

In the Spotlight: Washington showed us the way

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When George Washington died (14 December 1779) he was viewed as the embodiment of the American Republic. We forever speak his name when referring to the United States Capitol, daily honor him with a 555-foot marble obelisk monument and glorify him in a painting rising into the heavens within the U.S. Capitol dome. But does any of that still have historical relevance to modern America?

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Sadly, the answer is “not much.” After all, in the age of iPhones a guy with a wig does seem obsolete.

Henry Ford’s analysis a century ago best captures today’s attitude. “History is bunk,” he said. “The only history that’s worth a tinker’s damn is the history that we make today.” Clearly, we were seeing the early onset of the nation’s historical dementia. We no longer remember much if anything about those who gave it birth.

History is about many things. But it is ultimately about people and their relationships, especially how they go awry. And if there is nothing to be learned from that, then history is indeed bunk and we are all doomed.

So what does Washington teach us that has all been but forgotten? Two things: the common good and self-restraint.

A republic wherein people govern themselves is fundamentally about discerning and pursuing the common good. And that depends upon the people’s ability to subordinate some of their personal interests, ideologies, and passions. In a democracy one man’s insistence on his world view becomes another’s tyranny.

This was Washington's greatest battle in forging a new nation, not the physical combat with the English, Loyalists and Hessians. "My God," he said, "I thought we were one country" as he ran into a buzz saw of colonies whose legislators put their own interests against the nation's, generals who operated autonomously and militias who refused to fight beyond their colonial borders.

Washington was both a general and a statesman. He tirelessly worked to forge collaboration, cooperation and coordination among the diverse and often antagonistic cultures embedded in the 13 colonies who had just declared themselves to be "Free and Independent States."

Often he felt like smashing heads together but had long mastered his volcanic temper. Instead he measured his words, invited conversation, listened to all, and strove for consensus. It was exasperating and exhausting work. It required restraint, manners and good will. It was called virtue.

A government of the people, by the people and for the people takes work and virtue. And if we want to keep our republic, George Washington has shown us the way. That's his relevance for today. And that's no bunk.

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