

Op-Ed: For virtue and vision, but two presidents stand out

By John F. Gilligan

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When it comes to Presidents' Day, we live in the land of Lake Woebegone where all U.S. presidents are deemed above average. It's another example of a culture that defines excellence downward.

Some presidents were awful, inept and crooks. Most were mediocre yet deserving of thanks for their service to the nation. Only a handful stand out among the rest. The top two were born in the month of February: George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Let's call it as it is and remember them specifically.

Each deserves his own editorial. Lincoln was born on the 9th of this month and Washington on the 11th (Julian calendar) but now updated to the 22nd by the Gregorian calendar. In any case, there would be no United States of America if it were not for Washington and Lincoln. So in good conscience, forget the others.

If one takes into account that each lived in different times and circumstances, it's easy to distinguish between the two without diminishing the other. Both rose to the occasion. It's why they remain exemplars of what it means to be an American.

Here are two of their character traits to model if America is to remain standing: virtue and vision.

Washington stands out most for virtue. He manifested a commitment to the common good and the courage to live and die by it. Washington gave us the definition of patriotism in real life. For him the common good of the country should prevail above all. It's why he despised political factions and understood his presidency as for the people and not a party.

Washington had a much longer life than Lincoln in serving the nation. Like the ancient Roman citizen-soldier Cincinnatus, Washington left his farm to fend off the French in the backwoods of the Ohio country (1754). He led his men in close-up combat. Two bullets pierced the flaps of his jacket. The French and Indian War got triggered that day.

Given such experience, the Continental Congress asked him to lead the Continental Army. Eight years of war brought victory. Washington was then compared to Fabius, the Roman general who drove Hannibal back to Africa (202 BC).

Again, Washington returned to his farm. He hardly got his boots off when the request came to chair the Constitutional Convention. Everyone trusted him to do the right thing. That service completed, he headed back home.

The United States Constitution was ratified by the states. But votes within many state ratification conventions were contentious and narrow. The great fear was that the chief executive could quickly morph into a king. There was only one person the nation could entrust to kick off this new government.

For good reason, Washington is called the father of our country. Yet he never saw himself that way. He always recognized, respected and was at the service of the people who make America. He was the first general to have African-Americans as soldiers and the first president to free his slaves; his immediate successors never did.

Lincoln, on the other hand, articulated the American vision like no other. He put in relief exactly what the Civil War was about: Could a “nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal ... long endure”?

Lincoln called this “the great task before us.” It was then, and is today. Being an American means transcending race, ethnic, gender and religious identities in order to forge a culture of mutual respect, tolerance and dignity for our fellow citizens.

No nation in the world has ever stated that as its vision. America does. Making it a reality requires ceaseless effort. Yes, it has been a long slog. “But where there is no vision,” says the Book of Proverbs, “the people perish.” So too with America’s vision. Without it the nation perishes.

Celebrating Lincoln’s birthday reminds us of that vision. And celebrating Washington’s birthday reminds us of the virtue necessary to get us there.

John F. Gilligan, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, is president emeritus of the Human Service Center. He lives in Groveland.