

Monthly Lodge Program February 2011

GEORGE WASHINGTON
The Man, the Freemason, the American Hero

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As Freemasons, indeed, as Americans, we are very proud of Worshipful Brother Washington. But as biographer James Thomas Flexner noted in his book, *Washington the Indispensable Man*, to really know Washington, we need to rescue him from the layers and layers of obscuring legend that have accreted around his memory during some two hundred years.

So in this talk let us look at Washington, the man.

George Washington lived sixty-seven years, from 1732 to 1799. During his last twenty-four years, he was the foremost man in America, the man on whom the fate of his, of our country, depended. 1775 through 1783, the years of the American War of Independence, were of particular significance, and the mythmaking about George Washington began in the depths of despair during the Revolutionary War, when he played a pivotal role in building an army, keeping it together, and slowly moving toward victory.

The time after the War of Independence was not much less challenging, and during this period, George Washington was the Champion of the Union. Perhaps more than anyone else during the

Revolutionary period, he advanced the concept of binding the Colonies together. While he left many of the details to others, he brought a needed mindset to the movement for unity.

It should be remembered that others had different views. For example, in 1760 Benjamin Franklin acknowledged his belief that the American “fragmentation” was a permanent condition and that the Crown’s fourteen separate governments promised to be the default architecture of the new nation. He believed that boundary problems, taxation issues, defense, and other matters would keep them apart. These thoughts were still alive after the Revolution, and many believed that sooner or later Britain would have to come in and pick up the pieces.

Washington, however, never looked away from his goal of a national union. He reaffirmed his deep concern for national unity on numerous occasions and even in his Farewell Address near the end of his second term as President, and before his retirement to his home at Mount Vernon. There he stated: “The unity of government which constitutes you one people... is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very liberty which you so highly prize.”

From our perspective as Masons, we are proud to claim George Washington as one of our own, and to note that from the very beginnings of our nation, Freemasonry was there. We recall, for example, that in 1788 when, wearing a Masonic apron which had

been presented to him by General Lafayette and embroidered by Madame Lafayette, Washington, in a Masonic ceremony, laid the cornerstone of the United States Capitol at Washington, D.C.

But more than the outward trappings of Freemasonry, we are proud that the moral and philosophical underpinnings of George Washington's character and actions are thoroughly intertwined with those of Freemasonry. George Washington was a very visible Mason in both word and deed. He made his position clear in a letter to the King David Lodge of Newport, Rhode Island on August 17, 1790, when he wrote:

“Being persuaded that a just application of the principles, on which the Masonic Fraternity is founded, must be promotive of private virtue and public prosperity, I shall always be happy to advance the interests of the society and to be considered by them as a deserving Brother.”

He was proud of his lifelong membership in the Fraternity and fond of exclaiming, “The object of Freemasonry is to promote the happiness of the human race.”

Given his Masonic roots, it is no surprise that George Washington's concept of friendship was very broad and very deep. He was not an elitist and thought of himself always as an ordinary citizen. These strong feelings regarding friendship permeated his core beliefs and influenced his concerns about harsh political rhetoric and opinions – something we have concern about in our current environment.

In a letter to Thomas Jefferson, he wrote:

“My earnest wish, and my fondest hope, therefore is that instead of wounding suspicions and irritable charges, there may be a liberal allowance-mutual forbearance-and temporizing yieldings on **all sides.**”

His letter to Alexander Hamilton was stronger:

“Differences in political opinions are ... unavoidable ... but it is to be regretted, exceedingly, that subjects cannot be discussed with temper on the one hand, or decisions submitted to without having the motives which led to them, improperly implicated on the other ...”

Regarding Washington’s apparent lack of partisanship, biographer Richard Hofstadter wrote: “the President wished only to restore that spirit of happy unanimity which had been manifested in his own (unanimous) election.”

The degree to which George Washington’s character, and accomplishments, his virtue and honor, were recognized was demonstrated in the genuine sorrow of the nation at his passing.

James Madison and Henry (Light Horse Harry) Lee, the father of General Robert E. Lee, drafted the following words after the death of America’s first president in December of 1799.

“Our Washington is no more! The hero, the patriot, and the sage of America, the man on whom, in times of danger, every eye was turned, and all hopes were placed, lives now only in his own great actions, and in the hearts of an affectionate and afflicted people.”

And, together with John Marshall, they offered resolutions for a period of national mourning.

President John Adams led the country in prayer, stating:

“Let his countrymen consecrate the memory of the heroic General Washington, the patriotic statesman and the virtuous sage. Let them teach their children never to forget that the fruit of his labors and his example are their inheritance.”

As Masons, we too continue to remember his memory, not the myths but the realities of his life’s true greatness. It was truly said that George Washington was “*first in war, first in peace and, first in the hearts of his countrymen.*” We should go back and read his speeches and especially his Farewell Address, we should remember his legacy, and we should live up to his ideals.

I would conclude by praying that God bless the sacred memory of George Washington, our founding father; and may God bless America.