George Washington and American Constitutionalism

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Preface:
The Intentions of a Framer

George Washington remains a problem for students of American constitutional history. Few would challenge the notion that Washington was probably the most beloved public figure of his generation. Although Lincoln, Jefferson, and even Franklin Roosevelt have perhaps since surpassed Washington's standing in our civic pantheon, much of their veneration developed after their deaths. Their popularity in their own times was more attenuated. Yet if Washington was truly "first in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen," we should expect to see his mark on the political institutions and practices with which he was so intimately involved. In particular, our Constitution and the traditions that grew out of it should show some evidence of his having been on the scene, first as presiding officer of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia and second as first president of the newly constituted United States.

But assessments of Washington's accomplishments rarely address his substantive role in American constitutional development. Most accounts applaud his military accomplishments, commend his strength of character, and acknowledge his importance as a rallying point for American nation building. But these same accounts are often reluctant to portray him as anything more than a symbolic contributor to the founding of an American Constitution—an "indispensable man," to be sure, but indispensable in ways more instrumental than substantive. They see Washington as a conduit through which the ideas and aspirations of the "great" framers, men such as Hamilton, Madison, and James Wilson, acquired political legitimacy. Although this would be no small achievement in its own right, Washington's substantive constitutional contributions are deemed negligible.

At first glance, this assessment does not seem unfair. As a political philosopher Washington certainly lacked the erudition and sophistica-
tion of Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, or any of a dozen other of his contemporaries. His reading leaned toward natural history and heroic biographies rather than the political treatises favored by others of the founding generation. Moreover, many of the letters and speeches for which he is most famous (e.g., the Farewell Address, the Inaugurals, the Circular Letter to the States, and his resignation from the army) were written with the help of talented ghost writers such Madison, Hamilton, David Humphreys, and Tench Tilghman—each the possessor of a political personality and agenda of his own. Finally, while in the chair at the Philadelphia Convention and again as first president under the new Constitution, Washington is portrayed as an honest broker between contending viewpoints, concerned with achieving a consensus on national affairs and dedicated to creating a stable system of government. But his own constitutional aspirations are downplayed. His seeming passivity in the face of intense partisan conflict is often interpreted as a sign that he cared little about the shape and direction of national policy, that he was a mere empty vessel into which the political cant of others was poured. Thus, so the argument goes, Washington was not so much a "founding" Father as he was a "facilitating" Father.

A close reading of his letters and papers has led me to a different conclusion. Washington's political thought may have lacked the originality and richness of his contemporaries—he wrote no extended essays on politics or public affairs, preferring to express his views in private correspondence and in a handful of significant state papers—but his writings reveal a clear, thoughtful, and remarkably coherent vision of what he hoped an American republic would become. These notions began to emerge early in the 1770s, took on a sharper, clearer perspective during the Revolution, and changed little thereafter. His words, many of them intended only for friends and family, reveal a man with a passionate commitment to a fully developed idea of a constitutional republic on a continental scale, eager to promote that plan wherever and whenever circumstances or the hand of Providence allowed.

This interpretation challenges the conventional view of Washington in several other ways. First, I maintain that Washington's political values changed very little over time regardless of who his "secretary" was; the various messengers seem not to have affected Washington's message. He was no political chameleon willing to change his colors to conform to the interests and ideas of his brilliant counselors. The con-
tributions of his better-educated ghost writers, steeped in philosophy, certainly improved upon his stolid prose, but the substance remained distinctively Washington's.

Second, Washington's constitutional vision—drawing on elements of classical conservative republicanism and continentally minded commercialism—developed years before he ever met Hamilton, Madison, and the other Founders under whose spell he was supposed to have fallen. Thus, claims that Washington was a mere figurehead for the nationalist movement that emerged early in the 1780s underestimate Washington's contribution. The nationalists did not merely capture Washington's growing national reputation to lend authority to a cause of their own making. Rather, they looked naturally to him for leadership because his views were already well known and firmly established. Indeed, many of his ideas presaged the nationalist program.

Finally, no other American was situated as advantageously as George Washington was to affect, and perhaps in a few instances even direct, the development of the American constitutional tradition. Washington used his unique opportunities—as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army during the Revolution, as presiding officer at the Philadelphia Convention that drafted the federal Constitution, and as the first president of the United States—to promote his own enlarged notions of a constitutional republic. He did not always succeed in grafting his "intentions" on that constitutional tradition. No single Founder could ever hope to claim such comprehensive parentage. But this work, I hope, will restore Washington's rightful place as one of this nation's most important constitutional Founders.

This restoration would not have been possible without the support of others. The early stages of my research were supported by faculty colleagues on the Organized Research Committee of Northern Arizona University and its chair, Henry Hooper. The Earhart Foundation graciously provided funds that allowed me to travel to the "dustbins of antiquity" (in reality, the airy, modern Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress). Earl Shaw, the chair of the Political Science department, and Earl Backman, the dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, arranged to free up time for me to write at a particularly critical stage in the project.
My intellectual debts are even more numerous. Lance Banning’s careful reading of the manuscript saved me from my most egregious errors and more than once showed me the way. His enthusiasm for the project often exceeded even my own and confirmed for me that historians and political scientists can still talk to each other intelligibly and productively. At various times Hal Bass, Dan Cothran, Tom Cronin, Edward Dreyer, Joseph Farry, Tom Greene, Fred Greenstein, Carey McWilliams, Thomas Pangle, Larry Preston, Earl Shaw, Paul Sigmund, and Jeffrey Tulis offered insights that proved invaluable. From beginning to end my colleagues in the Department of Political Science provided moral support and encouragement when they were most needed. Finally, in Fred Woodward I was able to acquire both a publisher and a friend.

Two folks deserve a special note of appreciation. Leonard Ritt, without having the slightest interest in George Washington (or, indeed anything that occurred before 1933), offered his wise and funny counsel over innumerable coffees and lunches and more than once replenished my intellectual juices with his infectious curiosity. My wife, Cathy, had the most thankless job of all. Gentle critic and firm supporter, she assumed the daunting task of explaining to our children why Daddy had to go to work on Saturdays. Thank you, Cathy.