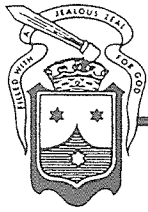


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Life is Worth Giving

LIFE OF WASHINGTON PUTS MAN IN PERSPECTIVE

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

Many decades ago this writer well remembers his art class sessions at St. Aloysius School in New Jersey. When the calendar opened to February, Sr. Rose Celeste focused our art work on the two greatest presidents. Abraham ^{LINCOLN'S} cut-out profile seemed to be much more human and down-to-earth than the icon-like image of George Washington. But the best of both cut-outs decorated our classroom during February.

And we were also introduced to the myth-like stories of Parson Weems who made Washington into a demi-god in our young imaginations, as opposed to Lincoln whose life seem to be filled with doubts and disappointments and ended with assassination.

These remembrances came to mind when it was disclosed that the author of a recent book on Washington entitled "His Excellency" went to St. Mary's Catholic School near Mt. Vernon in Virginia, and frequently traipsed all over the Washington estate to experience what our first president and his surroundings were really like. These trips added much to the reality of the book about the man who was "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

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This early association of the author and his subject may be the reason that the book presents a real flesh-and-blood Washington and not some icon on our currency or Mt. Rushmore.

Joseph Ellis presents Washington as part of the upper echelon society of Virginia, but also as a young man who worked hard and made excellent choices to achieve what he did in his life. Also, ^(his) ~~his~~ early experience in the French and Indian War taught him much about British military organization and snobbery — and how to deal effectively with both. Even his participation in the great defeat of Gen. Braddock's forces in the Ohio Country against the French and their Indian allies taught him how to fight a guerrilla type of wilderness warfare, and also how to defeat a larger and stronger enemy through patience and skilled maneuvering. He also determined that he would later defeat the British Army and Navy, then the most powerful forces on earth. Although sometimes a questionable military leader, the reader is led to understand that Washington led the Continental Army from just after Bunker Hill in 1775 to the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781 during the longest declared war in American History. He did it with both skill and courage with an army never even near half the size of the enemy, and never adequately supported by the Continental Congress.

In spite of his personal courage and energetic spirit,

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he understood that he could not directly defeat the British — but could outlast them in a protracted war. And he also set a great example by sharing the sufferings of his troops during the long years of great defeats and small victories.

Washington's experience in the American Revolutionary War also convinced him that America needed a strong federal government so that individual states could be united and galvanized into a single purpose of building a great nation.

After the trying years of the war, Washington wanted little more than to return to his beloved Mt. Vernon and family and friends. He readily resigned his commission as head of the Continental Army, from which he received no salary, to show that he was not seeking personal power or establishing a dynasty.

But when, following the chaos of war, some states seemed incapable of relinquishing their individual rights to form a new nation, Washington was once more called to the service of our fledgling republic. He chaired the assembly which gathered to write the U.S. Constitution which had a strong sense of a central government. Much of his personal prestige was used to aid in ratifying the new Constitution by the individual states.

Washington was then called upon to be our first president, and labored greatly to bring the new republic into being.

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He urged Virginians, New Englanders, and others to begin thinking of themselves simply as "Americans."

As president, he understood that a war with any great power would be disasterous for our new nation, and also strove greatly to avoid foreign alliances that could very well prove harmful to the interests of the United States.

The author also delves into Washington's relationships with both friends such as Alexander Hamilton, and others who became enemies such as Thomas Jefferson. But always, Washington greatly disliked the party system which turned elections into political warfare. The book also delves into Washington's moral dilemma about slavery with understanding and compassion. As with the American Indians, especially the Creeks who aided the Continental Army, Washington wanted both groups to be treated justly. Financial considerations proved an obstale to his freeing his own slaves, but his will provided for their emancipation after his death in 1799.

Washington was truly the "Father of His Country." But as author Joseph Ellis so readily points out, he was a human being who strove mightily to found an American Republic that would be a beacon of freedom and democracy. The book is a tale well worth the telling, and even moreso the reading!

(Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.)