

# Imprimis

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## The Character of George Washington

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Author, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington*



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*The following is adapted from a speech delivered at the dedication of a statue of George Washington on the Hillsdale College campus on May 9, 2003. The statue is the first in a series that will form the Hillsdale College Liberty Walk.*

I want to talk today about two qualities of George Washington's character. The first is persistence. There's a line in the song "America the Beautiful": "Thine alabaster cities gleam, Undimmed by human tears." It means that the cities of America, unlike those of Europe, have not been torn and destroyed by war. That's not quite right. The city I live in, New York, has been attacked twice in American history.

The first attack was in the summer of 1776, and George Washington, commander-in-chief of the American Army, was responsible for the city's defense. The Declaration of Independence had been read for the first time in New York on July 9. That very week, Americans on Long Island saw a British fleet moving toward New York Harbor. The British, who made camp on Staten Island, had at their command ten ships of the line, dozens of other ships, and 32,000 professional soldiers (including Hessians). To oppose this force, Washington had no navy, no ships, and 19,000 soldiers, most of them militia and most of them untrained. Over the next few months, he and his men fought two battles: the Battle of Long Island, in what is now Brooklyn, and the Battle of White Plains north of the city. They lost both.

The second attack on New York was on September 11, 2001. I live about three miles north of the Trade Center site. It was a primary day, so I was out to vote, and I could see the plume of smoke

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quite clearly from both of the towers. It was a beautiful fall day. Then I had to go to work at *National Review*, where I watched the towers burning on television. I have a friend in upstate New York who's an artisan. He makes and designs furniture and builds houses, and when he saw the towers burning on television, he said to his father, "Those buildings are coming down," and he got up and left the room. I'm not an artisan, so I didn't know they were coming down. I watched them fall, and then I left the room to write about it for *National Review*.

New York lost 3,000 men and women on 9/11, far more than the several hundred American soldiers who were killed in the battles of 1776. But for the rest of the Revolutionary War, the British kept all their American prisoners on ships in the East River, where they were not well fed, had no good air, and were given barely any water. Every morning the British would say, "Rebels, throw out your dead," and corpses would be pitched overboard. Eleven thousand men died on those ships, and for years people in Brooklyn found skeletons on the waterfront.

We lost the two Trade Towers on 9/11, along with several smaller buildings. George Washington lost the entire city, which the British occupied for the remainder of the war. The British could also be said to have used weapons of mass destruction: They encouraged slaves to run away from their American masters with the promise of freedom, but any slave who had smallpox was sent back in the hope that he would infect his fellow slaves and rebel masters.

It's been less than two years since 9/11 and we've fought two short wars: Afghanistan was about six weeks, Iraq about three weeks. The American Revolution lasted eight-and-a-half years. It was the longest American war until Vietnam – longer than the Civil War and our part in World War II put together.

So we have our problems, but Washington had his. And in many ways his were worse: America was much weaker then, and the enemy it faced was much stronger. Washington's per-

sistence through the Revolutionary War was remarkable. But it didn't end there. When the war was over and he retired to private life, he was called upon to serve again. He presided over the Constitutional Convention in 1787, was inaugurated as the first president in 1789, and served as president for two terms. So the full time of his service – including the war, the Constitutional Convention and his eight years as president – was 17 years.

Franklin Roosevelt served 12 years as president and died a month after his fourth inauguration. Jefferson, Wilson and Reagan each served eight years as president. Lincoln served four years as president and was murdered a month after his second inauguration. Washington served 17 years at the center of American life – a record that has not been matched. Washington's mother is supposed to have said, when told of one of his Revolutionary War victories, "George generally completes what he undertakes." He certainly did, and he did so through a lifetime of public service.

## Paradox of Republican Leadership

The second quality of Washington's character I want to mention is the ability to let go and knowing when to let go. This quality, in a way, contradicted Washington's persistence, and largely for that reason it is even more remarkable. It is more remarkable because it was a new thing at the time.

Nowadays, we know that in a republic, the military power serves the civilian power. We know that elected officials serve for set terms, and that if they don't win reelection, they have to go home. This is part of our life today. It is what we expect. But in George Washington's lifetime, these were new ideas. Most of the rulers in the world were kings or monarchs of some sort. Holland and the Swiss Cantons were exceptions, but all of the major countries and most

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of the small ones were ruled by people who ruled them for life.

Washington lived in a time when royal rule began to be shaken. During his lifetime, the King of France was deposed and executed, and other monarchs would follow that path. But the new rulers who took their places did not, generally speaking, believe in letting go. Napoleon Bonaparte was a Corsican artillery officer who became first consul of France, then first consul for life, then emperor. His career as emperor was eventually ended, but it took a world war to end it. And that pattern has been repeated over and over again around the world.

Thus, at the end of the Revolutionary War, when Washington returned his commission to Congress, it was something very new. It was similarly new when, at the end of his second presidential term, he announced that he would not run a third time. These actions touch on a paradox of republican leadership. The paradox is this: If you are a leader, there are times when you must simply take charge and be superior to the people you lead. This is most common in military situations, but it happens in peacetime as well: A leader must use his charisma or some other trans-rational force to get his way, and if he doesn't, things will fall apart. Every leader understands this. But a leader in a *republic* must also understand that those times are temporary, that their term of leadership will pass, and that they must then pass from the scene. And the reason they have to pass from the scene is that the people they are leading are in fact their equals.

Washington kept both of those thoughts in mind throughout his career, which explains a feature of his rhetoric that comes up again and again. This feature is so common in his letters and speeches that I think of it as the "turn" in his rhetoric: It occurs when Washington takes the attention and the adu-

lation that comes to him, and turns it back to his audience. He does this to remind himself, as well as them, that he is a temporary leader of equals. We can see this in his Farewell Address, where he



*Richard Brookhiser, Hillsdale College Board of Trustees Chairman William J. Brodbeck, '66, Sculptor and Hillsdale College Associate Professor of Art Anthony Frudakis, and Hillsdale College President Larry P. Arnn pose in front of the newly-dedicated George Washington statue. The statue was made possible through a generous gift from Mr. Ed Reid of Washington State, in memory of his wife Marjorie.*

starts off by saying, "My friends and fellow citizens," and goes on to say that he has succeeded as president only because of the help the people gave him during his administration. We see it also in the last message that he wrote as commander-in-chief, where he said that the future happiness of America would depend on the people themselves – that their government was a good government, but that its survival was up to them.

One of the most striking instances of Washington turning attention from himself to others is what I believe to be the only authentic utterance we have from him on a battlefield. Of course, after he died, old veterans remembered a lot of things he said in battle. But much

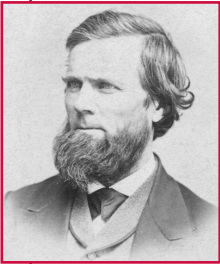
of this was embroidered: There was a General Scott, for instance, who remembered Washington at the Battle of Monmouth cursing at General Charles Lee. "He swore like an angel from Heaven," Scott recalled. "He swore 'til the leaves shook on the trees. Never in my life have I heard such wonderful swearing." The problem is, General Scott at the time was two miles away, so unless he had bionic ears, he didn't hear anything. There is one phrase, however, that comes up over and over again in the accounts of many different people, for which reason I suspect it's a real quote. It's a phrase Washington used to address his troops – "My brave fellows."

At the Battle of Princeton, Washington is reported to have said, "Parade with me, my brave fellows. We will have them soon." Before the Battle of Trenton, when he was trying to get the troops to re-enlist, he said: "My brave fellows, you have done more than could be expected of you. But I'm asking you to do this one more thing and re-enlist." Time and again he uses this phrase. And in doing so, of

course, he's asserting what remains to be seen: The soldiers, at the moment he addresses them, are not necessarily showing bravery. They may be confused. They may not know what is expected of them. They may be on the point of panic or fear. But he addresses them as "My brave fellows" to motivate them.

This is not the only way to motivate troops. Other generals have done it differently. Frederick the Great would say to his troops, "Do you dogs want to live forever?" That's one way to do it. But Washington's way was to say, "My brave fellows," which means, "My fellows, be brave."

This leads me to a final point about Washington's character, which is that it's unfinished. It's not completed, and I think that's by design. Washington made a bet with his life that the American people could bear the burden and responsibility of living in freedom. That bet is on the table in every generation. The completion of Washington's character, then, always rests with us.



## SPECIAL SESQUICENTENNIAL FEATURE

# The College and the Republic

## Edmund Fairfield

Former President, Hillsdale College (1848-1869)

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*Hillsdale College was founded in 1844 in Spring Arbor, Michigan, and moved to Hillsdale in 1853. The following is abridged from a speech delivered by College President Edmund Fairfield, upon the laying of the cornerstone of the new college building at Hillsdale 150 years ago this month, on July 4, 1853.*

**T**he law of custom imposes upon me the duty of saying a few things appropriate to the occasion. That duty I shall aim to discharge to the best of my ability....

There are many suitable topics that naturally suggest themselves; but, convened as we are, to lay the cornerstone of a College edifice on this anniversary of our national independence, none presents itself to my mind more naturally than this: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN OUR REPUBLICAN AND OUR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS. This, then, is my text for a few brief utterances.

The history of Liberty has been the history of Intelligence. "The fathers" brought with them to this goodly land the Common School and the College. These had prepared the way for rational civil and religious liberty, and

they were ever to stand as its reliable fortifications. Ignorance is rightly deemed an essential prerequisite to slavery. The more the ignorance, the better the slave, and when the bondman becomes possessed of intelligence, his oppressor will tell you that the devil is in him. Too much intelligence is the worst devil that oppression knows. The process of education is continually cherishing an independence of thought that is in close alliance with civil liberty. Give freedom to mind and you will not easily put chains upon the body. Education gives to each man an individual personality that well enough prepares him to be a freeman, but sadly disqualifies him from being a slave. It is a continual process of *self cultivation*: introducing him into the hidden arena of his own intellectual nature, making him acquainted with his own powers and capacities.

Whatever else he may study – whether the heavens above him, or the earth beneath him, or the world around him – there is continually a reflection of himself, and he who knows himself, knows that he was not made to be a slave; and the next thing he knows, is that no human arm is strong enough to make him one. The victim of despotic oppression must



as far as possible be stripped of all consciousness of personality: he must be hidden from himself; his noble nature must be unseen by his own eyes, that he may be content to be a thing – that he may be stupidly submissive when the tyrant oppressor despoils him of his rights and crushes out of him his soul.

Our educational institutions furnish a poor reparation for such a despotic rule. Intelligence, at the same time that it prepares a man for the enjoyment of his liberty, cultivates a sad distaste for the sweets of slavery. The man who knows not what he is or what he was made to be, may tacitly consent to be a mere appendage to another; but as the process of intellectual development goes on, he discovers in himself the equal of his lord; he has revealed to him the fundamental doctrine of human equality, and he can no longer consent to be but the fraction of a unit. He sees in himself a WHOLE MAN, and in another he sees no more. He recognizes in himself a separate responsible agent; and as said Webster, “The greatest thought of my life is that of my individual responsibility to God.” So with every man.

And when once inspired with such a thought as this, he is forever above that level where the tyrant may find a facile subject. The self-respect which such a man feels, and cannot but feel, illy qualifies him for the place of a menial, or to do the bidding of a haughty lord: he respects other men as men, and himself as a man too, and he thinks too highly of his manhood to consent to lose it, or allow it to be absorbed in that of another.

But Educational Institutions are not only invaluable in preparing for the enjoyment of rational liberty, they are equally so in perpetuating it; they are the constant allies and the eternal bulwarks of all the institutions of Republicanism. No nation approaches the confines of civilization but deems it important to educate their princes. The heir of sovereignty must be qualified to meet the responsibilities of their kingly office. In a Republic, the people are the kings. I speak today to those who either are, or are to be, the sovereigns of the land. You are not merely law makers, but make those that are law makers. If you wear not the insignia of an aristocratic nobility – in the shape of ribbons, red and green and blue – you may remember that the inhabitants of Lilliput did and you are not over-anxious to imitate the little six-inch men of the far-famed land. The insights of nature’s nobility are the hand – hardened by

toil – and the face radiant with intelligence and manly virtue.

You, fellow citizens, are not merely dukes and lords, and barons and knights; but kings, and sons of kings, and the fathers of kings. The crowns that come to you from the heads of those that lie low in the grave, will soon rest upon the heads of these *princes of the blood* whom I see before me. It is for the fathers to see that the sons are qualified for the responsibilities of American citizenship, and it is for the sons to see to it that they do not dishonor the crowns, the crowns that the Republic has placed upon their heads. The elements of power and stability in a nation of freemen are the intelligence and virtue of the people who bear rule.

What constitutes a State?

Not high-raised battlement, or labored mound.

Thick wall, or moated gate:

Not cities proud with spires and turrets crown’d,

Not bays and broad-armed ports,

Where laughing at the storm, rich navies ride:

Not starred and spangled court,

Where low-brow’d baseness wafts perfume to pride;

No: *Men*, high-minded MEN,

With powers as far above dull brutes endued,

In forest, brake or den;

As beasts excel cold rocks and bramble rude,

Men who their duties know,

But know their rights, and knowing dare maintain;

Prevent the long-aimed blow,

And crush the tyrant while they rend the chain,

THESE CONSTITUTE A STATE.

If there is in a Republican government a *power behind the throne*, that power is to be found in public sentiment. And in the formation of public sentiment, our Educational Institutions exert an influence beyond the power of computation. Happily for the interests of liberty and Republicanism, Colleges have almost universally ranged themselves on the side of popular rights. In every contest between the prerogatives of the ruler and the rights of the ruled, they have defended the right against the might.

Again: the strength of a Republican government is to be found not so much in the rigid enforcement by arms of the laws of the Senate, as in the fact that these laws are self-imposed by the intelligent perception on the part of the people of their wisdom and of their necessity. Let the law be written not merely

upon the statute book, but upon the hearts and minds of intelligent citizens, and the willing homage which they pay to its mandates is liberty itself in the highest form and truest type; while the constrained obedience rendered only at the point of the bayonet, even to wise and necessary laws, is little else than slavery. The one is Republicanism; the other is Despotism. The one is Liberty, regulated by intelligence; the other is the recklessness of ignorance and the restlessness of insubordination, restrained by force. Not long can a Republic maintain its existence as such without at least that measure of general intelligence that perceives and acknowledges the necessity of just laws, and that for the public good yields a cheerful and unconstrained obedience to them.

Unrestrained freedom is anarchy. Restrained only by force and arms, is despotism; self-restrained is Republicanism. Wherever there is wanting the intelligence and virtue requisite for the latter, Republicanism expires. The complicated machinery of free institutions must have an adequate regulator; and that is to be found in an enlightened public conscience. This our Educational institutions – teaching as well the laws of social morality as of physical science – are omnipotent in forming. And as we cherish the heritage of civil and religious liberty which has come down to us, so it becomes us to cherish the College, the Academy and the Common School, permeated by Christian influence, which alone have secured us this inheritance, prepared us for enjoying and appreciating it, or can prove its efficient conservators.

But more than this: our Educational Institutions are eminently Republican in their very nature. Here are brought together the sons of wealth and of poverty, of patrician and plebian descent, to meet upon the same arena, to wrestle in the same intellectual gymnasium, run in the same race, and contend for the same honors, upon equal terms, and with equal chances of success, only as the gifts of nature, or the vigorous industry, the close application, or the determined perseverance of each individual candidate shall vary the equation; and this variation, justice requires us to say, is often in favor of the inheritor of poverty and toil, rather than of riches and titles. Within College walls aristocratic dignities, aristocratic pretensions, or aristocratic airs, avail their possessor but little. Woe to the luckless youth that puts them

on. Here, if nowhere else, the mind is the measure of the man. Long genealogies and endless pedigrees are a sorry offset for short memories and shallow brains. Here is valued not so much the crown as the head that wears it. Lace, and ribbons, and purple and fine linens, are a poor compensation for a deficient cranium. Nor does a full purse make amends for an empty head. Gold is not legal tender for College honors. A soft hand is no passport for a soft head. The sun-burnt farmer's boy, with his inheritance of poverty, hardships and toil, stands side by side with the fair-browed youth who is heir of millions, and who eats the bread of another's sweat; only that like Saul among his fellows, he is not unfrequently higher than any of the sons of wealth and luxury, from his shoulders *and upward*. For an illustration of true Republicanism, give us such a community as is found at the Common School and the College, and you may and a better if you can. And the Republic owes it to itself to open wide to all its sons the doors of the Common School, the Academy, and the College. She has an interest in her children that a monarch can never have. Her life is identified with theirs. They constitute the essential parts of her own vital organism; and such and so many are the sympathies of this complicated and living machinery, that if one member suffer, all the members suffer with it. She may so rear her sons, that they shall be her honor and her ornament not only, but her strength and her support: too, on the other hand, she may, by a criminal recklessness, not only lose the strength and the glory which they might impart to her, but virtually train them to inflict upon her the bitterest curses, and in the end prove her remediless destruction.

No nation, but least of all a Republic, can afford to lose from her garden of beauty and her crown of glory, those of whom the Poet has so pensively sung:

Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its fragrance on the desert air;  
Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear.

Still less can she long survive the suicidal policy of so abandoning her children to ignorance and to vice that they shall not only be ciphers in the account, but positive factors, whose product is gangrene and death.

The College is the friend of the Republic, and the Republic should be the friend of the College. Our Educational establishments ever



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have been the faithful allies and firm supporters of all that is ennobling in our free institutions, and every layer of the Republic should see to it that they are nurtured and guarded with a sleepless vigilance.

Let it be deemed no sacrilege, therefore, that we are convened upon this day, sacred to liberty, to human rights, and to patriotism, to lay the cornerstone of this College edifice. I deem it an auspicious coincidence. May it prove a significant prophecy upon this anniversary of the day on which our fathers laid the founda-

tions of the beautiful temple of our National Liberties, we come to lay the cornerstone of this spacious temple of Science. May the walls reared upon this foundation, stand for ages to come, sacred as well to freedom, humanity, philanthropy and true patriotism, as to sound science, pure morality, and true religion. The cornerstone will now be laid.



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