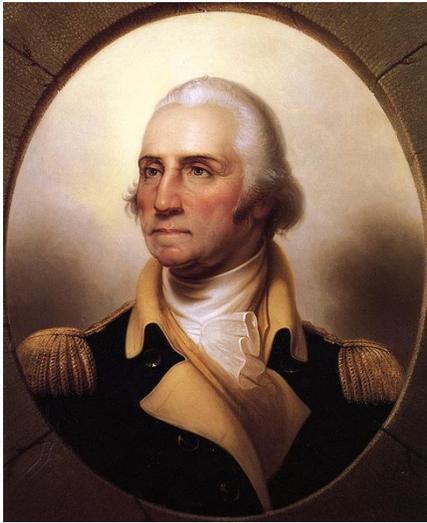


George Washington: “An Instrument in the Hands of Providence”

By Stephen McDowell

George Washington is one of the most significant men in all of history. Regarding the direct advancement of civil and political liberty in the earth, he may well be the most significant champion in all history. Certainly he was the central figure of bringing a new era of liberty to the world in modern times. Abraham Lincoln observed:

Washington is the mightiest name of earth — long since mightiest in the cause of civil liberty, still mightiest in moral reformation. On that name no eulogy is expected. It cannot be. To add brightness to the sun or glory to the name of Washington is alike impossible. Let none attempt it.¹



Founding Father Fisher Ames said that Washington changed the standard of human greatness.² One biographer wrote, “Washington was without an equal, was unquestionably the greatest man that the world has produced in the last one thousand years.”³ Thomas Paine observed: “By common consent, Washington is regarded as not merely the Hero of the American Revolution, but the World’s Apostle of Liberty.”⁴

A figure in history like Washington did not just arise by happenstance. It was the near unanimous consent of early Americans that Washington, like Esther of old, had “come to the Kingdom for such a time as this.”

After Washington’s death hundreds of commemorative orations were given all over the United States. Nearly all of them declare that Washington was a gift of God to the American people and to all of mankind. Some mention this in passing, many with this as the dominant theme. Washington is called the Moses of the American people, the Joshua who led his people into the promised land, and the savior of his country.

In his sermon “On the Death of George Washington,” Rev. Jedidiah Morse concluded his comparison of Moses and Washington by saying:

Never, perhaps, were coincidences in character and fortune, between any two illustrious men who have lived, so numerous and so striking, as between Moses and Washington. . . Both were born for great and similar achievements; to deliver, under the guidance of Providence, each the tribes of their respective countrymen, from the yoke of oppression, and to establish them, with the best form of government and the wisest code of laws, an independent and respectable nation.⁵

General Morgan, who fought alongside Washington during the Revolutionary War, acknowledged that Washington was key for obtaining independence, relating that while there were many officers with great talents, he was “necessary, to guide, direct, and animate the whole, and it pleased Almighty God to send that one in the person of George Washington!”⁶

President Calvin Coolidge summed up Washington’s contribution to mankind, under the Providence of God, in a speech to Congress:

Washington was the directing spirit without which there would have been no independence, no Union, no Constitution and no Republic. His ways were the ways of truth. His influence grows. In wisdom of action, in purity of character he stands alone. We cannot yet estimate him. We can only indicate our reverence for him and thank the Divine Providence which sent him to serve and inspire his fellow men.⁷

Washington's contribution to the birth of America and the advancement of liberty in the world is unsurpassed by any man. Without Washington, America would not have won the Revolution. He provided the leadership necessary to hold the troops together, even in the most difficult situations. As one contemporary observed, Washington was "that hero, who affected, with little bloodshed, the greatest revolution in history."⁸ Due to Washington's influence, America avoided a monarchy or military rule — he rebuffed an attempt to make him King; he thwarted a military coup; and he set an example of civilian rule by resigning as Commander-in-Chief. The Constitutional Convention would not have succeeded without Washington's influence as President of that body. America may never have set into motion her constitutional form of government, with a limited role of the President, without his example, for the unanimously elected Washington modeled how the President was to govern. Washington also set the standard for American international relations in his *Farewell Address*.

There would be no America, the land of liberty, without Washington, the apostle of liberty. The unique freedom, justice, and virtue incorporated into the American Republic have in the last two centuries spread throughout the world and taken root in many nations. Hence, Washington's legacy has impacted the world, and will continue to do so for centuries to come.

His greatness did not stem from oratorical skills or superior knowledge or brilliant military tactics, but rather from his strong virtues, sense of duty, and invincible resolution. When he was offered leadership of the army and leadership of the nation, he expressed doubts in his abilities to accomplish these tasks, but once he occupied those positions, nothing could stop him from performing his duty. By sheer force of character he held the disorganized nation together during the great struggle for independence, and after victory was won, the love of the people for him provided the unifying factor necessary to set a course for the American constitutional republic.

The providence of God and Washington's Christian faith were key to his character, career, and accomplishments. His faith, heart, and humility are revealed in the "Circular to the Governors of the states" in 1783 when he prayed that God would protect them and "most graciously be pleased to dispose us all to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that charity, humility, and pacific temper of mind, which were the characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy nation."⁹

In his famous "Oration on the Death of General Washington," Gen. Henry Lee said that Washington was "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." "Vice shuddered in his presence, and virtue always felt his fostering hand; the purity of his private character gave effulgence to his public virtues." Washington was first because, as Lee said, he was "the man designed by Heaven to lead in the great political, as well as military, events which have distinguished the area of his life. The finger of an overruling Providence pointing at Washington was neither mistaken nor unobserved."¹⁰

Washington himself had a sense of how God used him providentially to advance the cause of liberty to mankind as well as an understanding of the providential purpose of America, writing in March 1785:

At best I have only been an instrument in the hands of Providence, to effect, with the aid of France and many virtuous fellow Citizens of America, a revolution which is interesting to the general liberties of mankind, and to the emancipation of a country which may afford an Asylum, if we are wise enough to pursue the paths wch. lead to virtue and happiness, to the oppressed and needy of the Earth.¹¹

America set in motion a new example of religious, civil, and economic liberty that the nations have attempted to embrace during the last two centuries. The advancement of liberty in the world is directly related to the establishment of liberty in America, which owes its beginnings in large part to George Washington. Paine's epithet of "World's Apostle of Liberty" is, therefore, most fitting. Americans and citizens of the world who value liberty must forever keep alive in their hearts this great man and seek to follow his example.

This article is taken from *Apostle of Liberty: The World-Changing Leadership of George Washington* by Stephen McDowell. This book can be ordered from the Providence Foundation, www.providencefoundation.com, 434-978-4535.

End Notes

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3. William Wilbur, *The Making of George Washington* (DeLand, Florida: Patriotic Education, 1973).
4. "George Washington: Deist? Freemason? Christian?" by James Renwick Manship, in *Providential Perspective*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Feb. 2000, Charlottesville: Providence Foundation.
5. Jedidiah Morse, "A Prayer and Sermon, Delivered at Charlestown, December 31, 1799, On the Death of George Washington . . . With an Additional Sketch of His Life" (London: Printed by J. Bateson, 1800), 28.
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7. Osborn, p. iv. A facsimile of the peroration of President Coolidge's Address to the Sixty-ninth Congress, Second Session, on Washington's Birthday, February 22, 1927.
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9. Circular to the States, June 8, 1783, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, John C. Fitzpatrick, Editor (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1931), 26:496.
10. "Oration on the Death of General Washington, Pronounced before Both Houses of Congress, on December 16, 1799" by Major-General Henry Lee, in Custis, 622, 618-619.
11. Letter to Lucretia Wilhemina Van Winter, March 30, 1785, *The Writings of George Washington*, 28:120.