment of self-government must find its foundation if it is to be successful, and it is evident that this tradition has preserved in liberty the greatest and most successful republican regime in the history of mankind.

As a consequence of his great precedent, Washington's place in history has reached unparalleled heights. Nathaniel Hawthorne, a fellow officer in the Revolutionary War, best articulates the significance of Washington's Newburgh Address through the eyes of history saying that "Such instances of patriotism are rare, and America must find it difficult to express, in adequate terms, the gratitude she owes to both. Such a degree of glory so virtuously acquired, and so decently sustained, is as new as our political constel-

lation."¹⁰⁵ Washington proved to the world that virtue could prevail over self-interest, or rather that self-interest and virtue are not incompatible. What made Washington different and greater than dictators such as Caesar, Cromwell, and Bonaparte was the fact that his commitment to public duty was directly aligned with his ambitions and desires; such is the mark of a true statesman. As a result, Washington will forever hold a place in history as the savior and hero of the American Republic. Even Napoleon Bonaparte could see what Washington's actions meant in the grand scheme of history, having once said, "Posterity will talk of him with reverence as the founder of a great empire, when my name shall be lost in the vortex of Revolutions!"¹⁰⁶ The success of the American republic, in light of all failed republics, illuminates the fact that virtuous people are needed in order for self-government to work. The unique greatness of the American Cincinnatus is that his republican virtue allowed him to pave the way for a virtuous and enlightened people to establish a form of government that protects the God-given natural rights of each individual that allow humanity to fulfill its greatest potential.

¹⁰⁴ Schnable & Watson, 1998, pp. 246-247.

¹⁰⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne to Washington, April 13, 1783.

¹⁰⁶ Weems, *Life of Washington* (Mount Vernon ed.), 9.

