

HIS EXCELLENCY GEORGE WASHINGTON¹REVIEWED BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL ROBIN JOHNSON²

Land baron. Slave holder. Revolutionary. General of the Continental Army. Father of his country. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Joseph J. Ellis' recent Washington biography brilliantly describes how Washington's character in the context of his circumstances drove him to be all these things and more. Our first president was in a large part driven to revolution by his appreciation of the value of land. On a personal level, he was driven by his belief that the British were trying to purloin land from him following the French and Indian War.³ On a grander scale, he believed that the future of America lay to the west, beyond the Allegheny Mountains.⁴ These beliefs and all the driving forces that made Washington "the most ambitious, determined, and potent personality of an age not lacking for worthy rivals"⁵ are the raw material for Ellis' superb work, *His Excellency George Washington*.

In *His Excellency*, Ellis states his twofold goal for the book: first, "to write a modest-sized book about a massive historic subject,"⁶ and second, to explore the driving internal forces and the forces externally

¹ JOSEPH J. ELLIS, *HIS EXCELLENCY GEORGE WASHINGTON* (2004).

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³ ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 39, 56-58, 64.

⁴ *Id.* at 145, 209.

⁵ *Id.* at xiv (listing among these worthy rivals Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison).

⁶ *Id.* at xi-xiii. His first goal was aided greatly and partially inspired by the modern edition of the *Washington Papers*. *Id.* at xi, 277. The *Washington Papers* to which Ellis refers are the *Papers of George Washington*, the product of a project undertaken by the University of Virginia in association with the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union to compile all of Washington's papers in one usable source. Papers of George Washington, <http://wggwpapers.virginia.edu> (last visited October 20, 2005). Eventually, this modern edition of the *Papers* will comprise 90 volumes, of which fifty-two are complete as of this writing. <http://wggwpapers.virginia.edu/project/index.html> (last visited October 20, 2005) The project has collected 135,000 Washington documents in photographic form, including letters and papers written by him, as well as letters written to him. *Id.* The *Papers* are categorized into the Colonial Series (1744-75), the Revolutionary War Series (1775-83), the Confederation Series (1784-88), the Presidential Series (1788-97), and the Retirement Series (1797-99). *Id.* Ellis relied heavily on these catalogued, classified, and annotated *Papers* to compose *His Excellency*. See ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 279 (describing the *Papers* as "the central focus of my inquiry and the home base from which all other explorations were launched").

present in the American revolutionary era that created the man famously eulogized as “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.”⁷ Ellis accomplishes both of his goals admirably. At a mere 275 pages, *His Excellency* is, indeed, a “modest-sized book.”⁸ Yet, the compactness of the work is both a great strength and, ironically, a source of weakness. At its strength, *His Excellency* avoids the pitfalls of certain predecessor Washington biographies, namely those by Douglas Southall Freeman⁹ and James Thomas Flexner,¹⁰ which he implicitly describes by quoting Lytton Strachey’s comment on the subject of Victorian biographies as “interminable tomes that had become an endless row of verbal coffins.”¹¹ Ellis, after reading the entire *Washington Papers* compilation,¹² condensed this extraordinary amount material into a highly readable book. He successfully presents only that information which provides fascinating insights into Washington’s character and leadership style. He describes how the events of Washington’s day shaped the man and how the man helped shape several momentous events in American history. Ellis’ capacity for distilling such an enormous amount of raw information into an engaging informative narrative is truly one of his strongest literary assets.

At its weak points, the natural path of Ellis’ narrative leads the reader to segue down a secondary avenue, but Ellis terminates any such side trips with a “not the subject of this book” attitude. For example, Ellis addresses the Marquis de Lafayette, aside from factual recitations concerning Lafayette’s conduct in battle,¹³ only in so far as his relationship with Washington is concerned.¹⁴ Ellis declines to address how Lafayette, a Frenchman, came to volunteer in the Continental Army,¹⁵ how Lafayette later found himself imprisoned in Austria in the course of the French Revolution,¹⁶ or his additional contributions to the

⁷ ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 270 (quoting Henry Lee’s eulogy of Washington).

⁸ *Id.* at xii.

⁹ DOUGLAS SOUTHWALL FREEMAN, *WASHINGTON* (1968). Originally published in seven volumes, Freeman’s treatise reached modern audiences in a single 896-page abridged version in 1993.

¹⁰ JAMES THOMAS FLEXNER, *WASHINGTON: THE INDISPENSABLE MAN* (1969). Flexner’s original work was a slightly more manageable four volumes, later distilled, in 1994, to a single 448-page text.

¹¹ ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at xiii.

¹² *Id.* at 277.

¹³ *Id.* at 119, 132, 134, and 135.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 115-116.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 115.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 115, 220.

young nation.¹⁷ In light of the lifelong friendship between the two men,¹⁸ additional insight into Lafayette's motivations and character would lend further insight into Washington's. Additionally, there were some matters in which Washington's views and the views of Washington's peers significantly differed which Ellis briefly discussed. Occasionally, a detour to survey these differences more closely would have contributed to a deeper understanding of Washington's perspective. For example, Ellis mentions George Washington's and Thomas Jefferson's disparate views of the French revolution, but he does not adequately address how their views differed, or, more importantly, why.¹⁹

Ellis also accomplishes his goal of presenting the internal and external forces that impacted Washington. Two important events, early in Washington's life, shaped the man that he would become—the man who would shape defining events in the revolutionary era. The first of these events is the premature death, at age thirty-four, of his half-brother, Lawrence Washington, in 1752.²⁰ Ellis notes Lawrence's death as producing, in Ellis' opinion, what was Washington's "greatest legacy," Mount Vernon.²¹ More importantly, however, Lawrence's death created a vacancy in the adjutancy corps of the Virginia militia and thus began the military career of the future Commander in Chief of the Continental Army.²²

¹⁷ For example, he donated \$200,000 of his personal fortune to support American troops during the Revolutionary War and was instrumental in securing France's support for the Revolution resulting in the signing of the French Alliance in 1778. The American Friends of Lafayette, <http://friendsoflafayette.org/data/27reasons.html> (last visited October 20, 2005).

¹⁸ During the course of their lifetimes, Washington and Lafayette exchanged hundreds of letters. See *The Washington Papers*, *supra* note 6. Ellis reports that Washington held Lafayette in great affection and thought of him as his "surrogate son." ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 116. Lafayette's words at Washington's tomb at Mount Vernon further demonstrate their closeness: "The feelings which on this awful moment oppress my heart don't leave me the power of utterance. I can only thank you, my dear Custis, for your precious gifts and pay a silent homage to the tomb of the greatest and best of men my paternal friend." General Lafayette's words at the tomb of George Washington, October 17, 1824. THE ARTHUR H. AND MARY MARDEN DEAN LAFAYETTE COLLECTION, http://rmclibrary.cornell.edu/FRENCHREV/Lafayette/exhibit/Ampolimages/iampol_tomb.htm (last visited October 26, 2005).

¹⁹ ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 209-10.

²⁰ *Id.* at 10.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* at 12. Washington was twenty years old when Lawrence died.

The second key event in his early life was his marriage to Martha Dandridge Curtis, an extraordinarily wealthy widow.²³ Washington's marriage to Martha propelled Washington into the upper social echelons of the Virginia planter class.²⁴ At the time of the union, the Mount Vernon estate was a mere 3,000 acres;²⁵ the Curtis estate, on the other hand, encompassed three plantations on 18,000 acres of prime tobacco land, worked by more than 200 slaves.²⁶ Being a member of the colonial landed class shaped Washington's views toward English rule more than any other factor. His dealings with the mercantile system,²⁷ his belief that the English were trying to rob him of land rightly awarded to him for his service in the French and Indian War,²⁸ and the English oppression in the form of the Stamp Act,²⁹ the Townsend Act³⁰ and the "Intolerable Acts"³¹ inspired Washington to independence. Ellis convincingly advocates the case that Washington's was not an ideological or social revolution, but an economic one.

Lawrence's premature death and the resulting vacancy in the Virginia militia were remarkable strokes of fate. Washington earlier had applied for a position in the militia but had no military qualifications to recommend him.³² It is too easy to play "what if;" however, *if* Lawrence had not married into the influential Fairfax family,³³ and *if* Lawrence had not held a position in the militia,³⁴ and *if* he had not died prematurely,³⁵ *if* Washington had not happened to petition for a billet shortly before Lawrence's death,³⁶ and *if* William Fairfax had not supported his application, in spite of his lack of qualification³⁷ – if all these things had not converged in the summer of 1752, the future Command in Chief might well have spent the War of Independence safely ensconced in

²³ *Id.* at 40.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at 41.

²⁶ *Id.* at 41, 48.

²⁷ *Id.* at 48-50.

²⁸ *Id.* at 39, 56-58, 64.

²⁹ *Id.* at 51-52.

³⁰ *Id.* at 59-61.

³¹ *Id.* at 61-62.

³² *Id.* at 12.

³³ *Id.* at 10.

³⁴ *Id.* at 12.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

Mount Vernon, cheering for a successful insurgency in the interests of his pocketbook.

But, of course, all these events did converge and Mister Washington became Major Washington.³⁸ Military service drew out and polished Washington's natural leadership abilities. A significant portion of *His Excellency* is devoted to Washington's service in the French and Indian War and the War of Independence.³⁹ This emphasis is remarkable in light of the fact that Washington's other accomplishments include chairing the Constitutional Convention and nursing the nation through its infancy with stunning success as its first President. However, it is the development of Washington's character and innate talents during his military career that shaped him into a man capable of achieving his ultimate greatness; it is these attributes to which Ellis rightly devotes such attention.

Ellis highlights several of Washington's leadership attributes, including his steadfastness;⁴⁰ his ability to recognize when not to follow his instincts;⁴¹ his ability to exploit talent in other men;⁴² and his gift for knowing when to speak and when to keep quiet.⁴³ Ellis identifies Washington's remarkable steadfastness in fighting the War of Independence.⁴⁴ Ellis reminds the reader that the war was in many ways simply a matter of out-lasting the British and that the popular enthusiasm of the "Spirit of '76" did not last the eight years of war.⁴⁵ Ellis also recognizes Washington's shortcomings and does not ignore how Washington's steadfastness at times left Washington in a less than flattering light. Ellis relates a remarkable account of Washington's determination for land and its fruits: In 1784, Washington toured his western holdings and found several families working plots he owed in western Pennsylvania, and who had been doing so for many years.⁴⁶ Washington demanded that they leave or pay him rent as tenants and hired a lawyer to enforce his rights.⁴⁷ He viewed the defendants "as

³⁸ *Id.* at 10-12.

³⁹ Approximately 140 pages of the 275-page book cover Washington's military service. *See id.* at 12-24, 73-153.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 88, 157.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 99-101.

⁴² *Id.* at 80-82, 175, 198-200.

⁴³ *Id.* at 175, 198-200.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 88.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 157.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

willful and obstinate Sinners, persevering after timely and repeated admonition, in a design to injure me.”⁴⁸ For two years, arguably the most powerful man in the new nation vehemently prosecuted his case against a handful of impoverished farmers.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Washington’s unshakable determination to win the war—he simply could not envision *not* winning—was, in a large part, what won the war in the end. He maintained this conviction of victory in the face of lackluster recruits,⁵⁰ undependable financial support from the Continental Congress,⁵¹ a smallpox epidemic,⁵² and an awe-inspiring enemy.⁵³

Washington’s steadfastness coupled with his ability to put aside his instincts and natural inclinations resulted in his adopting a successful strategy for winning the war. Washington’s natural inclinations were to take the war to the enemy. He viewed himself as a strong person, and the Continental Army as an extension of himself. Early in the war, his aggressive personality caused him to lead the army to a recklessly ambitious confrontation with the British in New York in July 1776, and to suffer a spectacular defeat.⁵⁴ His aggressive style fared better in Trenton (December 1776)⁵⁵ and Princeton (January 1777),⁵⁶ and refreshed his confidence that the Americans could win the war. However, he also came to realize that it was necessary for him to reject his natural offensive instincts and adopt a more defensive strategy. Washington’s natural steadfastness and his ability to adopt a strategy completely contrary to his natural instincts led him to the defensive Fabian strategy that ultimately won the war.⁵⁷ Persisting in such a

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 83-84, 99-100, 113-114.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 124-126, 130.

⁵² The War of Independence occurred during a smallpox epidemic that claimed approximately 100,000 lives. Washington was immune because he had been exposed during his youth. Remarkably, he recognized the need to address the issue, had the sense to quarantine soldiers afflicted, and was an early proponent of inoculation. *Id.* at 86-87.

⁵³ *Id.* at 90.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 92-96.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 97-98.

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 98-99.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 99-101. A Fabian strategy, named after the Roman general Fabius Cunctator, is a strategy in which direct decisive battle with a superior enemy is avoided and a battle of attrition is fought by inflicting “military pin-pricks to wear down the (enemy’s) endurance.” Robert M. Cassidy, *Why Great Powers Fight Small Wars Badly*, COMBINED ARMS CENTER MILITARY REVIEW, Sept. – Oct. 2002 English Edition, available at <http://leavenworth.army.mil/milrev/English/SepOct02/cassidy.htm>, (citing HART B.H. LIDDELL, *STRATEGY* 27 (2d ed. 1967)).

strategy for eight long years, contrary to the very fiber of his being, is truly a tribute to Washington's leadership capability.

An additional leadership attribute that served Washington well was his uncanny ability to identify talent in the men around him and effectively utilize them. Ellis first identifies this ability in connection with Washington's hand-picked lieutenants in the war.⁵⁸ Two of his chief lieutenants, Nathanael Greene and Henry Knox, were inexperienced in military matters and joined the Army for patriotic reasons—to fight for independence.⁵⁹ Greene joined as a private Soldier and rose to the rank of brigadier general within a year.⁶⁰ Washington identified Greene's brilliance early and promoted him accordingly, without regard to Greene's lack of formal military training and experience.⁶¹ Knox was a bookseller before the war, not a military man.⁶² Nonetheless, Washington saw his capabilities and, as with Greene, exploited his capabilities to the fullest. After the war, Washington made Knox his Secretary of War in the 1790s.⁶³ Washington also quickly recognized the remarkable talents of Horatio Gates and Charles Lee, former British officers, both eccentric characters who were brilliant strategists, and who championed the guerrilla-style tactics and the Fabian strategy that ultimately won the war.⁶⁴

Later having decided to participate in the Constitution Convention, which he would chair, Washington recognized his own lack of formal education in republican theory and sought instruction from the sharpest political minds of his time, including John Jay and James Madison.⁶⁵ As President, his cabinet membership included arguably the greatest statesmen in American history—James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and

⁵⁸ ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 80-82.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 81.

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ *Id.* at 81-82, (citing Hugh Rankin, Washington's Lieutenants and the American Victory, in *The World Turned Upside Down: The American Victory in the War for Independence 71-90* (John Ferling ed. 1988) JOHN SHY, *A PEOPLE NUMEROUS AND ARMED: REFLECTIONS ON THE MILITARY STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE 133-62* (1976); GEORGE WASHINGTON'S GENERALS AND OPPONENTS: THEIR EXPLOITS AND LEADERSHIP (George Billias, ed., 1994).

⁶⁴ ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 80-81.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 175.

Alexander Hamilton—and his “B list” included Knox, Jay, and Edmund Randolph.⁶⁶

But even as Ellis lauds Washington’s gift to recognize talent and exploit it, he does not gloss over Washington’s propensity for extinguishing even the brightest stars if they faltered in absolutely loyalty to him or threatened to dim his own light. Both Lee and Gates, though possessing brilliant military minds and who were proponents of the strategy that would ultimately lead to victory, challenged Washington “out-of-doors” and were eventually sacked.⁶⁷ Washington’s fall out with Jefferson is truly the stuff of history. These two Virginia gentlemen farmers had played leading roles in the birth of their nation. Jefferson was one of Washington’s “cherished surrogate sons;” when Jefferson retired from the cabinet Washington praised him for his integrity and trustworthiness.⁶⁸ Yet by 1797, the two men had severed all communications, in large part, because Jefferson, in his passion to defeat the Jay Treaty, became involved in a smear campaign against Washington, who supported the treaty.⁶⁹ The depth of their rift was so great that Washington attributed the creation of the two party system to it.⁷⁰ The problem lay in both men believing absolutely in their own greatness and making no allowances for anyone, even if equally great, challenging their perfect opinion of matters.⁷¹

Ellis also highlights Washington’s gift for knowing when to speak out and when to remain silent. As President, Washington commanded the executive as he had commanded the army—by recruiting talented men to serve as staff officers, or cabinet members and giving them the responsibility to do their jobs, but all the time knowing when he, the commander, needed to be heard and when a decision or action was his to perform. Ellis describes this facet his leadership style as “knowing when

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 198-200.

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 81-82.

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 231.

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 232.

⁷⁰ *Id.* One must not condemn Jefferson too severely for his conduct in regard to the Jay Treaty. He was outraged by the terms of the treaty which he viewed as “nothing more than a treaty of alliance between England and the Anglomen of this country against the legislature and people of the United States.” JOSEPH J. ELLIS, *AMERICAN SPHINX THE CHARACTER OF THOMAS JEFFERSON* (1996), 188.

⁷¹ ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 38, 78; ELLIS, *AMERICAN SPHINX*, *supra* note 32 at 191 and 222, where Ellis describes President Jefferson’s criteria for cabinet membership as “proven ability and complete loyalty to the Jeffersonian version of republicanism.”

to remain the hedgehog who keeps his distance and when to become the fox who dives into the details.”⁷²

Perhaps the best illustration of Washington’s gift at remaining silent is found in his conduct as the Chairman of the Constitutional Convention. While others were intensely debating states rights, powers of the central government, individual freedoms and slavery,⁷³ Washington remained silent and above the fray. However, he was not just a superfluous bystander; Washington’s presence was necessary to provide leadership and legitimacy to the proceedings.⁷⁴ Interestingly, although the U.S. Constitution is one of the greatest political achievements in history, Washington was not so confident of its greatness. After the Convention adjourned, he wrote to his friend Lafayette:

It is now a child of fortune, to be fostered by some and buffeted by others. What will be the General opinion on, or reception of it, is not for me to decide, nor shall I say anything for or against it—if it be good I suppose it will work its way good—if bad it will recoil on the Framers.⁷⁵

In fact, Washington’s concern that the convention would fail and that his reputation would be at risk fed his initial reservations about participating in the Convention at all.⁷⁶

⁷² ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 198.

⁷³ Like many of his peers, Washington’s views on slavery were complex and, in some regard, contradictory. Ellis presents Washington’s opinions and practices regarding slavery in an honest light. Washington, reports Ellis, viewed the institution of slavery “as the central contradiction of the revolutionary era.” *Id.* at 161. He was troubled morally by his ownership of slaves, but for years believed that freeing them outright was not economically feasible. However in the 1790’s he devised a plan that would ultimately result in their freedom when it was economically feasible to do so. *Id.* at 257. This plan did not come to fruition and Washington ultimately freed all his slave holding in his will. *Id.* at 263.

⁷⁴ *Id.* at 177-79. His silence should not be mistaken as indifference; his correspondence from Philadelphia reveals his attentiveness to the proceedings. *Id.*

⁷⁵ *Id.* at 179.

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 174.

Ellis makes clear Washington's confidence in his own greatness⁷⁷ and the great man's intense concern for his reputation and legacy.⁷⁸ This appears to have been a near lifelong concern; Ellis recounts Washington's efforts to rewrite history and change the facts of the Fort Mifflin debacle during the French and Indian War to cast himself in a better light.⁷⁹ Indeed, all Washington's subsequent decisions about his public life, as in regard to participation in the Convention, take into account this concern. He clearly had a historic perspective of himself: after the war, when there were various plots afoot to crown him king of the new nation,⁸⁰ Washington, unlike Cromwell or Napoleon, was able to check his personal ambition and appreciate that his personal "place in history would be enhanced, not by enlarging his power, but by surrendering it."⁸¹

So what is Washington's legacy? What, in Ellis' view, made Washington "the most ambitious, determined, and potent personality of an age not lacking for worthy rivals?"⁸² Ellis contends that Washington was the "rarest of men: a supremely realistic visionary."⁸³ Washington believed in the revolution and in the necessity and the goodness and beauty of the creation of the United States; he also appreciated the hard realities of waging a successful revolution and ensuring the survival of a new republic. For example, Washington considered slavery to be morally and politically wrong, but he also knew that to try to abolish it at the nation's birth would condemn it to be still born.⁸⁴ Likewise, Washington supported the Jay Treaty because Washington knew that even a treaty so unfavorable to the United States was preferable to war

⁷⁷ Amazingly, Washington's birthday was recognized as a national holiday before he was even dead. It was recognized as early as 1778. He died on December 14, 1799.

⁷⁸ Preoccupation with one's legacy did not start with Twentieth Century politicians. See BILL CLINTON, MY LIFE (2004) for a modern classic of legacy-spin. But not all our Founding Fathers shared Washington's concern for it. See ELLIS AMERICAN SPHINX, *supra* note 70, at 350: "The true Jeffersonian legacy is to be hostile to legacies," quoting historian Joyce Appleby, noted Jefferson historian and author of THOMAS JEFFERSON: THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS SERIES (2003); ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR., INHERITING THE REVOLUTION: THE FIRST GENERATION OF AMERICANS (2000).

⁷⁹ ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 16, 273.

⁸⁰ *Id.* at 139-43.

⁸¹ *Id.* at 143.

⁸² See *supra* note 6 and accompanying text.

⁸³ ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 271.

⁸⁴ *Id.* at 202. U.S. CONST. art. 1, § 9, para 1, which provides, "The migration or importation of such persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by any Congress prior to the year one thousand eight hundred and eight."

with England, a war he did not believe America could survive.⁸⁵ Without Washington's realism, the vision of a new American republic would have died on the vine.

His Excellency is an outstanding read. It is a fair and balanced look at a great man. Washington was a complex character, driven by both external and internal forces; his life was a striking example of the right man at the right place at the right time. Ellis admirably tells Washington's story by succinctly relating the facts of the places and times that affected Washington's life. More importantly, he then fairly describes how Washington's inner attributes caused him to react to those external forces and achieve such greatness. *His Excellency* should not be read as a history of the War of Independence, the Constitutional Convention or the early years of nationhood and readers who approach it as such will surely be disappointed. But to readers who are interested in the remarkable synergy between these revolutionary events and the man, George Washington, Ellis' work is strongly recommended.

⁸⁵ *Id.* at 227. Washington gave the United States "a generation" before he believed it was capable of prevailing in such a conflict. *Id.* at 226-227.