

2016

## Cherries from the Tree: National Identity and the Hero Construction of George Washington, 1799-1829

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### Recommended Citation

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<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-k87m-db96>

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**Cherries from the Tree: National Identity and the Hero Construction of George  
Washington, 1799-1829**

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**A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts**

**Early American and U.S. History**

**The College of William and Mary  
January, 2016**


## APPROVAL PAGE


This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

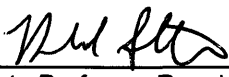
Master of Arts

  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is about how Americans in the early nineteenth century made the figure of George Washington into the archetypical national hero. Chapter One looks at how eulogists and orators exalted Washington into a godlike figure immediately following the first president's death in 1799. Chapter Two looks at how Americans celebrated the legacy of George Washington in pomp and ceremony as well as in print between his death in 1799 and the inauguration of Andrew Jackson in 1829. Finally, Chapter Three takes a critical view of Mason Locke Weems' famous biography of Washington, arguing that this author constructed the first president into a didactic folk hero. This thesis seeks to deepen our understanding of the legacy of George Washington as well as the relationship between print culture and national identity in the early United States. #

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author of this thesis wishes to express his thanks here to the many people who made this work possible. First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Christopher Grasso for overseeing this project. Under the stewardship of this master historian, I was able to position my own work and ideas within the voluminous literature about the early United States. Second, I would like to thank Dr. Carol Sheriff for all of her advice and encouragement, as well as Dr. Ronald Schechter for providing the much-needed criticism of a non-Americanist scholar. Lastly, I would like to thank my colleague Kasey Sease for the hours of proof reading and editing she did for me on this piece.

On a non-professional note, I would like to thank my mother and father for always being there for me. I would also like to thank my Aunt Patricia and my Aunt Kathy, who have generously and selflessly funded my education over the years. And lastly, I would like to thank all of my teachers over the years: Mrs. D'Angelo taught me how to read, Mr. Doerfler taught me how to think historically, and Dr. Cynthia Whittaker, Dr. Gerald DeMaio, and Dr. Christopher Grasso made me into an historian.

This Master's Thesis is dedicated to Aaron Salem Hume, who was the light in my darkest hour...

## Introduction:

### Hero Construction and Print Culture

In the three decades after his death, writers turned George Washington into a national hero in print during the period known as the early republic (1799 to 1829). Three different kinds of sources highlight how Washington was glorified in different forms of printed material. Eulogies, funeral orations, and brief biographical sketches of Washington were compiled into bounded volumes and sold to the public around the end of the year 1800. The second chapter shows how Washington was portrayed in the newspapers of the young nation. Discussions of his birthday celebrations, Fourth of July celebrations, as well as several national events – like Andrew Jackson’s victory at New Orleans in early 1815 or the simultaneous deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1826 – show how Washington’s figure evolved in pomp and ceremony as well as in partisan politicking. National, cross-regional celebrations of Washington’s legacy also occasioned its use for partisan ends. But Mason Locke Weems’s famous biography *Life of Washington*, the subject of chapter three, was the most important publication shaping America’s first president into a didactic folk-hero. This book-peddling itinerant preacher took George Washington, a colonial elite, and refashioned him into an American hero who rose up from humble origins by dint of his well-cultivated private virtues. Weems also used his version of Washington to promote the ideal of the balanced character – the most popular model of the self during the period. The biographer placed the figure of the first president within the tradition of Greek and Roman antiquity while simultaneously infusing his life with a grander millennial purpose.

When George Washington died in late December of 1799, the people of the young republic participated in an unprecedented period of mourning that witnessed both public



ceremonies in all parts of the nation as well as an outpouring of eulogies and orations.<sup>1</sup> In addition, a handful of authors composed biographical sketches and discourses on Washington's life in the months following his departure from the world stage. Taken together, these texts represented the first time Americans paused to deeply reflect about the man they called the Father of their Country. These eulogies were the first round of Washington's hero construction – a process which entailed exalting the first president above and beyond all heroes of history, glorifying his accomplishments with references to the bible, and describing his virtues in a way that encouraged future generations to emulate them. America's revolutionary generation placed a great deal of emphasis on posterity, or the idea of one's reputation being preserved in a positive way throughout future ages. All the published authors sought to make Washington's example immortal. Many of the commentators reflected on the admirable character traits of Washington, invoking the ideal of the balanced character – what Daniel Walker Howe has shown to be the dominant model of self-cultivation during the period.<sup>2</sup> They also overemphasized Washington's piety while reading providential design and interposition into the events of his life.

These commentators drew on references to Greek and Roman antiquity as well as references to the bible (particularly the Old Testament) in order to dramatize and contextualize Washington's greatness. Previous scholars have pointed out how these orators and writers used the "Moses-Washington analogy." In this formula, Washington is depicted as the leader of Israel guiding his people out of the desert and into the land of Canaan. This rendered the War for Independence and the creation of the American Republic a quasi-biblical event.<sup>3</sup> At the same

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald E. Kahler, *The Long Farewell: Americans Mourn the Death of George Washington* (Charlottesville, V.A.: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 1-17.

<sup>3</sup> Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), pp. 91-103, 170-177.

time, other scholars have analyzed how eulogists tapped into the larger American tradition of referencing the history of ancient Greece and Rome to make sense of Washington's historical significance.<sup>4</sup> However, there are two trends these historians have missed. The first involves the blending of these two traditions into one grand narrative that locates Washington simultaneously within secular and sacred history. The second involves a phenomenon that has grand implications for American nationalism and American exceptionalism. That is, the eulogies and orations constituted the first time a modern American hero was exalted *above* all the heroes of antiquity. This element was the most ambitious component of the early hero construction of Washington.

The political divisions of the day, as well as the upcoming presidential election of 1800, also influenced the orators. If the orations and eulogies had a political bias, it was almost exclusively Federalist in outlook. Commentators used Washington's figure to censure the French Revolutionaries and their American allies, as well as promote the Federalist Party and John Adams in particular. One of the central themes that emerges from this politicking is what scholars have called "antipartisanship," or the idea that one's own party is the true representative of the people's will, while the other was a corrupting and divisive faction bent on destroying national unity.<sup>5</sup> By rendering Washington a prototypical Federalist while holding him up as *the* national hero, Federalists and Federalist-leaning commentators sought to position themselves as the rightful inheritors of the American Revolution. This theme would resonate throughout the years of America's first party system, until the collapse of the Federalists and the rise of the Jacksonian age witnessed the depoliticization of the first president's legacy.

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<sup>4</sup> Eran Shalev, *Rome Reborn on Western Shores: Historical Imagination and the Creation of the American Republic* (Charlottesville, V.A.: University of Virginia Press, 2009), pp. 73-113.

<sup>5</sup> David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 201-245.

Chapter two will tell that story by casting a wide net over America's voluminous amount of newspapers published between Washington's death and the inauguration of Jackson (1799-1829). Articles about different national events occasioned reflection and commentary on Washington's legacy. Here the partisan usage of Washington went through three phases. In the first (1800-1812), the hero construction of Washington was almost exclusively a project of the Federalist Party. In this period, Federalists delineated and celebrated Washington's example and character while Republicans focused on glorifying Thomas Jefferson and offered only perfunctory recognition of the first president. In the second phase, the legacy of Washington was openly contested. The War of 1812 and the Federalist opposition to that struggle caused the Republicans to challenge the Federalist monopoly on Washington's legacy. They charged their opponents with corrupting the example of the Father of his Country for corrosive ends. During this period, the politicization of the memory of Washington reached its crescendo. In the third phase, with the collapse of the Federalist Party and the death of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, the figure of Washington became depoliticized. Now, Americans celebrated Washington and Jefferson together as members of a common pantheon of revolutionary American statesman. By the time of Andrew Jackson's inauguration, the second generation of American leadership took the stage. From then on, American partisan fault lines would not be drawn over the inheritance of Washington in particular, but over the inheritance of what Daniel Webster called the "American constellation" of revolutionary heroes. This story shows how the hero construction of Washington in the American press was a political and contingent process.

In addition to print, public celebrations and ceremonies were integral to this process. As David Waldstreicher has argued, the "reciprocal influence of [public] celebrations and print" had

the effect of making local fetes appear as national rituals.<sup>6</sup> During the national period of mourning and continuing on through Washington's Birthday celebrations (February 22<sup>nd</sup>), newspapers printed articles with detailed descriptions of public ceremonies in order to give their readership a sense of participation in the festivities. In addition, newspaper editors commented on the events in a way that attempted to capture their emotional aura. As Waldstreicher points out, these public fetes were America's first "media events."<sup>7</sup> In other words, besides a mere reporting of the facts, the press participated in making ceremonies significant. Hence, public celebrations in the early republic became part of print culture in a way that blurred the lines between the text and the festivity.

Though it is perhaps still the most famous biography in American history, Mason Locke Weems's *Life of Washington* can still offer new insights into the development of early American nationalism. Trish Loughran has argued that "there was no 'nationalized' print public sphere in the years just before and just after the Revolution, but rather a proliferating variety of local and regional reading publics scattered across a vast and diverse geographical space."<sup>8</sup> However, challenging Loughran's view of early nineteenth-century print culture, Weems's *Life of Washington* reached a truly *national* readership. The book was marketed not only in bookstores up and down the coast (and even in some smaller towns in the West), but was sold also in underserved, rural locales by Weems himself, who travelled the countryside for a living. Weems's portrait of Washington became the most popular version of Washington proliferating throughout the young nation. The substance of the biography itself also turned Americans' focus from public to private life. As Scott E. Casper argues, "Weems moved toward a new sort of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. xviii-xix.

[biographical] didacticism” by showing that “a direct relationship existed between the public and the private: the character Washington cultivated in private life made his public successes possible.”<sup>9</sup> Weems relied on apocryphal tales of Washington’s private life in an effort to dig deeper into his character than the eulogists, who focused more on Washington’s public virtues. In other words, while eulogists relied on the historical Washington to comment on his character, Weems invented a literary version of his private life in order to reveal “Washington below the clouds.”

While Casper was concerned with the *form* of the biography, a different kind of interpretation that focuses on the *substance* of the work shows how Weems used Greek and Roman antiquity, the Old and New Testament, as well as certain historical figures from the late eighteenth century to delineate the character of Washington. Weems continued in the tradition of using the political heroes of the ancient republics to contextualize Washington’s public feats, but added Homeric references to infuse Washington’s private virtues with classical mystique. Secondly, while the eulogists relied mostly on Old Testament references to Moses and the Israelites, Weems used the New Testament to render Washington a messianic figure, and to portray the American Revolution as a millennial event. Also like the eulogists, Weems read providential design into Washington’s life and character. But Weems’s sense of the divine is broad, ambiguous, and inconsistent. Sometimes we see a deist understanding of Providence helping Washington through second causes, while elsewhere Weems gives us a Calvinistic image of Washington as a non-agentive conduit for God’s will on earth. Weems may have even purposefully used an ecumenical deity to appeal to a broad range of readers.

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<sup>9</sup> Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biographies and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 74.

Weems also intentionally made Washington appear to be of humble origins in order to appeal to poor rural children. In so doing, Weems was trying to make the first president seem more relatable to the majority of American children, all in an effort to maximize the biography's didactic appeal. This is especially the case when it comes to Weems's telling of Washington's education. Further, Weems used the ideal of the balanced character (popularized by Benjamin Franklin) in order to prescribe a model for virtuous self-cultivation. Both of these trends combined to make Washington into a figure that emerged out of the common people, and rose to fame and glory by merit of his own character. I call this phenomenon "the didactic folk hero."

Ultimately, this is a study of the way in which early American national identity was fostered by the hero construction of George Washington in print. As Benedict Anderson so famously pointed out, "the development of print-as-commodity" (or "print-capitalism") had the power to nurture the idea of the nation as an imagined community: a "deep, horizontal comradeship" among a group of people who "will never know most of their fellow-members."<sup>10</sup> In early America, a host of different forms of print were used to fashion Washington into the archetypical national hero. Washington was made into the anthropomorphic representation of the kind of nation-state envisioned by the Federalist Party, and he was also the human face stamped upon the revolution that created the American republic. Yet it was more than that. In print – and especially in the Weems biography – Washington was made into the grand metonym for the American national *character*: a concept which includes both the relationship between "the citizen, or national subject, and the state, or national government," as well as the way "individuals could be understood in the light of [a] national culture [or] psychology."<sup>11</sup> In other

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<sup>10</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983, rev. ed. 1991), pp. 37, 44, 7, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, p. 141.

words, Washington came to symbolize both the emerging American nation-state, as well as a whole bundle of character traits and behavioral norms associated with being a good citizen. In that sense, early American nationalism to a significant degree congealed around the conception of Washington as “an exalted father.”<sup>12</sup> And no vehicle was more important in this process than print.

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<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), p. 182.

## Chapter 1

### Death of a Hero: Eulogy and the Construction of an Idol

On December 14, 1799, George Washington died at Mount Vernon among a team of doctors, his wife, family members, and a few of his enslaved African house servants.<sup>13</sup> It took five days for this “afflicting intelligence” to reach the Philadelphia papers.<sup>14</sup> Over the next several months – from the mock funerals that were held immediately following his death to the congressionally sanctioned national day of mourning on Washington’s Birthday (February twenty-second) – the people of the young republic participated in a long and unprecedented period of public grieving and remembrance. Within the span of about eight weeks, there were over three hundred eulogies, orations, and discourses delivered in front of audiences all across the nation.<sup>15</sup> While scores of these were reprinted in local newspapers, a handful of them were deemed popular and important enough to make their way into a number of anthologies printed for sale to the general public.<sup>16</sup> These orations, eulogies, and biographical sketches presented in such volumes show how Washington’s legacy was constructed in marketed print material immediately following his death and mourning.

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<sup>13</sup> Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2010), pp. 806-810.

<sup>14</sup> *Gazette of the United States* (Philadelphia), December 19, 1799; *Aurora General Advertiser* (Philadelphia), December 19, 1799.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald E. Kahler, *Long Farewell*, pp. 151-152.

<sup>16</sup> *The Washingtoniana: Containing a Biographical Sketch of the Late Gen. George Washington, with Various Outlines of His Character, from the Pens of Different Eminent Writers, both in Europe and America; And an Account of the Various Funeral Honors Devoted to His Memory. To Which Are Annexed His Will and Schedule of His Property. Embellished with a Good Likeness.* (Baltimore: Samuel Power, 1800); *Eulogies and Orations on the Life and Death of General George Washington, First President of the United States of America* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1800); *Memory of Washington: Comprising a Sketch of His Life and Character; and the National Testimonials of Respect. Also, a Collection of Eulogies and Orations, with a Copious Appendix* (Newport, R.I.: Oliver Farnsworth, 1800).



The revolutionary generation was posterity obsessed, and its statesmen were vehemently concerned with how their reputation would be perceived by future ages.<sup>17</sup> Hence, one of the central themes running throughout the eulogies and orations was how “[Washington’s] great example... will be a germ of virtuous actions through the succeeding generations, till time shall be no more.”<sup>18</sup> In Alexandria, Virginia (the closest town to Washington’s plantation), Doctor Elisha Dick declared that “his fair fame [is] secure in its immortality,” while Federalist politician Gouverneur Morris ended his oration by proclaiming that “HE SHALL LIVE FOREVER!”<sup>19</sup> But former Continental Army general Henry “Light Horse Harry” Lee went the furthest of all, declaring in front of a massive crowd in Philadelphia that “when nations now existing shall be no more; when even our young and far-spreading empire shall have perished, still will our WASHINGTON’S glory unfaded shine, and die not, until love of virtue cease on earth, or earth itself sinks into chaos.”<sup>20</sup> The orators also envisioned how the construction of Washington’s immortal legacy would be perpetuated and disseminated. Historian and physician David Ramsay urged Americans to “bring your children and your children’s children to examine” Washington’s papers in order to “teach them to love their country, and to serve it on liberal terms.”<sup>21</sup> Numerous speakers called upon their audience “to lisp the name of *WASHINGTON*” into their infants’ ears, while Henry Lee reminded Philadelphians that “he lives in our hearts [and] in the growing knowledge of our children.”<sup>22</sup> More than one commentator suggested that Washington’s life

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<sup>17</sup> Douglass Adair, “Fame and the Founding Fathers,” in Trevor Colbourn ed., *Fames and the Founders: Essays by Douglass Adair* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), pp. 3-36.

<sup>18</sup> David Ramsay, “An Oration on the Death of Lieutenant-General George Washington,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> Dr. Elisha C. Dick, “Oration at Alexandria,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 205; Gouverneur Morris, “An Oration Upon the Death of General Washington,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 54.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Lee, “Funeral Oration on the Death of General Washington,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 139.

<sup>21</sup> Ramsay, “Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 94.

<sup>22</sup> Dick, “Oration,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 206; Jonathan Mitchel Sewall, “An Eulogy, on the Late General Washington,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 41; John Thornton Kirkland, “A Discourse Occasioned by the Death of General George Washington,” *ibid.* p. 297; Lee, “Funeral Oration,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 139.

would serve as “immortal subjects for the historian, orator and poet,” while former congressman Fisher Ames called upon “some future Plutarch” to catalog “the purity and ardour of his patriotism.”<sup>23</sup> But beyond his political acumen and military prowess, orators emphasized that “the character of General *Washington*...will be transmitted to posterity” while “the memory of his virtues...will remained undiminished.”<sup>24</sup>

In the Anglo-American world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, “character” referred to “personality with a moral dimension” – made up of a “mixture of traits, vices, and virtues that determined a person’s social worth.”<sup>25</sup> No orator who spoke at any length failed to “delineate a just portrait of [Washington’s] character,” and many eulogies and biographical sketches contained the word “character” in their titles.<sup>26</sup> Many of the encomiums talked about Washington’s “unexampled virtue” and described him as “a character throughout sublime.”<sup>27</sup> As George Minot told his Boston audience, Washington’s exemplary virtue was “the greatest legacy which a mortal could bequeath you.”<sup>28</sup> As historian Daniel Walker Howe has argued, the American model of the virtuous self during the period was the “balanced character,” or one who had his “faculties properly exercised, developed, and disciplined.”<sup>29</sup> In effect, what this meant was a control of one’s animalistic passions and an avoidance of excesses of all kinds.

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<sup>23</sup> Kirkland, “Discourse,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 295; Jedidiah Morse, “Biographical Sketch of General George Washington,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 26; Anon. “Death of Washington,” *ibid.* p. 115; Fisher Ames, “An Oration on the Sublime Virtues of General George Washington,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 128.

<sup>24</sup> Anon. “The Character of Washington Elegantly Drawn and Published in London,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 226.

<sup>25</sup> Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. xx.

<sup>26</sup> Major William Jackson, “Eulogium on the Character of General Washington,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 243.

<sup>27</sup> George Richards Minot, “An Eulogy on George Washington,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 26; Lee, “Funeral Oration,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 139.

<sup>28</sup> Minot, “Eulogy,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 19-20.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 127; see also: pp. 5-8.

With regard to Washington, his “consummate prudence” was the virtue most often celebrated.<sup>30</sup> He was “cool in action, undaunted [and] self possessed,” always exhibiting a “magnanimity of character” and a “pacific temper of mind.”<sup>31</sup> Widely noted for his “unvarying habits of regularity, temperance, and industry” as well as for having “a judgement sober, deliberate and sound,” one orator went so far as to proclaim that “no person ever existed, that had all his passions under more complete control.”<sup>32</sup> Washington was depicted as having the perfect portion of the character traits admired by the age, and his greatness lay “not so much to be seen in the display of any one virtue, as in the possession of them all.”<sup>33</sup> Speaking in Charleston, South Carolina, David Ramsay summed it up perfectly: “He had religion without austerity; dignity without pride; modesty without diffidence; courage without rashness; politeness without affection [and] affability without familiarity.”<sup>34</sup> Another idea highly valued by early republican America was the notion that one’s private virtue determined one’s public behavior.<sup>35</sup> Hence, more than one orator made sure to highlight how “the private virtues of this great man exactly corresponded with those exhibited in public life” as they “gave effulgence to his public virtues.”<sup>36</sup> Some of the most widely cited character traits of Washington were his industry, charity, “strength and correctness of mind,” and a “self-command” that was “like Socrates.”<sup>37</sup> But perhaps the most conspicuous claim was that his “immutable principles of

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<sup>30</sup> Jackson, “Eulogium,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 247; Ames, “An Oration,” *ibid.* p. 127; John Davis, “An Eulogy on General George Washington,” *ibid.* p. 153; Sewall, “Eulogy,” *ibid.* p. 35; Morse, “Biographical Sketch,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 22; Timothy Dwight, *A Discourse, Delivered at New-Haven, Feb. 22, 1800; On The Character of George Washington, Esq.* (New-Haven: Thomas Green and Son, 1800), p. 33.

<sup>31</sup> Ames, “An Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, pp. 111-112; Isaac Parker, “An Oration, on the Sublime Virtues of General Washington,” *ibid.* p. 220; Morse, “Biographical Sketch,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 30; Sewall, “Eulogy,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p.37.

<sup>33</sup> Ames, “An Oration,” *ibid.* p. 127.

<sup>34</sup> Ramsay, “An Oration,” *ibid.* p. 91.

<sup>35</sup> See: Christopher Harris, *Public Lives, Private Virtues: Images of American Revolutionary War Heroes, 1782-1832* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000).

<sup>36</sup> Sewall, “Eulogy,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 36; Lee, “Funeral Oration,” in *Washingtonian*, p.148; see also: Dick, “Oration,” *ibid.* p. 204

<sup>37</sup> Morse, “Biographical Sketch,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 11; Anon., “Character of Washington,” *ibid.* pp. 222-223.

morality [were] based on religion,” while the hardest virtues to prove (but nevertheless emphasized) were “his piety and humility.”<sup>38</sup>

By 1800, many Americans had long been weary of the violent excesses of the French Revolution, and more than a few commentators blamed atheism for the bloodshed.<sup>39</sup> Most of the orations and eulogies that made their way into printed volumes, if they were at all political, had strong Federalist undertones. Hence, in order to make Washington appear as the archetypal anti-Jacobin, many of the orators overplayed his piety. Massachusetts justice John Davis told the members of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston that Washington was heavily influenced “by the firm and active persuasion of an ALL-SEEING, ALL-POWERFUL DEITY,” before asking his audience to contrast “his sublime example...with the tribe of infidel heroes, who have lately appeared on the bloody theatre of Europe.” Lawyer, poet, and arch-Federalist Jonathan M. Sewall expounded on how “the deepest sense of religion impressed upon [Washington’s] heart,” while proclaiming that “the saviour of his country, did not disdain to acknowledge and adore a greater Saviour, whom deists and infidels affect to slight and despise.”<sup>40</sup> Another commentator rejoiced in the idea that Washington “was far from being one of those minute philosophers, who believe that ‘death is an eternal sleep’ [and] discard the light of Divine Revelation.”<sup>41</sup> The conservative Charleston, Massachusetts pastor Jedidiah Morse harped on how Washington “was remarkable for his strict observation of the Sabbath” as well as “his faith in the truth and excellence of the holy scriptures.”<sup>42</sup> Ironically, George Washington was probably closer to being in the deist tradition than a model of Christian piety whose guiding

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<sup>38</sup> Lee, “Funeral Oration,” *ibid.* p. 145; Kirkland, “Discourse,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 297

<sup>39</sup> Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 252-277

<sup>40</sup> Davis, “Eulogy,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 156; Sewall, “An Eulogy,” *ibid.* p. 37-38

<sup>41</sup> Ramsay, “An Oration,” *ibid.* p. 9. NB: By the late 1790s, the word “philosopher” had developed a negative connotation in Federalist circles due to its association with republican France. May, *Enlightenment in America*, p. 222.

<sup>42</sup> Morse, “Biographical Sketch,” in *Washingtoniana*, pp. 30-31.

principles came exclusively from the scriptures.<sup>43</sup> Timothy Dwight, the rector of Yale College, came closest to reflecting this reality when he stated that “if he was not a Christian, he was more like one, than any man of the same description, whose life has been hitherto recorded.”<sup>44</sup>

Even if certain eulogists were unwilling to glorify Washington’s unexampled piety, many saw the hand of providential design in his life and character. Echoing the view that God acted through secondary causes, deist-leaning Gouverneur Morris told his New York audience that Washington was “born of high destinies [but] fashioned for them by the hand of nature.”<sup>45</sup> In a similar key, Doctor Elisha Dick proclaimed Washington to be “the individual whom a beneficent Providence selected...to dispense the blessing of political life and liberty to his country,” but added that he was formed “by the munificent hand of nature.”<sup>46</sup> Another commentator saw the hand of both heaven and the American people at work, stating that “the voice of his countrymen was raised to him, to the Instrument, under Providence, for their protection.”<sup>47</sup> Other orators adhered to a more traditional Providentialism, or “the belief that God controls everything that happened on earth.”<sup>48</sup> George Minot declared that “Providence directed his appointment as the Commander in Chief,” while Henry Lee asserted that “the finger of an overruling Providence” had “marked [Washington] as the man designed by Heaven to lead in the political as well as military events which have distinguished the era of his life.”<sup>49</sup> Timothy Dwight added that it was “God who formed and furnished him for labours so useful, and for a life so glorious.”<sup>50</sup> Some commentators nearly went so far as to elevate Washington himself to the status of a divine being.

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<sup>43</sup> Chernow, *Washington*, pp. 131-133; Mathew Stewart, *Nature’s God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), pp. 188, 181-192.

<sup>44</sup> Dwight, *Discourse*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>45</sup> Morris, “Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 44.

<sup>46</sup> Dick, “Oration,” in *Washingtoniana*, pp. 198-199.

<sup>47</sup> Morse, “Biographical Sketch,” *ibid.* p. 28

<sup>48</sup> Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 5; for revolutionary era Providentialism, see: *ibid.* pp. 137-172.

<sup>49</sup> Minot, “Eulogy,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p.21; Lee, “Funeral Oration,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 143.

<sup>50</sup> Dwight, *Discourse*, p. 30.

Jonathan Sewall mused that “whether man or angel, the difference is not great,” while Major William Jackson referred simply to “godlike WASHINGTON” in front of his Philadelphia audience.<sup>51</sup> Finally, many orators followed John Adams’s address to the House of Representatives in reminding their listeners that “it hath pleased Divine Providence to remove from this life, our excellent fellow-citizen GEORGE WASHINGTON.”<sup>52</sup>

But Providentialism was not the only thread of the Christian tradition found in Washington’s eulogies. As historian Garry Wills and sociologist Barry Schwartz have both pointed out, funeral eulogies and other early renderings of Washington “were saturated with Mosaic imagery,” as the “Moses-Washington analogy” helped infuse “religious meaning into the building of a new government” while articulating “the significance of Washington’s role as chief magistrate.”<sup>53</sup> The Old Testament provided tropes for many orators, like the Reverend Patrick Allison of Maryland who compared the collective grievance over Washington to that of “the Hebrews of old, when all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah.” But these kinds of parallels enjoyed the most resonance in New England, which had a rich tradition of drawing on the experience of the Israelites to contextualize social and political phenomena.<sup>54</sup> In Boston, George Minot told his audience that Washington was “favoured beyond the leader of Israel [i.e. Moses], not only with the prospect, but with the fruition of the promised blessing.” In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Jonathan Sewall likened Washington’s farewell address “to that bequeathed by Moses to the nation of Israel,” and went on to state that Washington liberated the American people from British tyranny as “did the leader of the hosts of Israel deliver that nation from

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<sup>51</sup> Sewall, “Eulogy,” in *Eulogies and Oration*, p.40; Jackson, “Eulogium,” *ibid.* p.248.

<sup>52</sup> John Adams, “First Response to the News in Front of the Houses of Representatives,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 107.

<sup>53</sup> Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), pp. 176-177; Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (Garden City, N.Y: Double Day, 1984), pp. 27-53

<sup>54</sup> Mark Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 33-47

Egyptian bondage.” Further, while Moses “lead [the Israelites] to the very borders of the promised land” Washington brought the Americans “into the full possession” of a new Israel.<sup>55</sup> But Timothy Dwight went furthest of all in elucidating the “strong resemblance between [Moses] and the hero of your own country,” comparing Washington’s fame to “the preeminence of Moses [among] all the great men of Israel.” Yet in Dwight’s text, it is not so much that Washington emerges as an American Moses, as much as it is Moses who appears as the ideal eighteenth-century republican. Moses revealed his “angelic virtue” by “sacrificing his diffidence to his duty,” while exhibiting “unexampled patriotism,” “glorious integrity in adhering always to the duties of his office, unseduced by power and splendour,” “unawed by faction and opposition,” and always performing “the duties of self government, benevolence, and piety.” In a broader sense, Dwight sees the story of Exodus and the American Revolution as “similar revolutions of empire, similar emancipations of mankind, and similar renovations of the human character” affected at times when “talents and virtues appeared with high lustre and dignity.”<sup>56</sup>

Beyond the biblical iconography, many of the commentators borrowed figures and tropes from Greco-Roman antiquity to illustrate and contextualize Washington’s greatness. Historians have longed recognize the importance of the ancient republics of Greece and Rome in the imagination of late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Americans. Even before his death Washington was portrayed as “Cincinnatus” or “the American Fabius.”<sup>57</sup> But in the outpouring

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<sup>55</sup> Minot, “Eulogy,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 22; Sewall, “Eulogy,” *ibid.* pp. 35-36, 38-39.

<sup>56</sup> Dwight, *Discourse*, pp. 17, 10-12.

<sup>57</sup> Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1984); Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994); Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2001); Shalev, *Rome Reborn on Western Shores*. NB: Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus was a fifth century B.C.E. Roman general who was given dictatorial authority during a war with the Aequi Greeks but, like Washington, famously chose to return to his plow instead of holding on to power. Quintus Fabius Maximus was a third century B.C.E. Roman who successfully used guerilla war tactics against the Carthaginian Hannibal, much like Washington used against the British. See: entry for

of eulogies and biographical sketches published during the winter of 1800, commentators began to dig deeper for other historical personages to use as both precedents and foils for Washington's character and legacy. The martial heroics and bravery of Leonidas proved a salient analog, and more than one orator claimed that the sangfroid Washington acted "like Sparta's hero at the Grecian straits" in battling the superior British.<sup>58</sup> Some references were even more obscure. John Davis posited that Timoleon, "memorable for the defence and deliverance of Sicily" from Carthaginian invaders, and for "the establishment of civility and order," exhibited "the nearest resemblance to WASHINGTON."<sup>59</sup> Fisher Ames invoked the Theban general Epaminondas (who he branded "the brightest name of all antiquity" for his gallant combat against Spartan invaders), and declared that "our WASHINGTON resembled him in the purity and ardour of his patriotism." And John Adams compared Washington to "Marcus Aurelius," the Roman philosopher-king noted for his writings on Stoicism.<sup>60</sup>

Besides these highly esteemed figures of antiquity, commentators drew on famous antiheroes to delineate Washington's grandeur. John Kirkland told his Boston audience that "the history of this great hero will indeed be very different from that of vulgar heroes...whose greatness is as execrable as it is immortal."<sup>61</sup> Julius Cesar was the most oft-cited villain, and many shared David Ramsay's sentiment that if Washington followed in the footsteps of this Roman tyrant the American people would have gone "from being subjects of George the Third

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"Cincinnatus," in David Crystal ed., *The Cambridge Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 209-210; entry for "Fabius Maximus," *ibid.* p. 321.

<sup>58</sup> [Thomas] Paine, "Ode," in *Washingtoniana*, p. iii. Fisher Ames gave his own Federalist twist, stating that Washington "stood, like LEONIDAS at the pass of Thermopylae, to defend our independence against *France*" (emphasis mine). Ames, "An Oration," in *Eulogies and Orations*, p.126. NB: The Thomas Paine who wrote the "Ode" is not the Thomas Paine of *Common Sense* fame.

<sup>59</sup> Davis, "Eulogy," in *ibid.* p. 152.

<sup>60</sup> Adams, "Response to the Senate," in *Washingtoniana*, p. 115.

<sup>61</sup> Kirkland, "Discourse," in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 295.



of Great-Britain, to become the subjects of George the First of America.”<sup>62</sup> Another added that if Washington followed ambition (“that vice so often allied to greatness”), he would have “led a discontented army to the seat of power” and “fortified himself in the fears instead of the affections of the American people” just like “Sylla, the corrupt general of Rome.”<sup>63</sup>

In addition to these polarities, some pointed to ancient figures whose greatness was marred by a fatal flaw or a bad twist of fate – both of which Washington avoided. John Davis proclaimed that the legacy of the venerated Marcus Aurelius was “clouded by the indiscreet adoption of Commodus” as a son as well as by the “deification” of his wife, “the infamous Faustina,” and his mandate “requiring the youth of Rome to pay their vows before her altars.”<sup>64</sup> Isaac Parker told his Portland, Maine audience how “Camillus was compelled to fly from the Rome he had so often saved” and how the Grecian statesman “Aristides was a victim to the ostracism of Athens,” before rejoicing that “the people of America have never for a moment forgotten the services of their WASHINGTON.”<sup>65</sup> By highlighting the imperfections of these venerated figures, orators underscored the transcendence of the American hero.

For the revolutionary generation, Plutarch’s *Lives* – a six-volume biographical catalog of numerous figures from Greek and Roman history compiled in the late first century A.D. – was “immensely popular.” As historian Eran Shalev has pointed out, many commentators drew on

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<sup>62</sup> Ramsay, “Oration,” *ibid.* p. 84. See also: Minot, “Eulogy,” *ibid.* p. 24; Parker, “Orations,” *ibid.* p. 224; Kirkland, “Discourse,” *ibid.* p. 295; Dwight, *Discourse*, p. 8-9.

<sup>63</sup> Kirkland, “Discourse,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 223.

<sup>64</sup> Davis, “Eulogy,” *ibid.* p. 152. It should be noted that Davis also remarked on how Peter the Great of Russia had a record that was sullied by “instances of his cruelties,” while the late-seventeenth-century English general Marlborough, who like Washington was “famed for his consummate prudence,” was remembered also for “protracting a sanguinary war for the enlargement of [his] property and power.” (*ibid.* pp. 152-153). While references to medieval and early modern kings were not as prolific as references to figures from Greco-Roman antiquity, they do show up in a few instances. For example, Timothy Dwight compares Washington to Alfred the Great: the famous Anglo-Saxon king who successfully defended his kingdom from Viking conquest. Dwight, *Discourse*, p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> Parker, “Oration,” *ibid.* p. 224.

this text to sketch “classical representations of Washington” that were “typological [in] nature.”<sup>66</sup> However, what he and all other previous historians have failed to note is the ubiquity with which Washington was portrayed as being *above* all figures from the ancient and modern past. Referring to Washington’s character, Elisha Dick affirmed to his audience that “in vain shall we examine the records of antiquity for its parallel,” while an unknown London author proclaimed that “the whole range of history does not present to our view a character upon which we can dwell with such entire and unmixed admiration.”<sup>67</sup> Henry Lee challenged his audience to “turn over the records of ancient Greece” and “review the annals of mighty Rome” before declaring that “you search in vain,” for “America and her *WASHINGTON* afford the dignified exemplification.”<sup>68</sup> The Senate of the United States declared that “ancient and modern names are diminished before him,” while David Ramsay “call[ed] upon antiquity, upon modern Europe, and especially on the recent republic of France, to produce one of their heroes or statesman, that can surpass, or even equal, our disinterested patriot.” A few moments later he answered his own request, boasting that “Rome, with all her heroes; Greece, with all her patriots, could not produce [Washington’s] equal.”<sup>69</sup> In a similar key, George Minot proclaimed that “the American leader appears superior to ancient and modern examples,” while Fisher Ames reminded his Boston audience that “Rome did not owe more to Fabius, than America to *WASHINGTON*.”<sup>70</sup> While parallels between revolutionary statesmen and generals and ancient heroes were common in the

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<sup>66</sup> Shalev, *Rome Reborn on Western Shores*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>67</sup> Dick, “Oration,” in *Washingtoniana*, pp. 197-198; Anon., “Character of Washington,” *ibid.* pp. 223-224. NB: The very fact that Washington’s name appears throughout in all capital letters, while even figures as revered as Cato and Cincinnatus appear in normal typeset, highlights the fact that even the publishers were thinking about exalting Washington’s name above all others.

<sup>68</sup> Lee, “Oration,” *ibid.* p.147. In a similar key, Jonathan Sewall asked his New Hampshire audience: “What ancient or more patriot, sage or hero, can in all respects be compared to our beloved *WASHINGTON*?” Sewall, “Eulogy,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 31.

<sup>69</sup> “Message from the Senate to the President,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 113; Ramsay, “Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 94, 96.

<sup>70</sup> Minot, “Eulogy,” *ibid.* p. 25; Ames, “Oration,” *ibid.* p. 113.

late eighteenth century, Washington's death marked the first time that an American was unapologetically projected above and beyond the pantheon of Greek and Roman patriots.

In exalting an American hero to a higher station than those of ancient and modern European history, the orators and commentators were positing their own version of the *translatio studii et imperii*: the idea that knowledge, learning, and political power flow westward, from Babylon to ancient Greece and Rome, to the medieval Anglo-Norman world, and finally to republican America.<sup>71</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that we also hear echoes of a budding American exceptionalism in this outpouring of praise and veneration for the Father of his Country. Thanking "God for so rich a gift" as the character of Washington, Jedidiah Morse ended his biographical sketch by giving "praise to his name for bestowing it on our nation, and thus distinguishing it above all others on the globe."<sup>72</sup> For an author writing under the pseudonym "True America," Washington was the "HERO OF THE AGES" and "the Idol of an Empire," in addition to being "the envy and admiration of distant nations" and "the brightest ornament of human nature."<sup>73</sup> Elisha Dick told his audience about the "Gazing nations" of the world "passing in wonder from the magnificent work" of Washington, while "Columbia, growing with celestial rapture," expresses its "boundless gratitude and affection [for] her favorite son."<sup>74</sup> Another thanked him for "building the noblest political system that adorns the world."<sup>75</sup> Henry Lee rejoiced that, due to Washington's political acuity, "our peaceful quarter of the globe" has stood "exempt as it happily has been from any share in the slaughter of the human race."<sup>76</sup> Fisher

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<sup>71</sup> See: J.G.A Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 511-513, 540-542; Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 546-547.

<sup>72</sup> Morse, "Biographical Sketch," in *Washingtoniana*, p. 32.

<sup>73</sup> Anon., "Death of Washington," *ibid.* p. 105.

<sup>74</sup> Dick, "Oration," *ibid.* p.202

<sup>75</sup> Minot, "Eulogy," in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 28

<sup>76</sup> Lee, "Oration," in *Washingtoniana*, p. 138.

Ames pointed out that while “modern Greece...lies buried...in the cave of Turkish darkness,” it was “ancient Greece that lives in remembrance, that is still bright with glory,” and whose spirit has been reanimated by Washington who “knew that...government must possess sufficient strength from within or without.”<sup>77</sup> Sometimes commentators articulated a version of American exceptionalism that relied on the counterpoint of republican France. One took “some consolation [that] amidst the violence of ambition and the criminal thirst for power, of which so many instances occur around us,” that modern man could find in Washington “a character whom it is honorable to admire, and virtuous to imitate.”<sup>78</sup> Fisher Ames was even more forward in juxtaposing the work of “the French and their partizans” with that of Washington. For this arch-Federalist, “American liberty calms and restrains licentious passion, like an angel that says to the winds and the troubled seas, Be still.” It is “mild and cheering, like the morning sun of our summer, brightening the hills, and making the vallies [*sic*] green,” while French liberty “is violent...like the sun, when his rays dart pestilence on the sands of Africa.”<sup>79</sup>

Even while hailing Washington as an exceptional hero who helped create and exceptional nation, commentators also held him out as a universally applicable example of greatness to all mankind. George Minot asked his Boston audience to “remember that it was not for you alone he labored...it was for the human race.”<sup>80</sup> Ames predicted that Washington’s “benignant light will travel on to the world’s and time’s farthest bounds,” while Henry Lee proclaimed that the American Cincinnatus, when he “converted his sword into a ploughshare,” was “teaching an admiring world that to be truly great, you must be truly good.”<sup>81</sup> The anonymous London author reminded his own countrymen that Washington’s “fame [was] bounded by no country [and] will

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<sup>77</sup> Ames, “Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 119.

<sup>78</sup> Anon., “Character of Washington,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 226.

<sup>79</sup> Ames, “Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 123.

<sup>80</sup> Minot, “Eulogy,” *ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>81</sup> Ames, “Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 108; Lee, “Oration,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 142.

be confined to no age.”<sup>82</sup> But historian David Ramsay was most grandiloquent and direct of all others, declaring in front of his South Carolina audience that “had I a voice that would reach across the Atlantic, I would address the nations at war, and propose to their emperors, their kings, their directors [and] their generals” that “if they would copy after the great example of our American hero, they would soon sheath their swords, and let the world have peace.”<sup>83</sup>

Washington’s death did not take place within a political vacuum, and as Gerald Kahler has pointed out, many at the time made efforts “to shape the national mourning to advance the goals of the Federalist political culture.”<sup>84</sup> The conservative New England Congregationalist Timothy Dwight argued that Washington’s dying wish was that Americans strive “to promote, as of primary importance, morality and religion” as well as continue “to cherish public credit.”<sup>85</sup> Henry Lee, in ventriloquizing the spirit of the deceased hero, urged his audience to “let Liberty and Order be inseparable companions.”<sup>86</sup> Part of the Federalist program was the promotion of both a strong navy and (much more controversially) a standing army. Hence, Jonathan Mitchel Sewall argued that one of Washington’s greatest legacies was his strong belief in “the necessity of maintaining the best state of defence in our power, both by sea *and land*” (emphasis added).<sup>87</sup> But George Minot was probably the most flagrant of them all. Looking forward to the upcoming presidential election, this Massachusetts Federalist told his audience that although Americans

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<sup>82</sup> Anon., “Character of Washington,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 226.

<sup>83</sup> Ramsay, “Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p.95. Timothy Dwight echoed a similar sentiment, in proclaiming that “from [Washington’s] great example all rulers may learn wisdom.” Dwight, *Discourse*, p. 32.

<sup>84</sup> Kahler, *Long Farewell*, p. 20.

<sup>85</sup> Dwight, *Discourse*, p. 34.

<sup>86</sup> Lee, “Oration,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 149.

<sup>87</sup> Sewall, “Eulogy,” in *Eulogies and Oration*, p.42. On Sewall, see:

“lament that their beloved WASHINGTON sleeps in death,” they must find “their consolation” in the fact “that his faithful Brother, the vigilant ADAMS, survives.”<sup>88</sup>

Washington’s death occurred at the end of what Gordon S. Wood calls “the Crisis of 1798-1799,” a time when many Federalists were convinced that the French Republic might invade the United States and, with the help of their Jeffersonian allies, overthrow the American government.<sup>89</sup> Thus, many Federalist or Federalist-leaning commentators used the period of national mourning as an excuse to lambast French republicanism and its American champions. Telling his audience that “the chief duty and care of all governments is to protect the rights of property, and the tranquility of society,” Fisher Ames censured “the leaders of the French revolution” for “excit[ing] the poor against the rich.” Fearing “the despotism,” “the mob,” and “the hypocrisy of morals” of a revolution that “has been constant in nothing but its vicissitudes,” he went on to categorize “its very existence [as] a state of warfare against the civilized world.” Finally, in a thinly veiled attack on the followers of Thomas Jefferson, he warned that “Jacobinism has become here” a force “inspiring a fanaticism that [is] equally violent and contagious.”<sup>90</sup> In the same key, Isaac Parker recalled how the irreverent French ambassador Citizen Genet – the “grand missionary of democratic jesuitism” – was “received by some of our apostate brethren with affection and joy.” These native radicals would have steered the American republic down the same ensanguined path as France “had not the formidable and venerated name of WASHINGTON been opposed to the prevailing degeneracy.” Parker saw it as providential that Washington was nothing like Napoleon, “the modern Sylla of France” who “at a

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<sup>88</sup> Minot, “Eulogy,” *ibid.* p. 29. NB: Tellingly, the only other name besides Washington’s that was presented in all capital letters in this piece was Adams’s.

<sup>89</sup> Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, pp. 239-275. NB: Jedidiah Morse, author of the “Biographical Sketch” considered here, was among those Federalists who “spread the theory that the French Revolution was part of an international conspiracy to destroy Christianity and all civil government.” (*ibid.* p. 244).

<sup>90</sup> Ames, “Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, pp. 121-124.

blow...extinguished the constitution of his country.”<sup>91</sup> In a similar manner, George Minot referred to Napoleon as “the master of so many crown” who “instead of interesting himself in the welfare of mankind” had “relaps[ed] into the absurdities of monkish superstition.”<sup>92</sup>

Many historians, such as Joanne B. Freeman, have argued that “the election of 1800 certainly qualified as a crisis.” As she argues, “with partisan animosity soaring and no end in sight, many assumed that they were engaged in a fight to the death that would destroy the Union.”<sup>93</sup> Paradoxically, as David Waldstreicher notes, the period also witnessed the high watermark of “antipartisanship” in political rhetoric. As an “ideology and a practice,” “antipartisanship” came into play when “one identified one’s own party, not as a party, but as the real nation” by denying “the other party’s legitimacy and the partisanship of their own party.” In other words, it is the political technique of “blaming the rise of party wholly on [one’s] opponents.”<sup>94</sup> Hence, much of the rhetoric surrounding Washington’s death echoed this sentiment.

Reflecting the tense atmosphere of the impending election, the Senate’s message to the president lamented that “to lose such a man at such a crisis is no common calamity to the world.”<sup>95</sup> In Boston, George Minot (the man who praised John Adams at the end of his oration) urged Americans eager to follow in Washington’s footsteps to “banish all animosity, melt down all parties [and] wipe away all distinctions.” Similarly, Henry Lee (again speaking as the ghost of Washington) advised his Philadelphia listeners to “controul party spirit,” calling it “the bane of

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<sup>91</sup> Parker, “Oration,” *ibid.* pp. 226, 223.

<sup>92</sup> Minot, “Eulogy,” *ibid.* p. 27.

<sup>93</sup> Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, pp. 199-262, quotes from pp. 229-230.

<sup>94</sup> David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 203-204.

<sup>95</sup> “Message from the President to the Senate,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 112. NB: David Ramsay used this exact same line in his oration at Charleston. Ramsay, “Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 89.

free governments.”<sup>96</sup> In South Carolina, David Ramsay reminded Charlestonians that Washington was “uninfluenced by prejudice, passions, or party spirit” because he possessed “a large proportion of common sense.”<sup>97</sup> And in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Jonathan Sewall cited the late president’s farewell address as evidence that Washington “warn[ed] against all combinations, whether open or covert, that tend to weaken government, or to lessen the authority of those who administer it.”<sup>98</sup>

Some were optimistic, like Charles Pinckney Sumner who hoped “that party asperity from this memorable day subside; and all with liberal eye seek private interest in the common weal,” or Timothy Dwight who proclaimed that if American statesmen follow Washington’s “policy of glory” there would come a day when “faction, party, dissention, will then cease.”<sup>99</sup> But again, Fisher Ames was the most vituperative, lambasting the Jeffersonians by proclaiming that “such are never without factions” who are “ready to be the allies of France, and to aid her in the work of destruction.”<sup>100</sup> While Thomas Jefferson was never mentioned in these antipartisan statements, it would have been very clear to the American audience that the Sage of Monticello was the ringleader of the American Jacobins.

In the orations, eulogies, and biographical sketches printed for sale following the period of national mourning, publishers presented the American public with the first draft of the hero construction of the departed Washington – a project that would be continued in newspapers, in more formal biographies, and in the publication of schoolbooks intended for a national audience. In their Providentialism, American Exceptionalism, reliance on tropes and character from both

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<sup>96</sup> Minot, “Eulogy,” *ibid.* p. 28; Lee, “Oration,” in *Washingtoniana*, p. 149.

<sup>97</sup> Ramsay, “Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 90.

<sup>98</sup> Sewall, “Eulogy,” *ibid.* p.42.

<sup>99</sup> Charles Pinckney Sumner, “Eulogy on the Illustrious George Washington,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 271-272; Dwight, *Discourse*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>100</sup> Ames, “Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 122.



the bible and Greek and Roman antiquity, and in their usage of the first president's legacy as a political football, the eulogists set the tone for how a whole generation would understand the man who was "first in war – first in peace – and first in the hearts of his countrymen."<sup>101</sup> The newspaper coverage of national holidays, presidential campaigns and inaugurations, and certain critical moments in the three decades following his death to illustrate how, among other things, the figure of Washington became slowly depoliticized as America moved into the Jacksonian period.

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<sup>101</sup> Lee, "Oration," in *Washingtoniana*, p. 148.

## Chapter 2

### The Fetes of Washington: A Hero in Pomp and Print

Before the funeral orations and eulogies of Washington were compiled into bound volumes for sale to the general public, almost all of them appeared in newspapers, printed and reprinted in urban centers across the young nation.<sup>102</sup> However, what didn't make its way into the were the journalistic descriptions of the public festivities that almost always surrounded the delivery of the grandiloquent encomiums. Even before his death, the construction of the cult of Washington was inextricably tied up with the fetes surrounding his birthday and his two national tours.<sup>103</sup>

As David Waldstreicher has argued, during the revolutionary and early republican period, the “social grounding and local reality [of] American nationalism...lay, not in any truly lasting political or ideological consensus, but in its practices: in the gathering of people at celebratory events, in the toasts and declarations given meaning by assent, [and] in the reproduction of rhetoric and ritual in print.” In “fostering an idea of the nation as an extralocal community and by giving ordinary people the opportunity for local expression of national feeling,” early American nationalism formed in part around the “mutual reinforcement” of “celebration and printed discourse,” in a way that made it “hard to tell where the ritual or the reportage begins or ends.”<sup>104</sup> The figure of Washington played an important role in public ceremonies as well as the newspapers which, in reporting those events, often took the opportunity to comment on his

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<sup>102</sup> See, for example: George Richards Minot: *Columbian Centinel* (Boston), January 1, 1800. Henry Lee: *Philadelphia Gazette*, January 8, 1800; *Maryland Gazette* (Baltimore), January 16, 1800; *Newport Mercury* (Rhode Island), January 21, 1800; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, January 25, 1800. William Jackson: *Philadelphia Gazette*, February 24, 1800; *Gazette of the United States* (Philadelphia), February 25, 1800. John Marshall: *Raleigh Register* (North Carolina), January 7, 1800.

<sup>103</sup> Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, pp. 117-125.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 51-52, 18, 27.

legacy. In addition, newspapers used Washington at certain critical moments – like Andrew Jackson’s famous 1815 victory at New Orleans or the simultaneous deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams in July of 1826 – to demonstrate how national events reflected on the legacy of the Father of his Country. Ultimately, Americans’ usage and understanding of Washington’s legacy changed between his death and the inauguration of Andrew Jackson – America’s second war-hero president.

Following the death of Washington, newspapers both reported on and participated in the festivities surrounding the national period of mourning. In many cities, newspapers gave public notices of events prior to their taking place. In Philadelphia, the Federalist organ *Gazette of the United States* “respectfully requested” the “Ladies” of the city “to wear white, trimmed with black ribbon, black gloves and fans, as a token of respect to the memory of the late president of the United States.”<sup>105</sup> More often, however, papers took it upon themselves to pass along instructions from local governments, like in New York, where the city ordered “vessels in the harbor” to “hoist their colours half-mast,” or New Jersey, where the governor ordered “the military gentlemen of the State to wear black crape on the left arm for twelve months.”<sup>106</sup> But perhaps more tellingly, newspapers in disparate locales reprinted information from other cities. For example, the *Maryland Gazette* ran a story all the way from Havana about the American ships in that foreign harbor lowering their flags to half-staff and firing their cannons.<sup>107</sup> By so doing, editors themselves reinforced the idea that “every paper in the Union teems with expressions of regret for the death, and veneration of the memory of General Washington,”

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<sup>105</sup> *Gazette of the United States*, December 19, 1799.

<sup>106</sup> *Centinel of Liberty* (Georgetown, D.C.), December 31, 1799.

<sup>107</sup> *Maryland Gazette* (Baltimore), March 6, 1800.

perhaps in an effort to make the “national” period of mourning seem like much more than isolated celebrations in disparate locales.<sup>108</sup>

In the public ceremonies during the national period of mourning, newspapers not only provided detailed accounts of the festivities but also provided their own commentary on the events. Sometimes they would try to convey the emotion and mood of an oration or other display. In Wilmington, Delaware, the main paper of the town reported that a “Rev. F.A. Latta” delivered “a very pertinent and pathetic prayer” in front of a crowd that was “impressed with one common sentiment of respect and veneration” for the late president.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, a paper in Augusta, Georgia told its readers about “an appropriate and masterly discourse” delivered “on the death of General Washington.”<sup>110</sup> In Philadelphia, a ceremony for Washington was held in a theatre that was “full to overflowing,” an event a North Carolina newspaper described as “a scene calculated to impress the mind with the utmost solemnity and sorrow.”<sup>111</sup> On the commemoration of Washington’s Birthday, a New Hampshire newspaper commented on “the contrast between these expressions of deep public grief” and “the demonstrations of joy, which formerly distinguished this day.” It added that this “contributed greatly to increase the solemnity of the scene.”<sup>112</sup> In addition, newspapers also commented on the nature of the crowds themselves. One of the most ubiquitously reported phenomenon was the order of the mock funeral processions held throughout the country.<sup>113</sup> In numerous cities, detailed descriptions of parades, bells tolling, and

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<sup>108</sup> *Raleigh Register* (North Carolina), January 14, 1800. Also see stories from Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. reprinted in: *Raleigh Register*, January 7, 1800; *South Carolina State Gazette* (Charleston), January 8, 1800; *Genius of Liberty* (Morristown, N.J.), January 9, 1800; *Carolina Gazette* (Charleston), January 9, 1800; *Maryland Gazette*, January 16, 1800; *Newport Mercury*, January 21, 1800.

<sup>109</sup> *Mirror of the Times, and General Advertiser* (Wilmington, D.E.), February 26, 1800. NB: In the eighteenth century, “pathetic” still retained its archaic definition as “relating to emotions.”

<sup>110</sup> *Augusta Herald* (Georgia), February 26, 1800.

<sup>111</sup> *Raleigh Register*, January 14, 1800.

<sup>112</sup> *United States Oracle* (Portsmouth, N.H.), February 29, 1800.

<sup>113</sup> Kahler, *Long Farewell*, pp. 14-18.

businesses closing were also added to reinforce the public nature of Washington's death and mourning.<sup>114</sup>

Newspapers also provided detailed accounts of the iconography of certain paintings and statues, as well as advertised for certain commodities bearing the figure and image of Washington. In New York City, the *New York Gazette* reported that "An Original Painting Will this Day be exhibited...by Mr. William Wooley," in which the "Emblematic Figure" or "Liberty," "Justice," and "Virtue holding her Crown" appeared under "a Portrait of Washington." In the foreground were "two Female Figures, Poetry and History," while to "the right [was] a Native American, whose extreme distress" showed "the loss that...the aboriginals sustained in the Death of the unparalleled WASHINGTON." The article ended with a notice that subscriptions would be taken for miniature engravings which were to "be finished in about 5 weeks."<sup>115</sup> In Providence, Rhode Island, an advertisement appeared for "Perkins' celebrated WASHINGTON MEDALS," composed of "Gold [and] Silver" and "impressed with the Likeness, the initials, the Dates of the Birth, Death, and principal Events in the History of the Immortal WASHINGTON." It added that the purpose of the medals was "to imprint on the Minds of All, especially Youth, the Memory" of the late president, stating at the end that the "Medals are worn in Boston, particularly by Children of all Classes."<sup>116</sup> For those who couldn't afford things like jewelry and engravings, a number of papers advertised that poems and discourses written about Washington were for sale at local shops and bookstores.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> *The Eastern Herald and the Gazette of Maine* (Portland), February 24, 1800; *Augusta Herald*, February 226, 1800; *Mirror of the Times*, February 26, 1800; *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth), February 26, 1800; *United States Oracle*, February 26, 1800.

<sup>115</sup> *New York Gazette*, February 24, 1800.

<sup>116</sup> *United States Chronicle* (Providence, R.I.), February 20, 1800.

<sup>117</sup> *Gazette of the United States*, February 24, 1800; *Centinel of Freedom* (Newark, N.J.), February 24, 1800.

But the political polarization of the American press was not as retrenched during the period of public mourning as one might think. In reporting the death of Washington, the very form in which the news was delivered was colored by partisan biases. While Federalist papers often printed orations and poems glorifying Washington in the days after his death, Republican papers often provided merely a banal notice of death and a reprinting of the resolutions drafted by the president and Senate.<sup>118</sup> For example, the Republican *Bee* of New London, Connecticut reported a small notice of Washington's death, which included his birthday and (as if his passing was the same as any local notable) a notice that "his large estates are expected to descend to the Custis family."<sup>119</sup> The day after, the Federalist *Gazette of the United States* ran an article defending a preacher for delivering a funeral oration on Christmas Day, explaining that because Washington's "name should be the first upon record in the Christian World," it was fitting that he should be "publicly lamented on the Jubilee of the nativity of the Saviour of the World."<sup>120</sup> And while Federalist papers reprinted eulogies that referred to "GODLIKE WASHINGTON" and called upon "the European world" to "behold the Joshua and the Solomon of America," the most famous of all Republican newspapers, the *Aurora of Philadelphia*, printed a melodramatic poem.<sup>121</sup> Instead of singing the praises of Washington and touting his example to the world (as did many of the poems printed in Federalist papers) the *Aurora* lamented:

O! cruel and relentless death!

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<sup>118</sup> For Republican papers' unemotional reporting on Washington's death, see: *Aurora General Advertiser* (Philadelphia), December 19, 20, and 21, 1799; *Universal Gazette* (Philadelphia), January 2, 1800; *City Gazette* (Charleston, S.C.), January 3, 1800; *Philadelphia Gazette*, January 8, 1800. NB: In determining the political affiliation of newspapers during the period, I have consulted "Appendix 2" in Jeffrey L. Palsey, *"The Tyranny of the Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), pp. 407-409.

<sup>119</sup> *Bee* (New London, C.T.), January 1, 1800.

<sup>120</sup> *Gazette of the United States*, January 2, 1800. On the same day, the Federalist *Maryland Gazette* published a poem which declared: "In short, the world cannot his equal shew, / And Heav'n alone doth all his merits know." *Maryland Gazette*, January 2, 1800.

<sup>121</sup> *Philadelphia Gazette*, January 4, 1800; *Gazette of the United States*, January 8, 1800.

Nor worth, nor greatness can thy hand refrain,  
Alike to thee all mortals yield their breath,  
And respite seek from thee, alas! in vain.<sup>122</sup>

Some Republican commentators went even farther: outwardly and openly attacking what they saw as the flagrant and heretical hero-worshipping of Washington. In an article in the *Independent Chronicle* of Boston, a man writing under the pseudonym “DECENCY” criticized “the many absurdities under the title of *Eulogies*” as “disgraceful to an *enlightened* and religious people.” Pointing out the “seraphic sentiments,” “extravagant fall[ac]ies,” and the “bombastic expressions of...young candidates for fame,” the author took exception to what he saw as “attempts to bring a mortal on an eminence with Deity.” Specifically, he pointed out different preachers who “placed Washington pre-eminently above Abraham the Father of the Faithful” and exalted the late president “as the perfect image of the Holy Trinity.” Appealing to “the philosopher, the *christian*, [and] the friend of humanity,” the unknown author told his Republican readership that “the cause of religion is injured by [these] irreverent analogies.”<sup>123</sup> Hence, while most Republican newspapers presented a mild and depoliticized version of the intense encomium being propagated by their Federalist counterparts, some went so far as to dismiss the celebration of Washington as “gross prophanity.”<sup>124</sup>

The national period of mourning took place when a newspaper war was being waged over the controversial Alien and Sedition Acts, and the partisan press was gearing up for the presidential election of 1800. Sometimes papers sandwiched their notices of Washington’s death and the attendant ceremonies in between articles that aimed to “expose the unconstitutionality of

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<sup>122</sup> “From the ‘Aurora’,” reprinted in *Genius of Liberty*, January 9, 1800.

<sup>123</sup> *Independent Chronicle* (Boston), February 3, 1800.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

these obnoxious...alien and sedition laws.”<sup>125</sup> On the Federalist side, papers often took the opportunity of Washington’s passing to defend the acts by attacking the “alien incendiaries and foreign traitors” who threaten the republic.<sup>126</sup>

More broadly, articles and reprints of orations which started off as eulogies for Washington often descended into attacks on “our Jacobins” and the “strong propensities to falsehood evinced” by the Republican press, whose goal was “to poison the foundation of popular opinion”.<sup>127</sup> One paper warned that the “infidel republicanism of France” would descend “bloody and ferocious” onto America if “the precepts of Washington were rejected.” Calling on its audience to “defend the rich inheritance of our father,” the article held up John Adams as “the worthy successor of [our] beloved WASHINGTON” and “our Christian Magistrate” while warning about the dangerous possibility of “an Infidel President.”<sup>128</sup> Playing the role of Federalist watchdog, the *Philadelphia Gazette* published an article about the “English Jacobinical writer” James T. Callender, whose characterization of Washington as “the *Grand Lama* of Federal adoration” and “the *immaculate Divinity of Mount Vernon*” beholden to “*paper jobbers*” was taken as an “indelicate...treatment of our whole country.” Sensitive to the wider political damage of such maligning, the article worried that “aspersions on [Washington’s] character...may find their way to Europe, and through one channel or other...have an influence on the opinions of mankind.”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> *Raleigh Register*, January 7, 1800. See also: *Bee*, January 1, 1800; *Raleigh Register*, January 14, 1800 and February 4, 1800.

<sup>126</sup> *Pittsburgh Gazette*, March 8, 1800.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* March 1, 1800; *Philadelphia Gazette*, February 24, 1800.

<sup>128</sup> *Pittsburgh Gazette*, March 8, 1800. NB: The trope of Thomas Jefferson as an infidel was a recurrent one in the election of 1800 and throughout his presidency.

<sup>129</sup> *Philadelphia Gazette*, February 24, 1800.



The public celebration of Washington's legacy, as well as the attendant politicking, continued into the July Fourth celebrations later that year. In Boston, the Society of the Cincinnati (a largely Federalist group of veteran Continental Army officers) celebrated the event by toasting "WASHINGTON! our late Fileleader." But while the late president got the final and most important toast, when the group raised their glasses to the current president (John Adams), they wished him luck in the upcoming election: "May he turn the Flanks of his Enemies, press down their Center, throw their whole Line into Confusion, capture their Standards...and burn their baggage!"<sup>130</sup> Another group of Boston Federalists toasted Adams's "strong rooted principle" before declaring their wish that "Our Envoys to France...prove the wisdom and policy of the Washington System."<sup>131</sup>

The Federalists gathered in Leominster, Massachusetts were even more irreverent, toasting "the Immortal Adams, who nobly withstood the shock of jacobinical calumniation," before drinking to "the immortal memory of our departed WASHINGTON."<sup>132</sup> In Albany, residents were treated to the unveiling of "an Equestrian Statue, in bronze" of "our deceased Father" in "roman dress" standing adjacent to both "the Goddess of Liberty, burning incense on the Altar of Freedom" and "a Native American, in fable dress, kneeling, in grief." Elsewhere in the town, a group of Federalists toasted "Major General Hamilton and the late Provisional Army" for their "patriotic readiness to step forth as the defenders of their country."<sup>133</sup> The Society of the Cincinnati chapter in Philadelphia also toasted the highly controversial Hamilton, while a group

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<sup>130</sup> *Columbian Centinel*, July 5, 1800. NB: a "fileleader" is an archaic military term for a soldier placed in the front to lead a file of troops.

<sup>131</sup> *Massachusetts Mercury* (Boston), July 8, 1800.

<sup>132</sup> *The Telescope* (Leominster, MA), July 10, 1800. In Augusta, Georgia, a group toasted "the memory of the Illustrious General Washington" along with Adams and his "energy and firmness" as "the first magistrate." *Augusta Herald* (Georgia), July 9, 1800.

<sup>133</sup> *Albany Gazette* (New York), July 7, 1800.

of Federalists in Portsmouth wished him luck “against foreign and domestic foes.”<sup>134</sup> Republican groups toasted “the memory of Washington” too, but added toasts to “the venerated author of the declaration of American independence” in lieu of praise for Adams and Hamilton.<sup>135</sup> Instead of drinking to “Liberty without licentiousness,” one group gave a mock toast to “the Alien and Sedition acts – may they remain only like monumental marble over the memory of the party that erected them.”<sup>136</sup> However, some Republicans left out any token reference to Washington, like the editors of the *Carolina Gazette*. Hailing the Declaration of Independence as a “fervid and nervous vindication of the Rights of Man,” the paper called upon Americans to “remember the virtues and services of the long-tried Thomas Jefferson” – the “persecuted but immortal patriot.”<sup>137</sup>

After Thomas Jefferson won the White House in the fall of 1800, Republicans tried to position his inauguration day – March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1801 – as a rival holiday to Washington’s Birthday.<sup>138</sup> Their first attempt at this was not without controversy. In Baltimore, “the project to illuminate the city” on Washington’s Birthday was suspended until “the day on which *Mr. Jefferson* is to be installed.” Pointing out that neither of Washington’s inaugurations “call[ed] forth an illumination,” an outraged Federalist argued that “illuminations, bonfire and public rejoicings” were not meant “to celebrate the triumph of parties,” before drawing a thinly veiled comparison to the Napoleon’s coup on the eighteenth Brumaire.<sup>139</sup> A few days after Jefferson’s inauguration, the Federalist *Philadelphia Gazette* offered a backhanded acknowledgment of the changing of the guard by asserting that “if Mr. Jefferson faithfully adheres to...the mild and equitable

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<sup>134</sup> *Philadelphia Gazette*, July 5, 1800; *New Hampshire Gazette*, July 8, 1800.

<sup>135</sup> *Federal Gazette* (Baltimore), July 7, 1800.

<sup>136</sup> *City Gazette* (Charleston), July 7, 1800; *Federal Gazette* (Baltimore), July 7, 1800.

<sup>137</sup> *Carolina Gazette*, July 10, 1800.

<sup>138</sup> Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, pp. 192-194.

<sup>139</sup> *Federal Gazette*, February 23, 1801.

example of Washington, he will merit, and assuredly receive, the blessings and the gratitude of millions.”<sup>140</sup>

The celebrations of Jefferson on that day paid tribute to Washington, but in a way that decentered the first president and even pushed back on the Federalist program of hero construction. In Connecticut, “a respectable number of the Republican Citizens of Norwich” toasted the day as “illustrious for the Triumph of Liberty,” “THOMAS JEFFERSON” as “the friend of science and virtue,” and vice president “AARON BURR” for “his undeviating patriotism,” before a token toast to “the memory of GEO. WASHINGTON” with no succeeding epithet.<sup>141</sup> Other celebrations also downplayed the centrality and eminence of Washington. In Orange, New Jersey, members of the “Jeffersonian Society” toasted their namesake twice before drinking to “the memory of Washington, Franklin, and the other departed worthies of our country.” Elsewhere in that state, a group of “*real* republicans” toasted the “memory of Washington” together with other “of those heroes, patriots, and sages” who “raised the superstructure” of “the temple of Columbia,” while another group in Hackensack left Washington out entirely.<sup>142</sup>

On the same day in Boston, Republicans toasted “the sublime and resplendent republican virtues of Jefferson,” who “like the Sun, shines not for his own glory, but to illumine those around him.” After drinking to “the republic of France in union with the American” and “the tree of liberty,” the group took a shot at the Federalist program of exalting Washington. In a trope that would recur in many Republican celebrations, the Bostonians toasted “the memory of

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<sup>140</sup> *Philadelphia Gazette*, March 7, 1801.

<sup>141</sup> *Norwich Courier* (Connecticut), March 11, 1801. NB: It is important to note that this Republican paper chose to print the names of Jefferson and Burr in all caps, in addition to that of Washington, a subtle suggestion that the first president should be considered the equal of the current executives.

<sup>142</sup> *Centinel of Freedom*, March 24, 1801.

Washington; may it remain without the help of a Mausoleum, until the Sun itself be extinguished.”<sup>143</sup> Two other Republican groups hoped that Washington’s legacy would developed “without the aid of Egyptian superstition” or without “erecting a huge heap of Stones.”<sup>144</sup> The theme continued into the July Fourth celebrations of that year, where Republicans across the country sang the praises of Jefferson and Burr while either toasting the memory of Washington and Franklin together (and in a non-political way), or leaving Washington out altogether.<sup>145</sup> At least one town toasted “Franklin the sage” without mentioning Washington at all.<sup>146</sup>

Washington’s Birthday continued to occasion both lavish public ceremonies and the celebration of the Federalist cause. On February 22, 1802, citizens of Portsmouth, New Hampshire could (for “25 cents, and half price for children”) come view two wax works of George Washington, one of which portrayed “the illustrious Hero...as a victim to death, his Lady and Domestics weeping around him.”<sup>147</sup> More than one paper published original poems written for the occasion. Some were banal and apolitical.<sup>148</sup> Others contained a not-so-subtle Federalist message, like *The Republican or, Anti-Democrat* of Baltimore, which focused more on the gloom of Jeffersonian America than on the departed hero, who was “First in peace and first in war.” Blaming “faction’s raging force,” the author lamented that “our constitution [is] ceded to

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<sup>143</sup> *The Constitutional Telegraph* (Boston), March 11, 1801. For similar statements against the construction of the Washington Monument, a project promoted almost exclusively by Federalists, see: *Federal Gazette* (Baltimore), July 7, 1800; *Augusta Herald*, February 25, 1801; *Constitutional Telegraph*, July 11, 1801; *Richmond Enquirer* (Virginia), July 7, 1829; *Connecticut Herald* (New Haven), July 7, 1829. See also: Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 38-49.

<sup>144</sup> *Centinel of Freedom*, March 24, 1801.

<sup>145</sup> In Marblehead, M.A., and Newport, R.I., Washington and Franklin were toasted together. In Cambridge and Dedham, M.A., Portsmouth and Dover N.H., Berlin, C.T., and Pittsburgh, P.A., none the Republicans who met to celebrate the Fourth and sing the praises of Jefferson honored Washington with a toast. See: *Constitutional Telegraph*, July 9, 1801; *Guardian of Liberty* (Newport, R.I.), July 25, 1801; *Mirror of the Times*, July 25, 1801.

<sup>146</sup> Dedham, M.A. See: *Constitutional Telegraph*, July 8, 1801.

<sup>147</sup> *New Hampshire Gazette*, February 24, 1802.

<sup>148</sup> *The Sun* (Dover, N.H.), February 20, 1802.

the winds.” Warning that “civil war, with trumpet horse” was looming, the author addressed Washington as the “Sainted spirit of the skies / To thee thy fainting country cries.”<sup>149</sup>

In 1802 especially, Washington’s Birthday (which of course occurred a little over two weeks before Jefferson’s inauguration day on March Fourth) was especially controversial. Alexander Hamilton’s paper *The New-York Evening Post* lamented that “the Birth-day of Washington...is necessarily accompanied by the painful reception, that a *state of things* has now succeeded *most horrible to think on*.”<sup>150</sup> In Boston, the arch-Republican *Constitutional Telegraph* celebrated that “preparations...are making in various parts of the Union, not to celebrate a President’s Birth Day, but the second Birth Day of the Nation” when “the immortal JEFFERSON was announced THE PRESIDENT of the United States.”<sup>151</sup> In Washington, D.C., Federalist politicians Gouverneur Morris and James Bayard threw a Birthday celebration at Stille’s hotel that included several highly charged toasts. Men raised their glasses to “the doctrines of the Old School” and to “the army and the navy,” while railing “against the spirit of Jacobinism” and “the subtilties [*sic*] of philosophists.” One declared in Latin that “the times change, but we will not change with them,” while another toasted “the man of honor, the man of our hearts, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney” – another former Continental Army general whom the Federalists would later nominate to run for the White House in 1804.<sup>152</sup> Meanwhile, rumors spread throughout the nation’s newspapers that Jefferson’s Vice President Aaron Burr snuck into the event and “gave a toast [that was] not very flattering to the Ministerial Party.”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> *The Republic or, Anti-Democrat* (Baltimore), February 23, 1802.

<sup>150</sup> *New-York Evening Post* (New York), February 22, 1802.

<sup>151</sup> *Constitutional Telegraph*, February 27, 1802.

<sup>152</sup> *The Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), March 8, 1802. Latin phrase was “Tempora mutantur sed non mutamer in illis.”

<sup>153</sup> *Salem Gazette* (Massachusetts), March 12, 1802.

The next great event in the young nation's history that witnessed the Federalist usage of Washington's legacy toward political ends was the death of Alexander Hamilton. Many Federalist or Federalist-leaning papers made it clear to their audience that "no event since the death of the illustrious WASHINGTON has filled the publick mind with more painful solicitude, or so much called forth the general sympathy and grief."<sup>154</sup> One went so far as to predict that "the [funeral] process tomorrow will be the largest ever known, not even excepting that of the death of WASHINGTON."<sup>155</sup> Reflecting the antipartisanship of the age, many of these same papers tried to recreate the national mourning after Washington's departure by representing Hamilton as the "*first citizen* of our country" who was "universally beloved."<sup>156</sup>

A day after the Republican *Vermont Gazette* ran an editorial piece praising Jefferson for vanquishing "the system of Hamiltonian insurrections, plots, and conspiracies," the Federalist *Columbian Centinel* in Boston proclaimed that "all party feeling are absorbed in the universal grief of the citizens here on the demise of Gen. HAMILTON."<sup>157</sup> In New York, the *American Citizen* declared "the death of General Hamilton as a national loss."<sup>158</sup> Federalist rendered Hamilton as the anointed son of Washington. At the funeral in New York City, Federalist Gouverneur Morris reminded his audience that "Washington, that excellent judge of human nature, perceived [Hamilton's virtues]...and made him his bosom friend." He added that Washington "viewed the deceased worthy of the second command" in the Army.<sup>159</sup> One Federalist paper in that city exalted Hamilton as "the favorite counsellor and friend of

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<sup>154</sup> *The Repertory* (Boston), July 17, 1804. See also: *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), July 14, 1804; *Commercial Advertiser* (New York), July 17, 1804; *The Courier* (Norwich, C.T.), July 18, 1804; *Albany Gazette*, July 19, 1804.

<sup>155</sup> *Columbian Centinel*, July 18, 1804.

<sup>156</sup> *Commercial Advertiser*, July 17, 1804; *Repertory*, July 17, 1804.

<sup>157</sup> *Vermont Gazette* (Bennington), July 17, 1804; *Columbian Centinel*, July 18, 1804.

<sup>158</sup> *American Citizen* (New York), July 20, 1804.

<sup>159</sup> *American Citizen*, July 16, 1804;

Washington,” while its partisan counterpart in Albany wrote that Hamilton rose to fame “under the auspices of the immortal WASHINGTON,” adding that “Hamilton was the soul” of the first president’s administration.<sup>160</sup> Federalist papers also pointed out the “order and solemnity” of the funeral, and one in Philadelphia described how “the streets were lined with people [and] the house tops were covered with spectators who came from all parts” so that “distant readers may form some idea of what passed on this mournful occasion.”<sup>161</sup> On the next celebration of Washington’s Birthday, in 1805, many parties toasted to the memory of Hamilton along with Washington.<sup>162</sup> In all of these ways, Federalist’s used the legacy of Washington to try to exalt Hamilton to a similar station, claiming the mantle of the true inheritors of the American Revolution in the process.

The War of 1812 brought with it a heightened interest in Washington, a partisan fight over the mantle of his legacy (made especially bitter by the Hartford Convention), and the emergence of a new military hero who would one day follow in Washington’s footsteps and become president of the United States.<sup>163</sup> During this crisis, the figure of Washington was more political than ever. In 1813, a number of cities combined the traditional ceremonies on Washington’s Birthday with a celebration of “the late BRILLIANT NAVAL VICTORIES” accomplished against the British.<sup>164</sup> Striking a nostalgic note, and orator quoted in the Federalist *Albany Gazette* “paid a deserved tribute to our navy,” calling that recently victorious branch of

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<sup>160</sup> *Commercial Advertiser*, July 17, 1804; *Albany Gazette*, July 19, 1804.

<sup>161</sup> *Commercial Advertiser*, July 17, 1804; *The United States Gazette* (Philadelphia), July 19, 1804.

<sup>162</sup> *Albany Centinel*, February 22, 1805; *Morning Chronicle* (New York), February 22, 1805; *New-York Evening Post*, February 27, 1805.

<sup>163</sup> NB: The Hartford Convention was a series of clandestine meetings organized by New England Federalists in 1814 and 1815, which discussed strategies for opposing the Madison administration and its waging of war against Great Britain. Many accused it of trying to bring about disunion by having the New England states secede and make a separate peace with Great Britain. See: Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, pp. 692-696.

<sup>164</sup> This was the case in at least Boston, New York, and Philadelphia: *Boston Patriot*, February 20, 1813; *Public Advertiser* (New York), February 22, 1813; *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser*, February 22, 1813.

the armed forces “a remnant of federal times.”<sup>165</sup> In a Philadelphia theatre, a “transparent Portrait of the Gallant Captain Bainbridge” as well as “Portraits of Decatur and Hull” (all recent heroes of the War of 1812) were unveiled just before the audience was shown “a new Portrait of the IMMORTAL WASHINGTON.”<sup>166</sup>

Despite all the pomp and ceremony, the Federalist press rallied around the legacy of Washington to wage a ruthless campaign against the Madison administration and the Jeffersonians more broadly. Noting that Washington’s Birthday is this year “of more than ordinary importance,” the *Federal Republican* of D.C. took the opportunity to contrast how the first president “conducted [America] through the vicissitudes of a necessary war” (which brought about “peace and liberty”) and the current administration’s “wicked prosecution of an unnecessary one” (which “puts both in jeopardy.”)<sup>167</sup> On the same day a Maine paper declared that Washington’s memory “should excite in the breast of the real American the mingled passions of pride for the integrity, firmness & wisdom of the hero of America” while also exciting “shame for the degradation of the state under the auspices of his successors.” Waxing nostalgic, the article longed for the “pure uncorruptible integrity of the age of Washington,” but also asserted that “if everyone, while he reads and reflects on the character of Washington...would resolve to imitate [his] virtues, our country might yet be saved.”<sup>168</sup> In Newburyport, Massachusetts, a Federalist newspaper described an oration given by a local minister which was designed to “make [the audience] forget they had fallen on those evil times,

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<sup>165</sup> *Albany Gazette*, February 25, 1813.

<sup>166</sup> *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser*, February 22, 1813.

<sup>167</sup> *Federal Republican* (Washington, D.C.), February 22, 1813.

<sup>168</sup> *Gazette* (Portland, M.E), February 22, 1813.



brought about by corrupt rulers.”<sup>169</sup> The *Albany Gazette* added that “the situation of our country [was] degraded by a departure from the policy of Washington” and denounced “the war as unjust, impolitic, and ruinous.” It too called upon Americans “to emulate the fame and virtues of [their] departed Chieftain.”<sup>170</sup> Finally, reflecting the radically antiwar climate of the region in particular, the *Salem Gazette* of Massachusetts reported the celebration of “sentiments adapted to the Washingtonian spirit which now distinguishes New England.”<sup>171</sup>

As we have seen, Republicans during the Jefferson administration focused their encomiums on that man while making token reference to the memory of Washington (and sometimes attacking outright the Federalist project of hero construction). With the war waging and Federalist in New England talking of disunion, Republican commentators now waged an open fight for the legacy of the common father. Referring to the activities of New England Federalists in opposing the war, the *Baltimore Patriot* called for a rejection of “the vile apostacy, which has connected [Washington’s] distinguished name with the most deadly of projects, and claimed his mantle, to cover the most horrid purposes.” Lambasting the “insidious schemes” which “cast a stain on the spotless escutcheon of WASHINGTON’s glory,” the Republican organ compared Washington and Jesus, whose legacies had both been corrupted after their deaths:

The name of the meek and lowly founder of our faith was sanctimoniously assumed by the most aspiring and rapacious ecclesiastics that ever fostered intrigue and spread devastation, under the blasphemous pretence [*sic*] of religion. The name of our ‘first and greatest revolutionary,’ has been assumed by those, who are striving to sacrifice the boon the revolution gained, at the feet of the power, from whom the revolution severed us. True and melancholy is it, that self-

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<sup>169</sup> *Newburyport Herald* (Massachusetts), February 23, 1813. Similarly, a Philadelphia newspaper described the “honors paid to the memory of this Illustrious Chief, whose virtues and talents are now doubly resplendent when contrasted with the conduct of our present rulers.” *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser*, February 24, 1813.

<sup>170</sup> *Albany Gazette*, February 25, 1813.

<sup>171</sup> *Salem Gazette*, February 23, 1813.

styled *federalists* are striving to break the *Federal Union*; *Washingtonians* are spurning the injunction of WASHINGTON and aiming to undermine the fabric, which he so ardently labored to rear, and the preservation of which he so fondly hoped.

The author went on to urge his Republican readers to “study the political Bible, which he left as his testimony against disunion; and to imitate him in his course of patriotic service and disinterested virtue!”<sup>172</sup> A few weeks later, on the Fourth of March, Republican toasts to Washington were not perfunctory but politically charged. In Boston, a group appropriated “the memory of Washington” as the man who “foresaw the invidious attacks which would be made upon the liberties of his Country,” while the Republicans of Providence toasted Washington along with the “Heroes who fell in the first war of Independence” before adding that “their memory is insulted by the treason of the present day.”<sup>173</sup>

In 1815, the celebration of Washington’s Birthday in eastern cities coincided with the reception of the news of Jackson’s improbable victory against the British at New Orleans.<sup>174</sup> Hence, on February Twenty-Second of that year, cities from Hallowell, Maine to Lexington, Kentucky combined the two milestones into “Washington and Peace Festivals.”<sup>175</sup> In the bigger cities, public buildings were “Brilliantly Illuminated,” like New York’s American Museum which was “decorated with variegated lights, emblems, &c.”<sup>176</sup> In New Haven, Connecticut, “the

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<sup>172</sup> *Baltimore Patriot* (Maryland), February 22, 1813.

<sup>173</sup> *The Yankee* (Boston), March 5, 1813; *Columbia Phenix* (Providence, R.I.), March 6, 1813.

<sup>174</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 63-64.

<sup>175</sup> *Connecticut Herald* (New Haven), February 21, 1815; *New-York Evening Post*, February 21, 1815; *Baltimore Patriot*, February 22, 1815; *The Columbian* (New York), February 22, 1815; *Hallowell Gazette* (Maine), February 22, 1815; *Independent Chronicle* (Boston), February 22, 1815; *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), February 22, 1815; *City Gazette* (Charleston, S.C.), February 23, 1815; *Portsmouth Oracle* (New Hampshire), February 25, 1815; *Reporter* (Lexington, KY), February 27, 1815; *Alexandria Gazette* (Virginia), February 28, 1815.

<sup>176</sup> *New-York Evening Post*, February 22, 1815. Elsewhere in New York, a theatre was turned into “The Temple of Peace” and illuminated. *The Columbian*, February 18, 1815. In Boston, “the Columbian Museum” on “Tremont-street” was turned into a “Grand Illumination.” *Independent Chronicle*, February 22, 1815. Elsewhere in that city, the New State House was “splendidly illuminated.” *Weekly Messenger* (Boston), February 24, 1815. Even out in Lexington Kentucky, the courthouse was the site of “a most brilliant illumination” at night. *Reporter*, February 27, 1815.

day was proclaimed with the roar of the cannon and the ringing of bells,” while in Boston “fine rockets were projected from the top and the statehouse.”<sup>177</sup> More than one city displayed pieces of art and banners which situated the heroes of the war of 1812 as inheritors to the martial legacy of Washington. In New York, the citizens built a “Temple of Peace” whose “two Pillars [were] inscribed with the names of Jackson, Decatur, Perry, Macdonough, and other Heroes of the late War” while the “Apotheosis of Washington” stood “suspended over the Characters.”<sup>178</sup> Similarly, the theatre on Chestnut street in Philadelphia hung an image of Washington (“from [Gilbert] Stuart’s well known picture) “in the centre, over the portico,” while “a ring of medallions” with the names of “Bainbridge, Hull, Jones, Decatur [and] Jackson” hung below.<sup>179</sup> In Boston, a parade on the day concluded with a contingent of “truckmen with a sled drawn by seventeen horses, and loaded with bales of cotton, on which was inscribed the name of Gen. Jackson.”<sup>180</sup> The image of the tradesman parading an homage to “Old Hickory” was certainly an omen of the coming age in American politics.

But although peace and Washington’s Birthday were cause for celebration around the nation, the day was also the apex of partisan bickering over the legacy of Washington. In Philadelphia, a Federalist celebration contained reconciliationist imagery, with two transparent pictures – one of “the Genius of America” the other of “Britannia” – standing side by side over “The Temple of Concord.”<sup>181</sup> In New York, a “numerous respectable company of Gentleman” toasted “the people of America and Great Britain, may they learn to know and love each other.”<sup>182</sup> Elsewhere in that city, another group of Federalist listened to an “extemporaneous

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<sup>177</sup> *Connecticut Journal*, February 27, 1815; *Weekly Messenger*, February 24, 1815.

<sup>178</sup> *The Columbian*, February 18, 1815.

<sup>179</sup> A report from Philadelphia, in *New-York Evening Post*, February 18, 1815.

<sup>180</sup> *Weekly Messenger*, February 24, 1815.

<sup>181</sup> *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser*, February 22, 1815.

<sup>182</sup> *New-York Evening Post*, February 23, 1815.

address” which rendered Washington as “a Statesman of the Federal Republican School” while celebrating the end of “a wicked, unnecessary and desolating War.” In his conclusions, the orator rejoiced that Rufus King (the Federalist candidate for president in 1816) possessed “all qualities which constitute the distinguished and pre-eminent Statesman.”<sup>183</sup>

Federalists took it upon themselves to malign President Madison and the retired Thomas Jefferson. In Vermont, an oration was delivered on “the strong contrast between the moral and political characters of Washington and Jefferson,” before the Federalist group gave a mock toast to “Madison and his visionary cabinet – inefficient tools” who like “Don Quixote fought a windmill.” Another at the same party even toasted “the Hartford Convention,” which “will ever be admired, while liberty and peace have a charm.”<sup>184</sup> In Hudson, New York, another mock toast to Madison concluded with a wish that “his flight from office be as speedy as it was from the battle of Bladensburg.”<sup>185</sup> In Philadelphia, a group toasted Washington before drinking to the Federalist “Minority in Congress” as “the faithful and indefatigable guardians of our country’s happiness.”<sup>186</sup> But John E. Howard’s oration was the most grandiloquent of all: an encomium to Washington that echoed both American Exceptionalism and anti-Republican sentiment. The memory of Washington needs “no Roman Apotheosis” of “priests pointing to the eagle soaring from the funeral pile” nor “Babylonish deification ending in drunken orgies and midnight debauches.” Instead, the hero’s memory was built and sustained by “the spontaneous effusion of the gratitude of freemen.” In a thinly veiled attack on Jefferson and Madison, he lamented “that

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<sup>183</sup> Referring again to King, the speaker concluded his oration by telling his audience that “*surely another WASHINGTON has risen to bless our favored country.*” *Commercial Advertiser*, February 23, 1815.

<sup>184</sup> Another member of the group wished for “a speedy return to the policy of Washington,” while still another gave an impromptu mock toast to “the infatuated policy which has governed the destinies of our nation for fourteen years past – Selected by Napoleon – carved by Jefferson – and finished by Madison.” *Washingtonian* (Windsor, Vermont), February 27, 1815.

<sup>185</sup> This group also toasted “the memory of Alexander Hamilton,” Washington, and “our Federal brethren throughout the United States,” before also drinking to “the late War” as “Wickedly commenced and disgracefully conducted.” *Northern Whig* (Hudson, New York), February 28, 1815.

<sup>186</sup> *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), February 27, 1815.

sophisters and economists have adulterated the genuine spirit of the people,” adding that “the history of these times will teach the folly of leaving the passions of man unrestrained.” Echoing the universalism witnessed during the period of national mourning, Howard told his audience that “the fame of Washington and his cause [have] spread throughout Europe,” before adding that Napoleon’s “foaming course is a complete contrast to the virtues and truly great career of Washington.” In sum, despite the departure from the “unsophisticated and pure” character of the age of Washington, America and her founding hero were still exceptional.<sup>187</sup>

Yet, the Jeffersonians articulated their own version of Washington’s legacy that was diametrically opposed to that of the Federalists. During celebrations of Washington’s Birthday, Jefferson’s Inauguration, and July Fourth, Republican commentators tried to position themselves as the true inheritors of Washington’s legacy while lambasting the Federalists as seditious corruptors. When news of Jackson’s victory arrived in Rhode Island, the Republican *Providence Patriot* said that “WASHINGTON never enjoyed the confidence of an army more completely than does the great Hero of the Mississippi [*sic*],” before reporting that everyone in the city celebrated “save a few confirmed *tories*, whom God forgive!”<sup>188</sup> A few days later, a Boston paper referred to the city’s Federalists as those “who preach rebellion and disunion under the sacred and sainted name of WASHINGTON,” while a New Hampshire paper struck a similar note, criticizing the sedition of “the self-styled ‘disciples of Washington.’”<sup>189</sup>

Later on the Fourth of March, a group of Republicans drank to Jefferson, Madison, and Jackson, before giving a mock toast to the Hartford Convention, followed by one to Washington

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<sup>187</sup> *Alexandria Gazette* (Virginia), February 28, 1815.

<sup>188</sup> *Providence Patriot* (Rhode Island), February 11, 1815.

<sup>189</sup> *The Yankee*, February 17, 1815; *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord), February 22, 1815. The latter paper also celebrated the fact that peace has “put the whole phalanx of Federalism *hors du combat* [outside the fight].”

– “revered and cherished by every friend of union, order and obedience to the laws.”<sup>190</sup> On the Fourth of July, a group of Republicans in Hartford Connecticut of all places toasted that “[Washington] predicted attempts to dissolve the union, and warned his countrymen to guard against them.”<sup>191</sup> The same day, a group in Boston toasted both “American Independence” and “the successful termination of a second war, waged for its defence,” before raising their glasses to “celebrate the birth day of the country which [Washington] delivered from an ungrateful mother.”<sup>192</sup> Touting the narrative that Federalists had corrupted Washington’s legacy, Republicans in Maine declared that “we cordially subscribe to *his* Federalism, which consisted in an ardent attachment to the Union,” while in Boston the first president was toasted even though “his name is prostituted by self-created Societies.”<sup>193</sup> In Charleston, the “‘76 Association” declared that “his principles have triumphed, though his name has been profaned.”<sup>194</sup> During the War of 1812, there emerged a distinctively Republican rendering of Washington that portrayed him as the enemy of the British and the guarantor of the Union, while censuring the Federalists for corrupting his legacy for anti-republican ends.

By 1825, with the Federalist Party vanquished and the sun of democratic politics slowly rising, the legacy of Washington in pomp and print had entered a new phase. On Washington’s Birthday, canons still fired, museums were still illuminated, the infantry and artillery still paraded, and feasts were still given.<sup>195</sup> But whereas in the beginning of the century the fetes were

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<sup>190</sup> This was a subtle yet assertive shot at the sedition of the Hartford Convention. *Vermont Republican* (Windsor), March 6, 1815.

<sup>191</sup> *American Mercury* (Hartford, C.T.), July 5, 1815.

<sup>192</sup> *Yankee*, July 7, 1815.

<sup>193</sup> *American Advocate* (Hallowell, M.E.), July 8, 1815. NB: In my reading, “Societies” could refer either to the Hartford Convention or the Society of the Cincinnati and the Washington Benevolent Society. Given the atmosphere of the time, it probably was meant to describe both. *Boston Patriot*, July 8, 1815.

<sup>194</sup> *City Gazette*, July 8, 1815.

<sup>195</sup> *Gazette*, February 22, 1825; *Weekly Eastern Argus* (Portland, M.E.), February 22, 1825; *Rhode-Island American* (Providence), February 22, 1825; *Columbian Centinel*, February 23, 1825; *Newburyport Herald*, February 25, 1825;

almost always organized by the masonic lodge, or the local chapter of the Society of the Cincinnati or the Washington Benevolent Society, now celebrations were also orchestrated by groups like the “Washington Fire Society” and held in places like “Mechanicks’ Hall” in Providence.<sup>196</sup> While American political discourse had not yet moved fully into the age of Jackson, we can hear traces of the doctrine of the common man in the mid-1820s.<sup>197</sup> For instance, at a gathering in Salem, Massachusetts in 1826 guest toasted Washington by encouraging “the Mechanics of the rising generation [to] emulate his virtues, listen to the precepts, and follow the examples, which he has set before them.”<sup>198</sup> Yet this episode in Washington’s legacy construction is more notable for three other phenomenon: the depoliticization of his figure, the comingling of his memory with those of Adams, Jefferson, and others, and the association of his legacy with the republican revolutions taking place in Greece and South America.

As many historians have noted, the so-called “Era of Good Feelings” was hardly devoid of the bitter politicking that has been present in every epoch of American history.<sup>199</sup> Yet the rhetoric surrounding celebrations of Washington certainly reflected a moment when the partisanship which surrounded his figure in previous times had cooled. Noting that “party struggles and the temporary distress partially felt in the last twenty years have tried the *strength* of our institutions,” the *Independent Advocate* of Boston rejoiced in “the glorious national privileges of looking around to behold the principles which Washington advocated,” and added that “our best gratitude to [him]...is to be displayed by union among ourselves.” In Newburyport, Massachusetts, those gathered to celebrate Washington’s Birthday toasted to “Federalism and

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*Providence Patriot*, February 22, 1826; *Boston Commercial Gazette*, February 23, 1826; *Essex Register* (Salem, M.A.), February 27, 1826.

<sup>196</sup> *Newburyport Herald*, February 25, 1825; *Rhode-Island American*, February 22, 1825.

<sup>197</sup> See: Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 61-106, 145-218.

<sup>198</sup> *Essex Register*, February 27, 1826.

<sup>199</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, pp. 91-124.

Democracy – Twin brothers of unnatural birth...they have lived to a good old age.”<sup>200</sup> On the day that John Quincy Adams was inaugurated president (March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1825), a dinner at Faneuil Hall in Boston featured a wall “adorned with the Bust of the elder ADAMS, and with fine Portraits of WASHINGTON [and] the other Presidents of the United States,” while in Providence a reporter expressed his gratitude to “all who have been elected [president], and enjoyed the highest honors of this Republic, and the proudest political eminence in the world.”<sup>201</sup> Elsewhere in that city, a toast was given to “our Ex Presidents – A living testimony that the world has produced more than one Cincinnatus.”<sup>202</sup> Gone were the statements about the corruption of his legacy, as Washington, Adams, and Jefferson together were in the process of becoming exalted into a common pantheon.

During the 1820s, many Americans felt a strong solidarity with the Liberal Revolutions of Latin America (led by Simón Bolívar) and the Greek Revolution against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>203</sup> During celebrations of Washington, many Americans positioned the founder of their own country as a pathbreaker who allowed subsequent republican revolutions to take place. On February 22, 1825, Ebenezer Bailey recited a poem in Boston which played on this phenomenon:

See on the Andes’ fronts of snow  
The battle-fires of Freedom glow  
Where triumph hail the children of the sun  
Beneath the banner of their WASHINGTON  
Go on, victorious BOLIVAR  
Oh! fail not – faint not – in the war

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<sup>200</sup> *Newburyport Herald*, February 25, 1825.

<sup>201</sup> *Providence Patriot*, March 5, 1825.

<sup>202</sup> *Providence Patriot*, March 9, 1825

<sup>203</sup> See: Edward Mead Earle, “American Interest in the Greek Cause, 1821-1827,” in *The American Historical Review* vol. 33 (Oct. 1927), pp. 44-63. NB: The Greek Revolution sparked a particular interest in the United States, in no small part because Greek held a tremendous amount of importance for America’s obsession with the republics of Antiquity (Ibid. p. 45).



The poem went on to also mention the Greek republicans:

Be free! ye Greeks, or, failing die

In the last trench of Liberty

Ye hail the name of WASHINGTON: pursue

The path of glory he has mark'd for you<sup>204</sup>

In New Jersey, a group celebrating Washington's Birthday toasted to "Simon Bolivar – The Washington of the South" before also drinking to "the Patriots of Greece."<sup>205</sup> On March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1825, the group of Bostonians gathered at Faneuil Hall, after toasting Washington and Jefferson, drank to "the Republics of North and South America...May they make common cause in maintaining the rights of man." But the final toast of the night was drank to "Greece," whom they wished "other FRANKINS and ADAMSES for her councils; another WASHINGTON for her fields."<sup>206</sup> Through references like this, Americans celebrated Washington by positioning other republican revolutions as heirs to the one affected by their exalted chief.

This new round of revolutions also brought with it the trope of Washington's universality that started in the period of mourning. In 1825, a Rhode Island orator took the occasion of Washington's Birthday to remind his audience of how the American hero "so gloriously achieved our independence and attempted the first experiment the world ever saw, of a

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<sup>204</sup> *Columbian Centinel*, February 23, 1825.

<sup>205</sup> *Washington Whig* (Bridgeton, N.J.), February 26, 1825. These same tropes would recur during Fourth of July Celebrations. In 1826, a group in Baltimore toasted Bolívar as "the Washington of the Southern Hemisphere." *Baltimore Patriot*, July 6, 1826. That same day, a group gathered to celebrate "the jubilee of freedom" in Richmond toasted to "the Republics of South America," adding that "animated by our glorious example, they have shaken off the yoke of bondage." *Richmond Enquirer*, July 7, 1826.

<sup>206</sup> *Essex Register*, March 7, 1825. The same day, another group gathered for Quincy's inaugural drank to Washington just before toasting "the Patriots of South America – May they speedily be able entirely to shake off the yoke of their oppressors." *Providence Patriot*, March 9, 1825. Yet another party drank to Washington, before rejoicing that "already have the principles of '75 pervaded Spanish America." They later toasted "the Genius of Liberty – Awakening in Greece from its slumbers in the lap of despotism – may it soon burst asunder the fetters of the Turks, as Sampson in his wrath did the green withes of the Philistines." *Village Register* (Dedham, M.A.), March 10, 1825.

government founded entirely on the people's will."<sup>207</sup> The next year the *City Gazette* of Charleston observed that "the Birthday of the Father of his Country...opens to us a volume – the volume of a life to which the annals of human achievement and of human glory have never afforded."<sup>208</sup> The same day a Connecticut paper call him "the ornament and glory of the civilized world."<sup>209</sup> Hence, as the second generation of American statesmen were taking their place at the helm, and as revolutions against monarchical governments were taking place around the world, Americans saw Washington as the great progenitor of the struggle against tyranny.

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1826, Americans celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of their Independence. In Boston, a "Temple of Liberty" was erected "supported by the pillars of Wisdom – Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and J.Q. Adams."<sup>210</sup> However, while Americans were marking this milestone, two other exalted revolutionary statesman – John Adams and Thomas Jefferson – quietly slipped into the hereafter. As the *Daily National Journal* reported of Jefferson, "the stream of public sympathy for this illustrious man has been suddenly diverted into another and gloomy course...on the very day which he has rendered gloriously conspicuous by his immortal Declaration." The article continued to state that "he has gone to join the illustrious dead – Washington, Franklin, Hancock...and all the other band of sages and heroes by whose wisdom and courage we have obtained...the privileges of a free nation."<sup>211</sup> In Philadelphia, the American Philosophical Society declared: "Thomas Jefferson is no more. Since the death of Washington,

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<sup>207</sup> *Rhode-Island American*, February 25, 1825.

<sup>208</sup> *City Gazette*, February 22, 1826

<sup>209</sup> *Connecticut Gazette*, February 22, 1826.

<sup>210</sup> *Boston Commercial Gazette*, July 10, 1826.

<sup>211</sup> *Daily National Journal* (Washington, D.C.), July 7, 1826.

no event has occurred more afflicting to this nation.” In Baltimore, the leading Republican paper of the city simply said “the great Republican family has lost its venerated and beloved Father.”<sup>212</sup>

In the weeks that followed, America yet again went through a national period of grieving over these two figures. In the eulogies, orators could not help but invoke the legacy of Washington to contextualize the losses. As Daniel Webster put it: “Washington is in the clear upper sky. These other stars have now joined the American constellation.”<sup>213</sup> Another orator said of Adams and Jefferson: “You are joined to the company of Washington and Franklin...and the stars that have looked down for five and twenty years upon the silence of Mount Vernon, now point our paths to the peaceful shades of Quincy and Monticello.”<sup>214</sup> Peleg Sprague took the solemn occasion to draw a parallel between Jefferson and Washington, praising the state of “Virginia, which has nourished her great men [and] so many brilliant names.” The Old Dominion produced “Washington, as a military commander” and “Jefferson [who] mingled his counsels among the reverend and the grave in her halls of legislation.”<sup>215</sup> In Providence, J.L. Tillinghast declared that while “Washington, after a race of unequalled glory, died at the head...of the American armies,” Adams and Jefferson were “blest with a patriarchal length of days, which seemed, in their person, to connect posterity with antiquity” and bestow “the principles of a free government upon a generation entirely new.”<sup>216</sup> In many ways, this event marked the end of the first phase of the nation’s history. Americans were finally on their own. Referring to his

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<sup>212</sup> *Baltimore Patriot*, July 7, 1826.

<sup>213</sup> Daniel Webster, *A Discourse in Commemoration of the Lives and Services of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, & Company, 1826), p. 62.

<sup>214</sup> Charles Stewart Daveis, *An Address Delivered at Portland, on the Decease of John Adams Thomas Jefferson* (Portland, M.E.: James Adams Jr., 1826), p. 8. NB: “Quincy” refers to the estate of John Adams outside of Boston, while “Monticello” is the name of Jefferson’s mountaintop plantation in western Virginia.

<sup>215</sup> Peleg Sprague, *Eulogy on John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (Hallowell, M.E.: Glazier & Co., 1826), p. 6.

<sup>216</sup> J.L. Tillinghast, *Eulogy Pronounced in Providence, July 17, 1826: Upon the Characters of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (Providence: Miller & Grattan, 1826), p. 9.

“constellation” of dead statesman, Daniel Webster told his countrymen: “beneath this illumination, let us walk the course of life.”<sup>217</sup>

The presidential campaign of 1828 was unprecedented in that a poorly educated frontiersman turned military hero (Andrew Jackson) beat the Harvard-educated son of one of America’s most celebrated statesman (John Quincy Adams). The campaign was also unprecedented for a less-noted reason: it was the first to feature biographies specifically written to promote one of the candidates. While historians have long noted how Jacksonians tried to position the Hero of New Orleans as the heir to Jeffersonian democracy, the biographies delivered an image of Jackson as the heir of Washington.<sup>218</sup> The opening lines of Robert Walsh and James Henry’s *The Jackson Wreath* read: “With the exception of the name of the transcendent Washington, the annals of the United States, as yet, afford none possessed of so much eclat as that of ANDREW JACKSON.”<sup>219</sup> Another biography pointed out that “General Jackson resigned several...office, manifesting a preference for private life, in unison with the tastes of Cincinnatus [and] of Washington.” Like those figures, Jackson “left his farm” when called to duty, and then, “crown with laurels, he retired from it.” As the author noted, “the same disposition was seen and admired in our beloved Washington.”<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Webster, *Discourse*, p. 62.

<sup>218</sup> For Jackson as heir to Jefferson, see: H.W. Brands, *Andrew Jackson: His Life and Times* (New York: Double Day, 2005), pp. 389-405; Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 172-180; Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), pp. 7, 97.

<sup>219</sup> Robert Walsh and Dr. James McHenry, *The Jackson Wreath, Or, National Souvenir. A National Tribute, Commemorative of the Great Civil Victory Achieved by the People, Through the Hero of New Orleans. Containing a Biographical Sketch of General Jackson until 1819. With a Continuation until the Present Day, Embracing a View of the Recent Political Struggle* (Philadelphia: Jacob Maas, 1829), p. 9. NB: “eclat” is an archaic word which meant something close to “brilliant social distinction or conspicuous success.”

<sup>220</sup> Henry Lee, *A Vindication of the Character and Public Services of Andrew Jackson* (Boston: True and Greene, 1828), p. 31.

One of the major charges leveled by the Adams faction was that Jackson was unfit to be president due to his lack of experience in civil administration and his brutish, unsophisticated character fit for military life. An anonymously authored biography stated that “the cry against General Jackson as being a *Military Chieftain*, has been so incessantly rung in our ears,” before pointing out “that [his] experience in civil matters, is incomparably superior to that of General Washington’s previous to his being President.”<sup>221</sup> The author went on to lambast Jefferson and Madison as “cabinet Presidents...whose chief recommendations rested on their mere *literary* attainments.”<sup>222</sup> Comparing the two generals, the author said that “Washington, like Jackson, was not a time-server; and least of all was he a sycophant.” Like Washington, Jackson was “actuated by a pure love of freedom,” had “generous [and] magnanimous impulses,” and exhibited both “self-denial” and “disinterested devotion to the public welfare.”<sup>223</sup> As another biographer summed it up: “As America, with the exception of Washington, has produced no individual to whom she is more indebted than the illustrious subject of this publication, so with the same exception, there has yet appeared none whom she is more inclined to honor.”<sup>224</sup>

March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1829 was a cold, rainy day in the Federal City. In the afternoon, “a mob, of boys, negroes, women [and] children” broke through the windows of the White House and smashed glasses and plates that had once been eaten on by Dolly and James Madison. But before the fracas, a man referred to as “Old Hickory” delivered his first inaugural address on the steps of the capitol.<sup>225</sup> In one of his closing lines, President Jackson spoke of his “reverence to the

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<sup>221</sup> Anon. *Reflections on the Character and Public Services of Andrew Jackson, with Reference to His Qualifications for the Presidency. With General Remarks* (New York: Geo. F. Hopkins, 1828), pp. 10, 15. NB: the author published under the pseudonym “Native American.”

<sup>222</sup> Ibid. p. 39.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid. pp. 12, 15.

<sup>224</sup> Walsh and McHenry, *Jackson Wreath*, p. 81.

<sup>225</sup> Margaret Bayard Smith quoted in Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House, 2008), p. 61. For scene of the inauguration, see: *ibid.* pp. 52-69.

example of public virtue left by my illustrious predecessors,” before expressing his thanks to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson: “mind that founded and the mind that reformed our system.”<sup>226</sup> Later on, “a few of the surviving soldiers of the army of the Revolution” addressed the new president: “Washington led us triumphantly through the Revolutionary war...and we have entire confidence that the exercise of the same transcendent virtues, will, under God, preserve inviolate our liberties, independence and union, during your administration.” To which Jackson replied: “To have around my person...the companions of the immortal Washington, will afford me satisfaction and grateful encouragement. That by my best exertions, I shall be able to exhibit more than imitation of his patriotic labors, a sense of my own imperfections, and the reverence I entertain for his virtues, forbid me to hope.”<sup>227</sup> As the *City Gazette* of Charleston, South Carolina put it a few weeks before on George Washington’s Birthday, “as generation succeeds generation...each succession [feels] the blessing of his services,” whom “the whole course of human history fails to illustrate a parallel combination of circumstances and character.”<sup>228</sup> By the inauguration of Jackson, American nationalism had certainly entered what Benedict Anderson calls its “genealogical series” – where the entire revolutionary tradition had “become an inheritance.”<sup>229</sup>

On inauguration day, all over the country, Jackson supporters celebrated the fulfilment of a process and a tradition that had been started by Washington and perfected by Jefferson. At Jackson’s inaugural ball in Washington, D.C., Colonel J. Carpenter proposed a toast to:

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<sup>226</sup> Andrew Jackson, “First Inaugural Address.”

<sup>227</sup> “From the Washington Telegraph,” in *Baltimore Patriot*, March 7, 1829.

<sup>228</sup> *City Gazette*, February 23, 1829. Or, as the *National Gazette* put it: “Washington still shines apart in human history – beaming all the light which can be desired for the path of any successor: there, is the all-sufficient lesson of wisdom and virtue.” *National Gazette* (Philadelphia), February 24, 1829.

<sup>229</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 196.

The Yeomanry of our Country, the most virtuous and democratic part of the Community. With Washington at their head they knocked off the horns of John Bull. In 1800, with Jefferson and Liberty for their watchword, they drove from the field the minions of power and put an end to the reign of terror, commenced under John the first. Supported by the Hickory Staff of Liberty in 1828 they marched to the Polls, met and completely routed the motley camp of John the second – without resorting to ‘Corruption, Bargain and Intrigue.

Up in New Hampshire, an orator proclaimed “that Gen. Jackson was a second Washington,” while in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, a newspaper proudly proclaimed that the new president “has virtues which would compare with those of...Fabius, or Cato.”<sup>230</sup> A New York paper pointed out that Jackson’s inaugural address “very generally compared to the style and manner of writing which distinguished the official papers of General Washington,” while a Delaware paper reported that “General Jackson will take into his cabinet council, as Washington did before him, the Vice President, and also the Post Master General.”<sup>231</sup> Numerous toasts were given to Jackson which involved Washington’s legacy in a number of ways. In Providence, Rhode Island, a Jackson celebration toasted Washington as “first on the roll [*sic*] of *chieftains* and of *statesmen*,” while in Concord, New Hampshire, celebrants toasted “Lafayette, Washington, and Jackson – Military Chieftains like these, any country should be proud to call them sons.”<sup>232</sup> At the same party, a guest gave a toast which situated Jackson in both the tradition of Washington and of antiquity: “Gen. George Washington [and] Gen. Andrew Jackson...men no less entitled to their country’s gratitude and remembrance than the handful of Grecian patriots, who gathered wreaths of imperishable glory at the straits of Thermopylae and on the plains of Marathon.”<sup>233</sup> Another

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<sup>230</sup> *New Hampshire Sentinel* (Keene), March 6, 1829; *Pittsfield Sun* (Massachusetts), March 5, 1829.

<sup>231</sup> “From the N.Y. Enquirer,” in *Hampshire Gazette* (Northampton, M.A.), March 11, 1829; *Delaware Gazette* (Wilmington), March 6, 1829.

<sup>232</sup> *Providence Patriot*, March 7, 1829; In Waterford, New York, another party made reference to the trope that both Jackson and Washington were distinguished generals turned president: “The memory of Washington – Celebrated as a military chieftain and as a virtuous chief magistrate.” *Saratoga Sentinel* (Saratoga Springs, N.Y.), March 10, 1829. *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord), March 7, 1829.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.* NB: This toast is both a reference to Leonidas’s stand against the Persians, as well as an indirect reference to the recent Greek Revolution against the Ottomans.

noted that “resistance to British tyranny and usurpation” was “a school in which the Washingtons, Franklins [and] Jacksons...of our land, were educated.”<sup>234</sup>

The celebration of Jackson as successor to the legacies of Washington and Jefferson continued into the July Fourth celebrations of that year. On that day, in the spirit of Jackson’s inaugural address, something happened that would have been unthinkable twenty or thirty years before: Washington and Jefferson were toasted together.<sup>235</sup> In Hartford, Connecticut, and Augusta, Georgia, Jackson was toasted as “a worthy successor of ‘the mind that *formed* and the mind that *reformed* our System.’”<sup>236</sup> And while there were many references to Jackson and his “prototype, Thomas Jefferson,” celebrants evoked Washington’s legacy with equal ubiquity.<sup>237</sup> In Pittsfield, Massachusetts, one of “the friends of the present administration [of] this town” toasted to “General Jackson, the Tennessee Farmer – Like Cincinnatus of old, he leaves the plough when his country calls him into service and will return again with a good conscience.”<sup>238</sup> Another chimed in that “in war [Jackson] has equaled the Roman General, may he emulate in peace the virtues of the Roman Farmer.”<sup>239</sup> And a New Haven man added that “his sword is become a pruning hook, but evidently retains its old propensity for clipping.”<sup>240</sup> In the celebration of Jackson, the iconography of Washington as the hero general and the ideal of republican self-sacrifice was thoroughly mixed with the legacy of Thomas Jefferson as the enlightened statesman and the champion of democracy over aristocracy. Hence, with the coming of the Jacksonian age, we see the end of the politicization of Washington’s legacy as well as the

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> *The Hartford Times* (Connecticut), July 6, 1829; *The Pittsfield Sun*, July 9, 1829; *Richmond Enquirer*, July 10, 1829; *Weekly Eastern Argus*, July 14, 1829.

<sup>236</sup> *The Hartford Times*, July 6, 1829; *Augusta Chronicle* (Georgia), July 8, 1829.

<sup>237</sup> *The Hartford Times*, July 6, 1829. Other references to Jackson as Jefferson’s successor, see: *Connecticut Herald* (New Haven), July 7, 1829; *Augusta Chronicle*, July 8, 1829; *The Pittsfield Sun*, July 9, 1829; *New Hampshire Sentinel*, July 10, 1829; *Salem Gazette*, July 10, 1829.

<sup>238</sup> *The Pittsfield Sun*, July 9, 1829.

<sup>239</sup> *City Gazette*, July 7, 1829.

<sup>240</sup> *Connecticut Herald*, July 7, 1829.



beginning of the construction of what Daniel Webster called “the American constellation.” In other words, the fight between two factions competing to position themselves as the true inheritors of the legacy of the Father of his Country now became the celebration of an exalted pantheon of statesman from a bygone era.

Between 1799 and 1829, Americans made sense of both their national identity and their partisan affiliation by using the figure and the legacy of George Washington during public ceremonies. In so doing, they constructed a hero who was at once the anthropomorphic incarnation of both the American nation state and the American character. However, before the 1820s, the iconography of Washington as the great unifier and the common parent was a highly partisan affair. Before the War of 1812, the hero construction of Washington in the press was a Federalist project, which reflected the antipartisanship of a group who was desperately trying to position itself as the only legitimate representative of the American state. With the coming of the second war against Great Britain, Republicans reacted to what they saw as Federalist sedition and treason by delineating their own image of Washington while lambasting the Federalist for corrupting the legacy of the first president. With the simultaneous death of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, and the rise of Andrew Jackson to the presidency, the figure of Washington became depoliticized. By this point, as the second generation of American statesman took the stage, Washington was understood as the first among equals within an exalted pantheon of Revolutionary heroes that included Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, and others. Like many other historical processes, the hero construction of Washington in pomp and print was a highly contingent affair, as it was defined by partisan feelings until the coming of the age of Jackson.

## Chapter 3

### The Didactic Folk Hero: Parson Weems's Biography of Washington

On January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1800 – just as the first eulogies to Washington were hitting the press, and well before any were compiled into bound volumes – a book-peddling itinerant preacher wrote a letter to his business associate, the Philadelphia publisher Mathew Carey. Mason Locke Weems, part capitalist, part preacher, had this to say: “I’ve something to whisper in your lug. Washington, you know is gone! Millions are gaping to read something about him.”<sup>241</sup> A few weeks later, Weems wrote his publisher again, saying: “Everybody will read about Washington – and let us hold up his Great Virtues – Some, may go and do likewise.”<sup>242</sup> Thus, the idea was conceived for a book that would become the most important and widely read biography in the United States before the Civil War.

In the nineteenth-century Anglo-American world, biography, according to Scott E. Casper (the leading historian on the matter), had “constructive, cultural purposes.” Namely, this form of literature served to instruct and inform “the ways Americans understood the relationship between individual character and the broader meaning of American history” as well as to cultivate the reader’s sense of virtue, both public and private. In other words, “the paramount function of biography was didactic.”<sup>243</sup> But for Weems, creating a portrait of Washington’s life that was at once morally instructive, widely marketable, and appealing “to the imitation of Our Youth” entailed something else. It had to be democratic. In other words, Washington’s elite

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<sup>241</sup> Mason L. Weems to Mathew Cary, January 12, 1800, in Emily Ellsworth Ford Skeel ed., *Mason Locke Weems: His Works and Ways, In Three Volumes; A Biography Left Unfinished by Paul Leicester Ford* (New York: Published by editor Skeel, 1929), vol. II, p. 126. NB: the word “lug” was eighteenth-century slang for “ear.”

<sup>242</sup> Weems to Carey, February 2, 1800, in *ibid.* p. 127.

<sup>243</sup> Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 2-4, 74. For biography as didactic, see: *ibid.* pp. 19-76. On biography in early America as the instructor of public and private virtues, see: Harris, *Public Lives, Private Virtues*, pp. xiii-95.

upbringing needed to be erased, and his life depoliticized and distilled down into a series of enticing tales relatable to Weems's largely poor and rural audience. As Annette Gordon-Reed has observed of American biographies in particular, the lives of the "Great Men" can "be stripped down and made useful to individuals on any run of the social strata without any move toward social leveling." In other words, subjects could be taken out of the context of socio-economic systems as well as race and class hierarchies, instead becoming vehicles for conveying "some aspect of the human condition that links the subject to the reader across space and time."<sup>244</sup> Hence, what Weems wrote was not a biography as we would understand it today – a fact-based chronological narrative based on a thorough reading of the subjects writings and correspondence. Instead, it reflected much of the other literature which Weems sold, in that it was part didactic, self-help manual and part fable, but one that happened to be structured around the well-known events of George Washington's life.<sup>245</sup>

In recent years, the so-called "text-based model of U.S. nation-building" has come under fire. Trish Loughran argues that "there was no 'nationalized' print public sphere in the years just before and just after the Revolution, but rather a proliferating variety of local and regional reading publics scattered across a vast and diverse geographical space." She further contends that

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<sup>244</sup> Annette Gordon-Reed, "Writing Early American Lives," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (October 2014), pp. 496, 493.

<sup>245</sup> Before Weems published *Life of Washington*, the first books bearing his name was called *The Immortal Mentor: Or, Man's Unerring Guide to a Healthy, Wealthy, and Happy Life. In Three Parts, By Lewis Cornaro, Dr. Franklin, and Dr. Scott* (Philadelphia: Francis and Robert Bailey, 1796). This volume stressed the connection between healthy living, thrift, and the construction of the balanced, cultivated self. As I will demonstrate below, much of the Franklinian doctrine of self-improvement appeared in Weems's biography of Washington. In addition, Mathew Carey (Weems's publisher and business partner) was especially interested in marketing tracts which dealt with self-help. For example, the opening pages of the final 1809 version of *Life of Washington* contained advertisements for books which were supposed to help with the cultivation of moral and virtuous living. See: "Books Published by Mathew Carey," in Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of George Washington, With Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honorable to Himself, and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1809), pp. 5-11. Weems himself was so committed to the kind of self-improvement championed by Benjamin Franklin that, after writing the Washington biography, he wrote a *Life of Franklin*, which was not nearly as successful as the former book. See: Skeel ed., *Mason Locke Weems*, pp. 128-141. Nevertheless, Weems – as an author and a book peddler – was much closer to being someone who catered to a popular, yeoman audience than one who marketed books for a cosmopolitan literati.

the idea of a truly national market for printed material was “a postindustrial fantasy of preindustrial print’s efficacy as a cross-regional agent,” and adds that this myth was propagated by “a post-Revolutionary generation of entrepreneurs and literate elites who wanted to believe a national market for books *already* existed, if only it could be tapped.”<sup>246</sup> But Weems’s *Life of Washington* was a book which did achieve a truly national readership. This was due to a number of factors.

First, as an itinerant bookseller who spent much of his time travelling the backcountry marketing his wares, Parson Weems was in a unique position to bring his famous biography well outside the ambit of Philadelphia – the cultural capital of the young nation.<sup>247</sup> In fact, between 1800 (the year that the first edition of the biography was published) and 1810 (the year after the final edition of the biography went into print), Weems travelled as far north as western New York and as far south as Georgia peddling his *Life of Washington*.<sup>248</sup> In addition to bringing his literature to more rural market places, bookstores up and down the coast sold Weems’s biography.<sup>249</sup> Besides Weems himself, we don’t know how many other itinerant booksellers

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<sup>246</sup> Loughran, *The Republic in Print*, pp. xviii-xix, 17.

<sup>247</sup> For Weems as a travelling bookseller, see: Harold Kellock, *Parson Weems of the Cherry-Tree* (New York: The Century Co., 1928), pp. 59-79; Lewis Leary, *The Book-Peddling Parson: An Account of the Life and Works of Mason Locke Weems* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 1984), pp. 20-34; Lawrence C. Wroth, *Parson Weems: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Baltimore: Eichelberger Book Company, 1911), pp. 41-56.

<sup>248</sup> Skeel ed., *Mason Locke Weems*, vol. II, pp. xxi-xiv. NB: Hereafter, when referring to all the versions of the text collective, I will use the title “*Life of Washington*.”

<sup>249</sup> For newspaper advertisements for Weems’s *Life of Washington*, see: *New York Gazette* (New York), August 27, 1800; *August Herald* (Georgia), May 13, 1801; *Western Star* (Stockbridge, M.A.), August 3, 1801; *The Balance, and Columbian Repository* (Hudson, N.Y.), January 5, 1802; *True American* (Trenton, N.J.), January 5, 1802; *Waterford Gazette* (New York), March 23, 1802; *Farmer’s Weekly Museum* (Walpole, N.H.), April 6, 1802; *American Citizen* (New York), May 28, 1802; *Gazette of the United States* (Philadelphia), June 17, 1803; *Augusta Herald*, May 16, 1804; *City Gazette* (Charleston, S.C.), October 14, 1805; *Carolina Gazette* (Charleston), October 13, 1808; *Alexandria Gazette* (Virginia), March 9, 1809; *The Sun* (Dover, N.H.), May 13, 1809; *The Delaware Gazette* (Wilmington), December 30, 1809; *Federal Republican* (Baltimore), April 19, 1810; *Charleston Courier* (South Carolina), May 22, 1810; *Newburyport Herald* (Massachusetts), May 22, 1810; *American Advocate* (Hallowell, M.E.), May 29, 1810; *New England Palladium* (Boston), July 20, 1810; *The Reporter* (Brattleboro, V.T.), July 1, 1811; *Farmer’s Repository* (Charles Town, W.V.), December 27, 1811; *Cooperstown Federalist* (New York), February 29, 1812; *The Gleaner* (Wilkes-Barre, P.A.), February 11, 1814. For advertisements for the German translation of Weems, see: *Der Readinger Alder* (Reading, P.A.), February 26, 1811.

purchased dozens of copies from coastal bookstores and brought them west into the backwoods. This was common practice for merchants of all kinds during the period.<sup>250</sup> However, we do know that *Life of Washington* would have reached as far west as southern Indiana, as Abraham Lincoln recalled reading it “away back in childhood” during “the earliest days of [him] being able to read.”<sup>251</sup>

The second factor which contributed to its wide diffusion was its price. While John Marshall’s five volume biography of George Washington was prohibitively expensive and sold via subscription, Weems’s biography cost twenty-five cents (about three 2003 dollars), and was about the size of a pamphlet.<sup>252</sup> Hence, *Life of Washington* was often sold along with bibles, farmer’s almanacs, and other self-help literature – especially in markets far outside the big coastal cities.<sup>253</sup> All told, Weems’s biography went through forty-three reprints (including one German and one Dutch translation) between its first publication and the election of Andrew Jackson (1828).<sup>254</sup> So, through a combination of strategic marketing in rural areas, its low price, the dozens of times it was reprinted, its sale in bookstores from Maine to Georgia, and the immense demand for stories about Washington among folks who could never afford Marshall’s well-researched, footnoted five-volume biography, Mason Locke Weems’s *Life of Washington*

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<sup>250</sup> Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 56-89.

<sup>251</sup> “Address to the New Jersey Senate at Trenton, New Jersey, February 21, 1861,” in Roy P. Basler ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), vol. IV, pp. 236-237. NB: Abraham Lincoln was born in 1809, and (precocious as he was) I am assuming he could read by seven or eight. This would mean that he read Weems’s *Life of Washington* sometime around 1816. In 1816, Indiana was just being settled by Anglo-Americans. The capital was not designated until 1820. Hence, from this piece of information, we can surmise that Weems’s biography made it all the way out to the frontier.

<sup>252</sup> On John Marshall’s biography, see: Casper, *Constructing American Lives*, pp. 22-35. For price, see: *Western Star*, August 3, 1801; *Farmer’s Weekly Museum*, April 6, 1802. For inflation conversion, see: Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Consumer Price Index: December 2007*.

<sup>253</sup> For example, in Brattleboro, V.T., Weems’s *Life of Washington* was listed in a small section advertising books, which also included “School and Pocket Bibles,” prayer books, and “The Farmer’s Dictionary.” *The Reporter*, July 1, 1811.

<sup>254</sup> Skeel ed., *Mason Locke Weems*, vol. I, pp. 1-78. For German edition (1809) and Dutch edition (1810), see: *ibid.* pp. 50, 57.

became, indisputably, the most popular biography in the early Republic, and perhaps even one of the most important books altogether, outside of the Bible.

As alluded to earlier, Weems's *Life of Washington* was a morally didactic book marketed specifically to the youth of middle- and lower-class families. The first edition of the biography ever was intended as "a pattern-book of imitation, to the rising Youth of America."<sup>255</sup> Tellingly, in an 1802 advertisement in a newspaper in Hudson, New York, "Weems's *Washington*" appears, not under the subheading "Biographies," but is included in the "Monitorial" section, which included works like "Cure for Drunkenness" and "Advice to Young Ladies."<sup>256</sup> Weems, along with several notable reviewers like Hugh Henry Brackenridge, thought the book "ought to be introduced into schools, and to be in every family."<sup>257</sup> From the first edition to the last, the central aim of the book was to use Washington's life as a vehicle to help "the rising generation of our land" cultivate certain virtues prized by the revolutionary generation.<sup>258</sup> As Weems declares in the first pages of the 1800 version: "YOUTH OF AMERICA, IMITATE YOUR WASHINGTON."<sup>259</sup> Hence, by rendering a quaint portrait of Washington's life, which often reads like a bildungsroman, Weems hoped to offer a relatable version of the Father of his Country fit for personal emulation.

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<sup>255</sup> [Mason L. Weems], *The Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington, General and Commander of the Armies of America* (Philadelphia: George Keating, 1800), p. 4. NB: Although this version appeared without an author, I (along with several scholars before me) have determined that it was written by Mason L. Weems. See: Casper, *Constructing American Lives*, p. 71; Skeel ed. *Mason Locke Weems*, vol. I, p. 3.

<sup>256</sup> *The Balance, and Columbian Repository*, January 5, 1802.

<sup>257</sup> "Letter from Hugh Henry Brackenridge to Rev. M.L. Weems," in Weems, *Life of George Washington* (1809), pp. 2-3. Several other reviewers made similar comments (ibid. pp. 1-4). In 1809, the year that the final version of the biography went to the press, Weems wrote outgoing president Thomas Jefferson asking him to officially endorse his biography as a textbook for American schools (something that ultimately was not accomplished). See: Weems to Thomas Jefferson, February 1, 1809, in Skeel ed. *Mason Locke Weems*, vol. II, p. 389.

<sup>258</sup> This phrase was one made popular by Noah Webster. See: Noah Webster, *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas & Ebenezer T. Andrews, 1790), p. 5.

<sup>259</sup> [Weems], *Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington* (1800), p. 5

In all versions of Weems's biography, there is an emphasis placed on both the didactic capacity of Washington's virtues for "our children, and our children's children" as well as on Washington's own capacity to instruct his contemporaries in proper conduct.<sup>260</sup> Like the eulogists of chapter one, Weems was fixed on propagating a positive image of Washington for posterity. Hoping that his example would trickle "down to distant ages," Weems wanted "the children of the times to come" to "hear of their *father's virtues*, and...emulate his fame."<sup>261</sup> In the first pages of the version published immediately after Washington's death, Weems declared that "the sun of America is set, let us learn to imitate his virtues."<sup>262</sup> And right down to the last pages of the final 1809 version, Weems lectures that "without an humble imitation of [Washington's] example...we can never hope to be A GREAT AND HAPPY NATION."<sup>263</sup>

But Washington was didactic in a double sense, in that the first president acted to purposefully instruct his countrymen during his lifetime in addition to setting a timeless example through his life and character. Weems delivers tales of America's "great moralizing teacher" in action.<sup>264</sup> With providential overtones, Weems declares that "he was born to teach his countrymen...to obey the sacred voice of JUSTICE and of HUMANITY."<sup>265</sup> Alluding to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, Weems tells us that "[Washington's] parental influence led the people of these states to adopt one grand system of pure Republican policy."<sup>266</sup> During his retirement at Mount Vernon, Washington "aimed at teaching his countrymen the art of enriching

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<sup>260</sup> Weems, *A History of the Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits, of General George Washington, Faithfully Taken from Authentic Documents, And, Now, in A Third Edition Improved, Respectfully Offered to the Perusal of His Countrymen; As Also, of All Others Who Wish to See Human Nature in its Most Finished Form* (Philadelphia: Reprinted by John Bioren, 1800), p. 27. NB: This is the second version of the biography, and the first to appear with Weems's name on it.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid. p. 66.

<sup>262</sup> [Weems], *Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington* (1800), p. 10.

<sup>263</sup> Weems, *Life of George Washington* (1809), pp. 226-227.

<sup>264</sup> Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), p. 66.

<sup>265</sup> [Weems], *Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington* (1800), pp. 30-31.

<sup>266</sup> Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), p. 74.

their lands.” And in one episode, Weems portrays a Christ-like Washington teaching “the poor of his large neighbourhood” to “catch an abundance of the finest fish for themselves,” going on to tell how “thou gavest to thy poor brethren” the “purest manna, and honey from the rocks of heaven.” In addition to these anecdotes, Weems also stresses how Washington sought “to promote, as an object of *primary importance*...those noble institutions for the diffusion of knowledge and virtue.”<sup>267</sup> In this way, Washington appears as both the great teacher of his contemporaries as well as an immortalized didactic figure useful to future generations.

One of the main ways in which Weems made Washington relatable to younger Americans of the lower classes was to make the Father of his Country appear as if he came from a humble background. As he puts it: “HAPPILY for America, George Washington was not born with ‘a silver spoon in his mouth.’”<sup>268</sup> He was “born of humble parents” in the “unpromising Nazareth” of “a narrow nook and obscure corner of the British Plantations.”<sup>269</sup> In a line that could only seem flagrantly distasteful to modern ears, Weems tells that “[Washington’s] whole inheritance was but a small tract of broken land in Stafford County...and a few Negroes” – an amount of property “utterly insufficient to those purposes of honor and usefulness.”<sup>270</sup> Yet the most important area of Washington’s aristocratic upbringing that Weems downplayed was the first president’s education.

Even before Weems, the details of Washington’s education were far from clear. Commentators on the matter ranged from those who stressed the acuity of his private tutors to one who described Washington as “a great practical self-taught genius.”<sup>271</sup> Weems actually

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid. 57-59. NB: These same lines appear in all subsequent versions.

<sup>268</sup> Weems, *Life of George Washington* (1809), p. 25

<sup>269</sup> Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), p. 49.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid. p. 43.

<sup>271</sup> Ramsay, “Oration,” in *Eulogies and Orations*, p. 90.



contributed to this uncertainty himself. In the first version, we are told that Washington “was educated (as youths of fortune in this country generally are) under the eye of his father by private tutorage.” According to this telling, young George learned “a slight tincture of the Latin language, a grammatical knowledge of his mother tongue, and the elements of mathematics.”<sup>272</sup> In the next version (published later in 1800), we are still told that Washington’s “education was of the private and proper sort,” but Weems adds that “dead languages...had no charm for him” and that “a grammatical knowledge of his mother-tongue” sufficed.”<sup>273</sup> By 1809, the story changes completely. In this final telling, Washington’s “first place of education...was a little ‘old field school,’ kept by one of his father’s tenants...an honest, poor old man...who for a teacher of youth, his qualifications were certainly of the humbler sort.” Taking a shot at John Marshall’s biography, Weems adds that “some of [Washington’s] historians have said, and many believe, that Washington was a *Latin scholar*! But ‘tis an error. He never learned a syllable of Latin.” Rather, his education was limited to “*reading, spelling, English grammar, arithmetic, surveying, book-keeping, and geography*” – what Weems calls the “useful arts.”<sup>274</sup>

Weems was writing in a period when the classical curriculum (in which pupils would learn Latin and Greek by translating the canonical texts of Western Antiquity) was rapidly coming to be seen as distastefully aristocratic and anti-democratic.<sup>275</sup> Hence, the education of Washington was fine-tuned over time to appear more and more like that being experienced by

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<sup>272</sup> [Weems], *Life and Memorable Actions*, (1800) p. 18.

<sup>273</sup> Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), p. 3.

<sup>274</sup> Weems, *Life of George Washington* (1809), p. 10, 22.

<sup>275</sup> On the type of classical education that colonial elites received in the eighteenth century, see: Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). For the assault of Latin and Greek, see: Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1992), p. 349.

rural youths throughout the young nation.<sup>276</sup> In all of these ways, Weems took the childhood of a colonial, tidewater elite and refashioned it to appear like that of a backwoods, American yeoman of the Jeffersonian period. As he put it: “Reader! Go thy way... Though humble thy birth, low thy fortune, and few thy friends, still think of WASHINGTON, and HOPE.”<sup>277</sup>

Although Weems was trying to instruct young men on how to become future Washingtons, he did not intend for them to rise to fame and public glory. While Washington’s public virtues and exploits were “glorious” and “instructing to future generals and presidents,” they “but *little* concern our *children*.” Instead, Weems central focus is on elucidating Washington’s “private virtues...because in these every youth may become a Washington.”<sup>278</sup> As Scott Casper has argued, Weems “prefigured the next generation’s apostles of self-made manhood” (e.g. Horatio Alger Jr.) by showing “a direct relationship...between the public and the private character.” In this formula, “the character that Washington cultivated in private life made his public success possible.”<sup>279</sup> But even to this day, little is known of Washington’s private life – especially considering the fact that his wife Martha burned all of their correspondence.<sup>280</sup> Hence, it is no accident that the first version to appear “enriched with a number of very curious anecdotes” was also the one in which Weems spent the most time lamenting that nothing is known of Washington’s private virtues. Criticizing John Marshall and other commentators on Washington, Weems tells us that “you see nothing of Washington below the clouds.” As an antidote, Weems offered Washington “behind the curtain...where a man can have no *motive* but

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<sup>276</sup> On the rustic, common-school education that was typical of the era in America, see: Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), pp. 13-29

<sup>277</sup> Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), p. 50.

<sup>278</sup> Weems, *The Life of Washington the Great. Enriched with a Number of Very Curious Anecdotes, Perfectly in Character and Equally Honorable to Himself, And Exemplary to His Young Countrymen* (Augusta: Re-printed by Geo. F. Randolph, 1806), p. 5. NB: This was the first version to appear with the famous cherry tree anecdote.

<sup>279</sup> Casper, *Constructing American Lives*, p. 74.

<sup>280</sup> Chernow, *Washington*, pp. 814-815.

inclination, no excitement but *honest nature*.” While Weems’s audience, like all Americans, would have been well-versed in the grand exploits “Washington the HERO, and the Demigod,” Weems insisted that “private virtues lay the foundation of all human excellencies” and are “the food of great actions.”<sup>281</sup> And in accomplishing this goal, Weems spun his own tales – one of which is still fixated in the American imagination.

In delivering colorful yet apocryphal stories about Washington’s private life, Weems was trying to get at two central character traits that had been obscured by the public exploits of Washington: his piety and industry. American children to this day know the story of the cherry tree, where Washington tells his interrogating father that “*I cant tell a lie, Pa, you know I cant tell a lie, I did cut it with my little hatchet.*”<sup>282</sup> However, the purpose of this tale was to open a window onto the still-to-be-cultivated young Washington in order to show “that moment [when] the good Spirit of God ingrafted [*sic*] on his heart the germ of *piety*, which filled his after life with so many of the precious fruits of *morality*.”<sup>283</sup> In other words, in order for Weems to convince his audience that a very *private* reverence for God was the bedrock of Washington’s *public* character, the biographer had to show the future president in the most intimate of settings. While schoolboys of the time could only dream about leading a revolutionary army, the trope of upsetting one’s father was widely relatable. Hence, to make Washington an effective model of private virtue, Weems had to invent a private life out of thin air.

As we’ve seen in the eulogies, the hero construction of Washington was marked by an intense campaign to refashion the disinterested deist into a model of Christian devotion. In all the versions of his famous biography, Weems went even farther than eulogists. In the second 1800

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<sup>281</sup> Weems, *Life of Washington the Great* (1806), p. 4-5.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12.

version, Weems tells us that Washington's "*great virtues*" were "early watered with the dews of heaven-born religion," adding that "the fame of Washington...arose from his early sense of *religion*, the only source of human virtue and of human greatness."<sup>284</sup> Later, in the 1809 version, one of the "curious anecdotes" was about a Quaker who found Washington in the woods outside Valley Forge "on his knees at prayer."<sup>285</sup> In that same last version, Weems elaborates on how the American people and their posterity have benefited from Washington's piety. He tells us that "the imitation of God in benevolent and useful life...was the happy case with Washington." This disposition bore real political fruit. For example, speaking about the Newburgh Conspiracy (when certain army officers were talking about making Washington king), Weems tells how "the tempter flashed the dangerous diadem before the eyes of [Washington]: but religion at the same time, pointed to the GREAT LOVE OF ORDER, holding up that crown in comparison of which the diadems of kings are but dross."<sup>286</sup> Later, the biography tells of "the many horrid insurrections and bloody wars which were saved to this country by Washington, and all through the divine force of *early religion*."<sup>287</sup> Weems even goes on to compare Washington's famous farewell address (in which the outgoing president warned about faction and entangling foreign alliances) to Jesus's Sermon on the Mount.<sup>288</sup> In all of these ways, Weems directly connects the well-known heroic feats of Washington to the "germ of piety" that was planted when George was a boy – a lesson to the youth of America about the first of all virtues.

Another facet of Weems's Washington that is central to the author's program of didacticism (and one also witnessed in the funeral eulogies) is the model of the balanced

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<sup>284</sup> Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), pp. 26-27.

<sup>285</sup> Weems, *Life of George Washington* (1809) pp. 183-185

<sup>286</sup> Ibid. p. 120.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid. p. 182.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid. p. 142.

character. After invoking some of the figures of antiquity to illustrate Washington's character, Weems put it "in plainer terms," saying that the Father of his Country:

was religious without superstition; just without rigour; charitable without profusion; hospitable without making others pay for it; generous but with his own money; rich without covetousness; frugal without meanness; humane without weakness; brave without rashness; successful without vanity; victorious without pride...true to his word without evasion or perfidy; firm in adversity; moderate in prosperity; glorious and honoured in life [and] peaceful and happy in death.<sup>289</sup>

As historian Daniel Walker Howe has noted, the "paradigm of the human faculties" – or the idea that human nature is marked by a competition between the more noble forces of virtue and reason and the baser, animalistic passions – was "fully comparable in importance to the language of the Puritan covenant or the language of classical republicanism" in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century America.<sup>290</sup> Weems invokes this tradition several times when illustrating the prudent character of Washington. In the first 1800, we are told that Washington was one "who exerted every faculty, mind and body." Because "great souls [are] like great ships," Washington was "not affected by those little puffs which would overset feeble minds with passion for sink them with spleen."<sup>291</sup> Echoing another trope which started in the period of mourning, Weems asks "in what history ancient or modern...can you find in so young a man...such an instance of the TRUE HEROIC VALOUR which combats malignant passions [and] conquers the unreasonable self...?"<sup>292</sup> And like his piety, the balanced self that Washington cultivated bore real political fruit. At the end of the Revolutionary War, when his troops were "in

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<sup>289</sup> Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), p. 74.

<sup>290</sup> Howe, *Making the American Self*, pp. 6-7. The most famous American popularizer of this model of self-construction was of course Benjamin Franklin. In relating the ideal of the balanced character through aphorism, Weems was following directly in the Franklinian tradition. For example, in his famous *Poor Richard's Almanac*, Franklin uses parables to make his point: "If passion drives, let reason hold the reins"; "A man in a passion rides a mad horse"; "He is a governor that governs his passions, and he a servant that serves them." *Poor Richard's Almanack*. By Benjamin Franklin; Selections from the apothegms, and proverbs, with a brief sketch of the life of Benjamin Franklin (Waterloo, IA.: U.S.C. Publishing Co., 1914), pp. 30, 13, 25.

<sup>291</sup> [Weems], *Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington* (1800), pp. 5, 28.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 34-35.

the height of their passion” and planning to march on Congress and demand their pay, Washington “but makes a short speech to them, and the storm is laid! the tumult subsides! and the soldiers...consent to ground their arms.”<sup>293</sup> Similarly, Weems tells of how Washington “steered our great national bark safely through the Scylla and Charybdis...of French and English politics.”<sup>294</sup> In constructing these moral aphorisms and anecdotes, Weems continues to offer instructions on self-cultivation by pointing out the correlation between private virtues and public character and fame.

To further illustrate the virtues of the balanced character, Weems invokes a number of foils who serve as a counterpoint to Washington’s greatness. While there were juxtapositions made between Washington and the villains of antiquity, Weems used contemporary character that would have been more familiar to his popular audience.<sup>295</sup> The first of these was General Braddock, who commanded young colonel Washington in the French and Indian War. On a trek into Indian country, the British Army was put in jeopardy because of “the pride and obstinacy of...their haughty General,” who Weems in a later version called an “epauletted madman.”<sup>296</sup> But in the face of “the furious assaulting savages,” Washington emerged “calm and self collected,” saving “the shattered remains of the British army” from further ruin.<sup>297</sup> While Braddock served as a synecdoche for the hubris and uncontrolled ambition of the British Empire, Weems invoked another famous supervillain to illustrate the dark side of the American Revolution. According to Weems, Benedict Arnold (the most famous traitor in American history) was “over-persuaded by the devil,” and “for lack of Washington’s religious principles, he soon

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<sup>293</sup> Weems, *Life of George Washington* (1809), p. 181.

<sup>294</sup> Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), p. 26.

<sup>295</sup> At one point, Weems invokes “the Caesars and Alexanders of the earth, to give sad evidence that no valor, no genius *alone* can make men great.” Weems, *Life of Washington the Great* (1806), p. 50.

<sup>296</sup> [Weems], *Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington* (1800), p. 37; Weems, *Life of George Washington* (1809), p. 40.

<sup>297</sup> [Weems], *Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington* (1800), p. 38.

fell, like Lucifer, from a heaven of glory into an abyss of never-ending infamy.”<sup>298</sup> His fatal sin was licentiousness. As Weems puts it: “though extremely brave, he was of that vulgar sort, who having no taste for the pleasures of the mind, think of nothing but high living, dress, and show.” To “fatten his Prodigality Arnold consented to starve his Honesty,” and “fill up with English guineas” he agreed “to sacrifice Washington.”<sup>299</sup> By using these two well-known characters as foils, Weems illustrates how men who surrender to their baser passions suffer infamy and death in the end. So, in instructing young boys in self-cultivation, Weems uses Washington as the positive example that is counterpoised to these two negative examples.

For all his Franklinian lecturing about how Washington “resolved to make up the deficiency” of his humble upbringing “by dint of great industry and economy,” there is a central paradox running throughout all versions of *Life of Washington* which, on the surface, throws its didactic capacity into question.<sup>300</sup> Even while hoping that his book might serve as a how-to guide for “every youth [to] become a Washington,” Weems also loads up his stories with a number of important references to providential interposition. Sometimes we see God helping Washington through second causes, like when a fog “providentially” rolled into the East River to save the Continental Army from being exposed to the enemy.<sup>301</sup> There are other times when Providence directly interposes to save Washington, as when it “made his body bullet-proof” during the siege of Braddock in the French and Indian War.<sup>302</sup> But most of what we see is God acting through Washington, the “blest instrument of light and joy to our world” whom “Heaven was pleased to

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid. pp. 21-22, 27.

<sup>299</sup> Weems, *Life of George Washington* (1809), pp. 102-103. To make this treason seem biblical in proportion, Weems labelled the episode “Arnold’s apostacy [sic].” (ibid. 99)

<sup>300</sup> Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), p. 43.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid. p. 13. This line appears in all subsequent editions.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid. p. 36.

select as his honoured instrument to establish this great WESTERN REPUBLIC.”<sup>303</sup> Sometimes Washington is nearly divine in and of himself. Weems refers to “the Godlike Washington,” “the angel soul of Washington,” and even goes as far as to describe how the “eager eyes” of America were “all fixed and shining on HIM” (capitalizing the pronoun in the way that is usually reserved solely for reference to God).<sup>304</sup> At other times, the will of the American people act as the agent of Providence in selecting Washington to lead. On being chosen as commander in chief by the Continental Congress in 1775, Weems says that “the nation unanimously placed Washington at the head of their armies, from a natural persuasion that so good a man must be the peculiar favourite of Heaven.”<sup>305</sup>

Yet, while Washington often appears endowed by Providence with an exalted level of agency over human events, there are also moments when Weems lapses into a kind of fatalism. Stressing that Washington’s piety entailed humbling himself before the Almighty, Weems describes how the chief “saw himself but as a mortal man whose breath is in his nostrils – whose place is but a point – his time a moment – and himself an atom in the hand of God to accomplish his mighty will.”<sup>306</sup> In another line, Washington appears as God’s “minister of mercies to America.”<sup>307</sup> Hence, even while Weems constantly stresses the role of piety in Washington’s life, the author himself gives us an ambiguous version of God that ranges from deist (non-

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid. p. 26-27, 74. These lines also appear in all subsequent editions.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid. pp. 18, 23, 30.

<sup>305</sup> Weems, *Life of George Washington* (1809), p. 189. Referring to the same episode in the second 1800 version, Weems states that Americans “now saw the man whom they had long considered as sent of God to save them and their children from slavery.” Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), p. 25.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid. p. 29.

<sup>307</sup> Weems, *Life of Washington the Great* (1806), p. 22



anthropomorphic and working through second causes) to Calvinist (an all-powerful father who has predetermined human events).<sup>308</sup>

As noted in chapter one, the America in which Weems lived was saturated with the imagery of classical antiquity, and Washington especially was compared to its greatest figures. In *Life of Washington*, Weems continues in this tradition, comparing the first president to Cincinnatus, Fabius, Cato, and other figures.<sup>309</sup> And like the eulogists, Weems too offers up his own typology of Washington's virtues based on the heroes of antiquity: "WASHINGTON was... just as Aristides; temperate as Epictetus; Patriotic as Regulus...in victory, modest as Scipio; prudent as Fabius; rapid as Marcellus; undaunted as Hannibal; as Cincinnatus disinterested; to liberty firm as Cato; and respectful of the laws as Socrates."<sup>310</sup> While it is clear that Weems read Plutarch's *Lives*, the biographer draws heavily on another classical writer – Homer – who went largely unreferenced in the eulogies. It is possible that Weems thought Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* was more likely to register on his rural audience.<sup>311</sup> Nevertheless, Weems draws on these texts on a number of occasions. For example, in the cherry tree anecdote, the author references

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<sup>308</sup> Weems himself was ordained as an Anglican parson (or parish priest) by the Archbishop of Canterbury. He took up a post in an Episcopalian church in Maryland after the Revolution, but was kicked out of this position, likely because he had Methodist sympathies. This is when he started his career as an itinerant preacher and bookseller. There is no identifiable sectarianism in any of the texts, and the likeness of God that comes through in *Life of Washington* was probably intentionally made ecumenical. At one point Weems very liberally declares that "God is love" (a quote from the Book of John 4:8), but elsewhere refers to "true religion" – a concept that usually entailed some level of dogma and theological nitpicking. Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), p. 51, 27. For Weems' career as an ordained parson, see: Leary, *Book-Peddling Parson*, pp. 10-11; Wroth, *Parson Weems*, pp. 19-26.

<sup>309</sup> For "Cincinnatus," see: Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), p. 41, 74; Weems, *Life of George Washington* (1809), p. 38. For "Fabius," see: Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), p. 16, 74. For Cato, see: *Ibid.* p. 59.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.* p. 74.

<sup>311</sup> One of the paradoxes that emerges in the text is that, while Weems attacks the notion that Washington received the Latin- and Greek-focused classical education which many eighteenth-century elites received, he at the same time draws liberally on his own reading of the classics to contextualize Washington's life and character. It is possible that Weems saw himself as someone who was democratizing the classics by bringing them down from esoteric Latin and Greek texts and into his folksy fables. This idea was certainly floating around Jeffersonian America. For example, in a letter to St. John de Crèvecoeur, Thomas Jefferson bragged to the Englishman that "ours are the only farmers who can read Homer." Thomas Jefferson to St. John Crèvecoeur, January 15, 1787, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), vol. XI, p. 44.

the *Odyssey* by likening George and his father to Telamachus and Ulysses, all to illustrate Washington's "early love of truth."<sup>312</sup> Weems invokes the *Iliad* in another version of the biography, when outlining Washington's "early industry." Trying to inculcate a love of hard work and thrift in the rising generation, Weems tells his readers that "IDLENESS" was what "brought on a ten years war between the Greeks and the Trojans."<sup>313</sup> So, in an interesting twist, Weems draws on the typical references to Plutarch's heroes when speaking of Washington's public exploits, but uses Homer to contextualize his more private virtues.

Following the eulogists, Weems also drew on biblical imagery in addition to that of antiquity. Referencing the Old Testament, Weems writes that "after having thus waded, like Israel of old, through a *Red Sea* of blood, and withstood the thundering *Sinai*s of British fury" Washington led the Americans "through a howling wilderness of war" to "the borders of Canaan."<sup>314</sup> Weems also refers to "the American Israel," and likens Washington to Moses.<sup>315</sup> But Weems breaks with the eulogists in that he incorporates the New Testament in addition to the Old. Specifically, Weems factors Washington's life into a version of a revolutionary and Christian millennium. In the second 1800 version, Weems tells us that "God has sent on his servant WASHINGTON, as a Day-Star to some mighty Revolution...to establish here a mighty empire, for the reception of a *happiness* unknown on earth, since the days of blissful Eden." He goes on to describe "the unsuffering kingdom of Christ" when "men shall no longer hurt nor destroy in the earth," adding that "if our country were filled with such men as Washington, that

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<sup>312</sup> Weems, *Life of Washington the Great* (1806), p. 8.

<sup>313</sup> Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), pp. 44, 47-48.

<sup>314</sup> Weems, *Life of George Washington* (1809), p. 121.

<sup>315</sup> Weems, *History of the Life and Death* (1800), pp. 51, 80

glorious day would this moment shine upon us.”<sup>316</sup> In the 1809 version, Weems’s millennialism reappears in an American exceptionalist key.<sup>317</sup>

As historian Jon Butler has noted of the period, “Christian millennialism played a significant role in rationalizing popular secular optimism” as its proponents “offered a vision of optimistic progress that was made more understandable by Christian teleology.” Speaking as the ghost of Washington, Weems states: “The eyes of long oppressed humanity are now looking up to [America] as to her last hope; the whole world are anxious spectators of your trial; and with your behaviour at this crisis, not only your own, but the destiny of unborn millions is involved.” America, under the guidance of Washington’s example, has a sacred mission to show “other nations...that men are capable of governing themselves.” Under her guidance, “the world will ripen for glory” until the day when “the last refining flames shall...kindle on this *tear-bathed, blood-stained globe*, while from its ashes a new earth shall spring, far happier than the first.” He concludes his ventriloquy promising that “freed from all their imperfections, the spirits of good men (the *only* true *patriots*) shall dwell together and spend their ever brightening days in loves and joy eternal.”<sup>318</sup> In Weems’s formula, the coming of the blissful end of the earth depends on

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid. p. 75

<sup>317</sup> According to Jon Butler, during the 1790s and early 1800s, many American clergymen thought “that Christ’s second coming would occur in a specific historical setting [and] that the revolution was ‘preparing the way for this glorious event.’” In other words, certain theologians of the period were positing a vision of the Christian millennium that was centered on the American Revolution. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 216-217. Other scholars have pointed out how American nationalism was infused with millennialism. Sometimes America was understood as being exempt from the evils plaguing Europe while also having a sacred mission to lead the rest of the world toward the millennium. See: Ernest L. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). This larger amalgam of revolutionary optimism, American nationalism, and millennialism can account for Weems’s description of an earth “over-run with devouring armies,” and its people “doomed to see their houses in flames, and the garments of their children rolled in blood,” while America, “like favoured Israel, [has] been sitting under [its] vine and fig-tree...advancing in riches and strength...” Weems tells his audience that “during all these horrid convulsions and miseries of other nations, [Americans] have enjoyed all the blessings of peace, plenty, and security.” He further lectures his readers that “you are placed here by yourselves,” “far from the furious passions and politics of Europe,” as “the sole proprietors of a vast region...abounding with all the conveniences of life.” Weems, *Life of George Washington* (1809), pp. 221, 225.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid. pp. 225-226.

the success of the American republic, and specifically on the emulation of Washington by future generations.

Weems's *Life of Washington* is an American original. Its combination of Franklinian self-help, the classical traditions of ancient Greece and Rome, and its biblical chiasm and providentialism is an elixir that could have been concocted only in early republican America. As the poet Sydney George Fisher once observed, "[Weems] is the most delightful mixture of Scriptures, Homer, Virgil, and the backwoods."<sup>319</sup> Another nineteenth-century commentator called him the "Livy of the common people," in reference to the great historian of ancient Rome, Titus Livius Patavinus.<sup>320</sup> Weems's biography of Washington, at first glance, reads like a fable or a folktale. After all, it was geared toward the children of a nation undergoing a rapid democratization of literacy and schooling.<sup>321</sup> Yet, as I have shown, Weems tapped into a number of traditions to create a biography that was didactic in purpose, sacred in language and idiom, and storied in terms of its references to the ancient past.

As a how-to guide for self-cultivation, *Life of Washington* stresses the role of piety as the bedrock of all other virtues while positing a model of behavior that is in line with the ideal of the balanced character. By spinning apocryphal tales about Washington's childhood and private life, Weems delivers a prescription for individual virtue that went beyond those commentators who focused exclusively on the first president's public feats. As a history that places Washington in the tradition of the heroes of antiquity, Weems continues the trend of using classical figures to contextualize the greatness of the American leader. But in addition to historians like Plutarch and Herodotus, Weems relies on the poet Homer – a writer who might have been more likely to

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<sup>319</sup> Sydney G. Fisher quoted in Skeel ed. *Mason Locke Weems*, vol. III, p. 437.

<sup>320</sup> Evert A. and George L. Duyckink, *Cyclopedia of American Literature* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1855), p. 485.

<sup>321</sup> For the expansion of schooling and literacy, see: Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, pp. 13-29.

register on his popular audience, but nevertheless served to infuse Washington's private virtues with classical mystique. Finally, Weems's most dramatic language is saved for the instances when he strikes what was perhaps the most powerful chord in the early American mind: millennialism. In delivering a version of the blissful end of days that is dependent on America and the world emulating Washington's glorious example, Weems retells the American Revolution as an eschatological event and makes the Father of his Country into a messianic figure. All told, what we get in Weems is a hero that stands above all those of antiquity, whose didactic capacity is not only perfect, but endlessly and universally applicable, whose life was angelic, and whose example will lead the America and the world to the paradisiacal end of history.

## Conclusion

The figure of George Washington was made into the archetypical national hero in early American print culture. Throughout the history of the world, there have always been certain mythical or quasi-mythical figures that serve to embody the values and characteristics of different groups of people.<sup>322</sup> But the United States of the early nineteenth century constituted a new chapter in the age-old ritual of hero construction. This epoch witnessed two critical and reciprocal phenomena: the explosion of the amount of printed materials available and in the number of citizens with the ability to read.<sup>323</sup> With the rise of subscription libraries, the penny press, and inexpensive books like Weems's *Life of Washington*, along with the democratization of education and the increase in literacy rates (especially in the North), an unprecedented number of Americans could now read about their national hero in a variety of different literary forms.<sup>324</sup> Simply put, Washington was perhaps the first hero to be constructed in print and disseminated throughout a widely literate group of people.

It is doubtless that many Americans of the period heard about the life of George Washington through word of mouth. But it was in printed orations and eulogies that Americans experienced the grand historical implications of his death, even if the mourning ceremonies were more spectacular than words on a page. It was in print that competing political factions contested Washington's legacy, and it was in print that Americans outside of urban centers could feel as if they were participating in the fetes surrounding his birthday. Finally, it was in print that Mason Weems's aphoristic lessons and apocryphal anecdotes became permanently fixed in the American imagination. In short, if Anderson's "print capitalism" is what allowed Americans to

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<sup>322</sup> For the classic study on the universality of heroic myths, see: Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949).

<sup>323</sup> Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley ed., *A History of the Book in America, Volume 2: An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>324</sup> For "democratization of education," see: Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, pp. 13-61.

imagine themselves as part of a larger national collectivity, it is also what invited them to imagine their own personal relationship to the exalted father of their new imagined community.

As noted in chapter one, the eulogies and orations were not the first instances of Americans expounding the virtues of Washington in print. However, they are remarkable for their self-conscious immortalization of Washington, for placing Washington in a grand narrative of human history, for marking him as the central figure in America's messianic mission in the world, and for elucidating his quasi-divine character traits. Whether it was by elevating Washington above the sanctified figures of Greco-Roman antiquity or celebrating Washington as the selected instrument of Providence, the orators and eulogists were constructing a hero fit for a people ready to embrace a particularly exceptionalist, universalist, and millennialist form of national identity. By making a new immortalized father figure out of Washington – the unimpeachable, exemplary, and sacrosanct model of virtuous citizenship – commentators were completing a cycle that started in July of 1776 when angry soldiers in lower Manhattan wrenched down a bronze statue of King George the Third.

Chapter two dealt with two interrelated phenomenon occurring within a single source base: the reporting on public ceremonies involving the celebration of George Washington and the political dimension of his hero construction. One aspect of nationalism that is overlooked by Benedict Anderson is the role of pomp and ceremony. While the diffusion of printed material is integral to the cultivation of the imagined community, parades, the singing of patriotic songs, and even things like firework celebrations all serve to reinforce the idea of belonging to a national collectivity. As David Waldstreicher has shown, in the early United States, these fetes were experienced directly by the attendees in urban centers and vicariously by the larger community of newspaper readers. In reporting on toasts, parades, illuminations, and the

unveilings of wax sculptures, portraits, and statues, newspapers invited a wide swath of Americans to become celebrants in the more spectacular elements of Washington's enduring legacy. Hence, the hero construction of Washington in ceremony and in print blended together in ways that were mutually reinforcing.

Yet this project of hero construction was not without its political jockeying. Nowhere is this fact more clear than in the newspapers of the young republic, which were infamous for their irreverent partisanship. Even today, groups on both the left and the right compete within political discourse to position themselves as the rightful heirs of the "Founding Fathers" (a twentieth-century term). Prior to the Age of Jackson, the figure of Washington was employed by both the Federalists and, to a lesser degree, the Republicans, as each group sought to legitimate their claim to represent the true interests of the American nation. As we have seen, the partisan volatility of Washington's legacy reached a crescendo during the War of 1812, but then slowly subsided until the death of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams and the rise of Andrew Jackson saw the construction of a pantheon of revolutionary statesman. While Washington and Jefferson often appeared as dueling national heroes during the first two decades or so of the nineteenth century, by the time the second generation of American politicians had come into power, these two figures were understood as coequal icons of a bygone era. Hence, what at first glance appears to be a wide popular consensus about the Father of His Country was actually a highly contingent and checkered process.

Finally, in chapter three we saw how Mason Locke Weems gave younger Americans a very private, apolitical version of Washington as a didactic folk hero. Other figures – most notably Chief Justice John Marshall – were publishing expensive, fact-based accounts of Washington's life that focused on his public feats. Weems, who combined self-help manual and



bildungsroman, delivered a cheap, instructive portrait of Washington's childhood and private life. Weems's *Life of Washington* was democratic, in the sense that it stripped the first president of his aristocratic upbringing in order to make his figure more relatable to the majority of American children. The book used Washington as a conduit for teaching a Franklinian model of self-cultivation that focused on virtues like prudence, industry, and piety. In so doing, Weems rendered Washington the archetype of the balanced character: the model of the virtuous self based on a rational control over one's base, animalistic passions. Thus, by tapping into these precincts of American cultural and intellectual life, by promoting and selling a biography for the cost of a pamphlet, and by spinning his own quaint tales about the nation's most beloved hero, Mason Locke Weems created one of the most important and widely read books in all of American history.

For years now, scholars have been pushing back against the idea that revolutionary era Americans, to quote Thomas Paine, had the "power to begin the world over again." The cultural continuities between imperial British and republican American society has been well commented on.<sup>325</sup> The American Revolution didn't purport to affect a total regeneration of mankind the way that the French and Russian Revolutions did. However, the colonist's break with their motherland was a radical event. One of the cultural fixtures lost in the sea of revolution was the king: the great father figure of the British people and steward of their sense of nationhood. At a moment when things that we now take for granted as timeless traditions were being invented out of thin air, a new generation of Anglo-Americans opted for an exalted father figure that better reflected the new world they felt they had created for themselves.

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<sup>325</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).