
GEORGE WASHINGTON



James Thomas Flexner (born 1908) is a distinguished historian, best known for his four-volume biography of George Washington. He was educated at Harvard University before becoming a reporter for the New York Herald Tribune and then a professional writer. Scholarly but not a professional academic, Flexner specializes in chronicling American lives.

His portrait of George Washington falls somewhere between that of the canonizers, who made Washington the saintly human equivalent of the American flag, and that of the debunkers, who reduced his surrounding legend to a pile of ashes. Flexner's Washington is flesh and blood rather than marble, yet profoundly generous: "I found a great and good man. In all history few men who possessed unassailable power have used that power so gently and self-effacingly for what their best instincts told them was the welfare of their neighbors and all mankind."

The following passage describes what is arguably the most important unknown moment in American history. The setting is Newburgh, New York, toward the close of the revolutionary war. Here Washington lived with his troops, took no salary, and refused to take any leave to visit his home at Mount Vernon. At this moment, the revolutionary cause was frustrated on many sides and Congress's failure to act on key issues had set off a near rebellion in the Army. (Among other grievances, the Army had not been paid in six years.)

To many officers, such troubles illustrated the need for strong, central command. Colonel Lewis Nicola, for example, urged Washington to assume the title "George I of the United States"—in other words, "the king." As such, he could lead the army in a rebellious coup against Congress. Barring that, they threatened to abandon their duty altogether. In the incident below, Washington surprises the troops in the midst of their conspiracy. He quickly realizes he must talk them down from their impassioned ultimatum—monarchy or mutiny—and restore their confidence in the Republic.

America easily could have followed the historic path of most revolutions, giving rise to an absolute power (Augustus Caesar in first-century Rome, Oliver Cromwell in England's seventeenth century, and Napoleon in eighteenth-century France). Only Washington's character barred the way. In refusing to be dictator, he became—Flexner says—"about the only individual in history who refused absolute power." But there was still a significant obstacle to be tackled—the Army's resolve. It was a critical moment. Washington knew that just

as charisma without character is dangerous and manipulative, so character without charisma is ultimately ineffective. In the drama that follows, he carefully steers clear of both pitfalls, and in so doing saves the American Revolution from history's prediction—a collapse into absolute power.

Absolute Power Tests Absolutely

"Once he gets in the field with his army, it will puzzle any American to get his neck out of the yoke. The army will salute him monarch; your militia will fight against you, and what will then become of you and your rights?"

—Patrick Henry, warning Congress that the Constitution, as written, would lead to George Washington's monarchy

"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."

—Abraham Lincoln

"Character counts in the presidency more than any other single quality. It is more important than how much the President knows of foreign policy or economics, or even about politics. When the chips are down—and the chips are nearly always down in the presidency—how do you decide? Which way do you go? What kind of courage is called upon? Talking of his hero Andrew Jackson, Truman once said, it takes one kind of courage to face a duelist, but it's nothing like the courage it takes to tell a friend, no."

—David McCullough,
biographer of Harry Truman

The Most Important Unknown Moment in American History

The meeting was held on March 15, 1783, in the Temple, a spacious hall with a vaulted roof which the troops had built from green timber to serve as a church on Sunday and at other times as a dancing academy. It was large enough for a brigade, and on that Saturday noon it was crowded to the walls. In calling the meeting, Washington had stated, "The senior officer in rank present will be pleased to preside and report the result of the deliberations to the Commander in Chief." Surveying the general officers who were sitting on a little dais, the conspirators were pleased to see that Washington had adhered to his resolution: he was not present. As the second in seniority, Gates would preside—and Gates was their creature.

A door giving onto the dais opened. Everyone turned their heads, and then His Excellency strode out into general view. A murmur of excitement went up from the crowd. As he looked out at his command, Washington appeared "sensibly agitated." For the first time since he had won the heart of the army in Cambridge, Washington saw in the faces of his officers not affection, not pleasure in his being present, but resentment, embarrassment, and in some cases anger.

"If my conduct," Washington said, "heretofore has not evinced to you that I have been a faithful friend to the army, my declaration of it at this time would be equally unavailing and improper. 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 common companion and witness of your distresses, 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 stage of the war, that I am indifferent to its interests." Washington paused to examine the faces before him: they were not moved.

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—George Washington

He asked how the interests of the army were to be promoted. "The way is plain, says the anonymous addresser. If war continues, remove into the unsettled country; there establish yourselves, and leave an ungrateful country to defend itself. But who are they to defend? Our wives, our children, our farms and other property which we leave behind us? Or, in this state of hostile separation, are we to take the two first (the latter cannot be removed) to perish in a wilderness with hunger, cold, and nakedness? If peace takes place, never sheath your swords, says he, until you have obtained full and ample justice. This dreadful alternative, of either deserting our country in the extremest hour of her distress or turning our arms against it (which is the apparent object, unless Congress can be compelled into instant compliance) has something so shocking in it, that humanity revolts at the idea. My God! what can this writer have in view by recommending such measures? 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 [British-held] New York, plotting the ruin of both by sowing the seeds of discord and separation between the civil and military powers of the continent?" The faces in front of Washington appeared uneasy—many stared away from him—but he still saw frowns.

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"There might, gentlemen, be an impropriety in my taking notice, in this address to you, of an anonymous production. . . . With respect to the advice given by the author, to suspect the man who shall recommend moderate measures and longer forbearance, I spurn it. . . . If men are to be precluded from offering their sentiments on a matter which may involve the most serious and alarming consequences that can invite the consideration of mankind, reason is of no use to us. The freedom of speech may be taken away, and, dumb and silent, we may be led, like sheep, to the slaughter."

Washington then assured his hearers that it was "My decided opinion" that Congress entertained "exalted sentiments of the services of the army" and would, despite the slowness inherent in deliberative bodies, act justly. He declared "in this public and solemn manner that, in the attainment of complete justice for all your toils and dangers, and in the gratification of every wish, so far as may be done consistently with the great duty I owe my country and those powers we are bound to respect, you may freely command my services to the utmost of my abilities. . . .

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—George Washington

"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 horror 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. By thus determining and thus acting, you will pursue the plain and direct road to the attainment of your wishes. . . . And you will, by the dignity of your conduct, afford occasion for 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.'"

Washington had finished his prepared speech, but the chill in the Temple had not thawed. The familiar faces looking up at him were uneasy, perplexed, sullen. Washington reached in his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. This, he stated, was a letter from a member of Congress that would show the officers what that body was trying to do and what the problems were. He would read it.

The officers stirred impatiently in their seats, and then suddenly every heart missed a beat. Something was the matter with His Excellency. He seemed unable to read the paper. He paused in bewilderment. He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket. And

then he pulled out something that only his intimates had seen him wear. A pair of glasses. With infinite sweetness and melancholy, he explained, "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country."

This simple statement achieved what all Washington's rhetoric and all his arguments had been unable to achieve. The officers were instantly in tears, and, from behind the shining drops, their eyes looked with love at the commander who had led them all so far and long.

Washington quietly finished reading the congressman's letter. He knew the battle was won, and avoiding, with his instinctive sense of the dramatic, any anticlimax, he walked out of the hall, mounted his horse, and disappeared from the view of those who were staring from the windows.

From James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington: In the American Revolution* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967). Copyright © 1967 by James Thomas Flexner. By permission of Little, Brown and Company, Inc.

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The Man Who Would Not be King

"The moderation and virtue of a single character probably prevented this Revolution from being closed, as most others have been, by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish.

"His integrity was most pure, his justice the most inflexible I have ever known, no motives of interest or consanguinity, of friendship or hatred, being able to bias his decision. He was, indeed, in every sense of the words, a wise, a good, and a great man."

—Thomas Jefferson,

on George Washington's role in preserving the republic

"Another George, King George III of England, who was Washington's enemy, acknowledged his significance. The king asked the painter Jonathan Trumbull, freshly arrived from America, what he thought Washington would do when the war ended. 'Go back to his farm,' Trumbull replied. 'If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world,' rejoined the king. And that is what Washington did, twice—first when the war ended, and later after his second term as president of the United States."

—Seymour Martin Lipset,

"George Washington and the Founding of Democracy"

"[Washington is] perhaps the purest and noblest character of modern times."

—The Duke of Wellington, victor at Waterloo

"Washington had given the United States an unheard-of boon: charisma with hardly any cost."

—James Thomas Flexner

Questions

1. As Flexner's account begins, the Army has assembled and is pleased that Washington is not present. When he arrives unexpectedly, their faces show "resentment, embarrassment, and in some cases anger." What might have been going through their minds at this moment?
2. In the next several paragraphs, Washington makes three failed attempts to appease the troops. What is his first tactic in the paragraph beginning, "If my conduct . . ."? Why do you think it falls short?
3. Next, Washington reads a letter from an anonymous soldier. What is his goal in doing so? Why does this attempt still leave them unmoved?

4. In a last appeal, Washington promises to represent the Army's cause to Congress: "You may freely command my services . . ." How do you explain their chilly response?
5. What happens next? Is Washington's use of the glasses calculated or spontaneous? How do the troops react?
6. What does this incident say about George Washington's character and its influence on the American Revolution?

Boss or Servant?

"Always take your job seriously, never yourself."

—a favorite line of
Dwight D. Eisenhower

"Kennedy controlled every person who came in contact with him. He was a Brueghel in the sense that he created a world of his own, but instead of squeezing oil paint, he squeezed people to create his own personal world. He was at the center of all he surveyed. He enjoyed using people, and setting them against each other for his own amusement. . . . It's not an accident that so many presidents have conferences with their people where they're naked and the people are wearing suits. Kennedy held court in the bathtub or the swimming pool, naked, holding meetings with men in suits sitting on the bathtub or the toilet or the floor—you don't have to be Freud to figure out what's going on there. Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon did the same kind of things."

—Richard Reeves, biographer of John F. Kennedy

"Johnson's grandiosity had a large impact on what he did as President. One can easily take offense at LBJ's impulse to make himself a larger-than-life character. 'I understand you were born in a log cabin,' German chancellor Ludwig Erhard said during a visit to the President's ranch. 'No, no,' Johnson replied. 'You have me confused with Abe Lincoln; I was born in a manger.'"

—Robert Dallek,
biographer of Lyndon B. Johnson

"In a few days I will lay down my official responsibilities in this office, to take up once more the one title in our democracy superior to that of President, the title of citizen."

—Jimmy Carter's farewell address,
written by him rather than his speechwriter

ANDREW CARNEGIE

Andrew Carnegie was introduced earlier in Session Three. In 1868 he realized he had been successful beyond his wildest dreams. He had \$400,000 in assets, had made \$56,110 that year, and was still only thirty-three years old. But he was not satisfied. Many of the most successful men he admired had only one ambition and one talent—money and the ability to make it. Not only were they big men in small worlds, they knew almost nothing of literature and culture, of Shakespeare and Robert Burns, which his father and uncle, poor though they were, knew so well.

So early on in Carnegie's rise to success he was restless. New Year's Eve was always a time of sober reflection for Scottish Calvinists and, atheist though he was, Carnegie the Scot picked up a pen and took a hard, un pitying look at himself and his situation. The result was a moral balance sheet to accompany his statement of business holdings. Intended only for himself, and not acted upon until years later when his stupendous wealth seemed to make a mockery of his youthful memo, this note has been quoted more than any other piece of Carnegie's writing.

Stock Taker

"This remarkable document of self-analysis and adjuration is surely unique in American entrepreneurial history, for neither Rockefeller, nor Ford, nor Morgan could have written this note, nor would they have understood the man who did."

—Joseph Frazier Wall, Andrew Carnegie

Personal Memorandum

December 1868
St. Nicholas Hotel
New York

Thirty three and an income of \$50,000 per annum.

By this time two years I can so arrange all my business as to secure at least 50,000 per annum. Beyond this never earn—make no effort to increase fortune, but spend the surplus each year for benovelent [sic] purposes. Cast aside business forever except for others.

Settle in Oxford & get a thorough education making the acquaintance of literary men—this will take three years active work—pay especial attention to speaking in public.

Settle then in London & purchase a controlling interest in some newspaper or live review & give the general management of it attention, taking a part in public matters especially those connected with education & improvement of the poorer classes.

Man must have an idol—The amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolitary [sic]. No idol more debasing than the worship of money. Whatever

I engage in I must push inordinately therefor should I be careful to choose the life which will be the most elevating in its character. To continue much longer overwhelmed by business cares and with most of my thoughts wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time, must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery.

I will resign business at Thirty five, but during the ensuing two years, I wish to spend the afternoons in securing instruction, and in reading systematically.

Joseph Frazier Wall, *Andrew Carnegie* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), pp. 224–225. Copyright © 1970 by Oxford University Press; © 1989 by University of Pittsburgh Press.



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Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Read the paragraph, “Settle in Oxford . . .” What type of needs in his life is Carnegie addressing? Why?
 2. What different type of needs is he addressing in the next paragraph? Have you considered such issues in your own life?
 3. How does Carnegie, an avowed atheist, describe the power of money? What is the significance of this very radical assessment?
 4. What does he mean when he says, “Whatever I engage in I must push inordinately therefor should I be careful to choose the life which will be the most elevating in its character”? What does this say of his own self-awareness?
 5. He says, “to continue much longer . . . must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery.” Recovery from what?
 6. How was this personal memorandum played out in Carnegie’s life? What do you think happened between this self-examining young man and the legendary multimillionaire?
 7. Personal mission statements are in fashion today. What are the pluses and minuses in using them? What part, if any, do they play in your life?
 8. Have you made a commitment similar to Carnegie’s? What place do you give to planning in your giving?
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