American political thought is not, at its core, an exercise in intellectual abstraction. This is not to say that no Americans have made their mark on the world of political ideas. Our history as a colony and nation has never lacked for interesting, provocative, or even on occasion original political ideas. From the founding generation, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and James Wilson, to name just a few, deserve to be included in any accounting of people whose thoughts have contributed to that vast reservoir of ideas we call Western civilization. These men all took the business of politics seriously and tried to think and write systematically about the aspirations and hazards of self-government. That they approached the problems of political life with sophistication and even elegance surely qualifies them as "American originals."

But to characterize even these few American statesmen as political philosophers misses the essential quality of American political thought—its reliance upon experience. Political ideas, like most other useful notions, are not the result of undiluted acts of pure reason. Nor are they delivered full-blown from some epiphany of insight. To the contrary, Americans, even those who do think seriously about their political world, have always been skeptical of ideas that are not grounded in the hard-tilled soil of practical experience. While John Dickinson's remarks at the 1787 Philadelphia Convention ("Experience must be our only guide. Reason may mislead us.") best illustrate this attitude, his sentiments reflected the prevailing view of most Americans of his generation. George Washington himself often expressed the opinion that reason could go only so far in animating political principles. People (and his reference here is almost certainly to Americans) "must feel before they will see."

Some might be tempted to interpret this attitude as yet another ex-
ample of the anti-intellectualism that recurs in American culture. But this conclusion would seriously misread the mindset of the founding generation. Many of Washington's contemporaries were children of the Enlightenment. They were committed to reason and reflection as the path to the good life, especially the good public life. But reasoning meant something other than mere abstraction or broad theorizing. It meant reasoning by example—reasoning that sought to derive practical wisdom from the accumulated knowledge of their own individual and collective experiences, reasoning that was focused on the resolution of real political problems in their own times.

When the delegates arrived in Philadelphia for the Constitutional Convention of 1787, they brought with them not only their substantial intellectual talents, but also their own experiences, great and small, in the business of governing. Most had served as representatives in their state legislative assemblies, as delegates to Congress, or as judges or magistrates at the local level. As plans and proposals circulated through the convention the delegates evaluated them in substantial part by reference to their own rich and varied experiences. If a delegate made an assertion (for example, that the legislature should be able to remove an executive officer for malfeasance in office) the debate often proceeded from broad theoretical claims (for example, that executives, like all men, were inherently susceptible to the blandishments of power and therefore must be checked by the threat of perfunctory legislative removal) to a consideration of how each of the delegates interpreted those claims in light of his own political experiences.

George Washington was no exception to this experiential, culturally constrained model of American political thought. His constitutional vision was not conceived whole and new in Philadelphia. Nor can we attribute his insights to the effects of only one great seminal moment in his life. Rather, his vision for an American constitutional republic emerged over a long period and was shaped by the social and political community in which he was raised and by the numerous events in which he was an active participant or interested observer.

There is always a risk in trying to explain human behavior. We can observe what a person does and make inferences about the effects of that behavior. But when we venture into the realm of personal causation (that is, when we try to understand why a person behaved a particular way or said particular things) social scientists and historians get
rather glassy-eyed. And with good reason. The elements that influence what we say and do are always maddeningly just beyond the reach of normal investigation. We simply cannot know with perfect confidence precisely what was in someone's head at any given moment. And even if we could (a rather horrifying prospect!), we still would confront the equally daunting task of determining which value, which experience, which (mis)perception truly influenced the person's behavior.

Nevertheless, two sets of experiences resonate again and again in Washington's pre-Constitutional writings: his immersion in the social, economic, and political life of his native Virginia and his unique vantage point as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army during the Revolution. There were other influences on Washington's thought, to be sure; but the role that these two factors played in shaping his political outlook cannot be ignored. From 1754, when his correspondence begins, until his departure for the Philadelphia Convention in 1787, nearly every letter that Washington wrote on public affairs can be best understood within the context of these two experiences.

Virginia’s Politics of Deference

We must guard against assuming too readily that an American political tradition or even a distinctive American identity existed before the Revolution. There were, indeed, important commonalities. By the eighteenth century most American colonists spoke a common language: English. By the 1750s legal procedures were becoming standardized throughout the colonies and provided a framework for an expanding network of commercial and civil transactions. A Boston merchant could trade with a Virginia planter within a legal structure that made the contractual obligations of each party quite clear. Most of the colonies had political institutions that mirrored those of Britain. Colonists had even adopted many of the rhetorical forms common to British politics. For example, colonial political factions often referred to themselves as Whigs or Tories, though what those labels represented varied from colony to colony, and used language in their everyday political discourse (e.g., references to “court” and “country,” the ancient constitution, political liberty, and the rights of Englishmen) that Americans almost anywhere in the New World would immediately recog-
nize. Thus a Georgian traveling from Savannah to Boston could stay at any tavern along the way and join an after-dinner discussion on issues of the day without needing any special knowledge of the local political climate.

Yet in spite of this growing commonality of experience in the eighteenth century, each of the colonies retained its own unique political culture. By the middle of the century the patriotic object of most Americans was increasingly the colony in which they lived. Most colonists still, of course, swore allegiance to and in many cases retained strong emotional ties to the Crown or other British institutions such as the Church of England. But by the 1750s, if you asked someone from Williamsburg or Alexandria or Richmond what his country was, he would most likely reply, "Virginia."

Washington's first appearances on the public stage, as a commander of Virginia militia and later as a volunteer staff officer serving the British expeditionary force commanded by General Edward Braddock, illustrate this shift in patriotic focus. Washington continually sought the approval of his superiors by emphasizing service to his country, service that he distinguished from service to "His Majesty" the king. For example, when he wrote to Virginia's governor to recommend a particularly meritorious subordinate, Washington took special note of the young man's "readiness to serve his Country. (which I really believe he looks upon Virginia to be)." Even more dramatically, to obtain his country's favor Washington was willing to expend much of his personal energy, embark on reckless military enterprises, and engage in an embarrassingly self-interested pursuit of personal honor.

Most of these early events in Washington's public career, as well as much of his developing political character, can be best understood in the context of Virginia's politics of deference. Virginia society exhibited a remarkable degree of cohesion in the 1700s. This was particularly true of the privileged class that dominated political, economic, and religious affairs. To be sure, Virginia's aristocrats were not exempt from the personalistic squabbles, backbiting, maneuvering, and petty corruption that arise within any ruling elite; but they presented a united front on many of the big questions of their day, e.g., support for a hierarchical social order and preservation of the colony's increasing political independence from the Crown in local affairs.

More so than in any other colony most Virginians, including the
small farmers, artisans, and merchants who were not part of this ruling aristocracy, acknowledged the legitimacy of these arrangements—a social consensus that provided Virginia with a remarkably long period of political stability. The quiescence with which most Virginians accepted the leadership of this elite suggests that the state's politics of deference was premised on more than the traditional claims made by feudal aristocracies. On the contrary, Virginia's aristocrats rarely argued that deference was due them because of some nobility of birth, or because God had established a Great Chain of Being that required obedience from those of low birth, or because they were naturally endowed with wisdom and talents that exceeded those of ordinary men. Instead, they believed that it was their right and obligation to provide political leadership for their communities because of four interconnected principles: land, wealth, independence, and self-government. Much of George Washington's nascent political ideology can be attributed to his growing understanding of how these four principles defined Virginia's politics of deference.

An Avarice for Land

In Virginia, at least, land was the principal measure of a man. Social and political standing were determined in large part by the acreage that one was able to accumulate, or by the trappings of the estate that one established on one's lands. Washington's attitude toward acquiring land bordered on the obsessive and was governed by three principles: buy (or claim as a bounty for public service) as much good land as possible, trade poor land for better land whenever possible, and never sell land for cash. If this acquisitive fever for land was an obsession, though, it was an obsession common to several generations of Virginia's wealthiest and most talented citizens. What accounts for this extraordinary focus on land as the currency of accomplishment and reputation? One clue can be found in the rise of "Country" ideology; its ascendance explains much about the political culture of Virginia in the 1750s. Ironically, to speak of "Country" as a distinctive, well-integrated political ideology is a bit of a reach. Those who were identified with the Country way of thinking in Virginia, like their counterparts in Britain, often did not agree on a specific set of political principles and public policies. Indeed,
for many of the important issues of the day (e.g., western expansion, internal improvements, taxation) Country ideology provided little or no guidance. On those issues Virginia's political and social elite was far more likely to divide on the basis of where one lived (the Tidewater area or the Northern Neck) or who one knew (friends of the governor in Williamsburg or friends of the magistrate in one's home county) than on the basis of ideological factions. Instead, it is more useful to think of the Country ideology as a set of attitudes or fears about political power and its consequences held in common by many Virginians.

Most of the Virginia gentry shared a firm commitment to socially conservative principles. They believed in stability and social order. They promoted private property and the rule of law as the linchpins of that social order. They insisted that only the "right sort of men" were entitled to govern. And, perhaps most importantly, they conceived of the community as an organic whole whose collective interests could best be advanced by social harmony, institutional cooperation, and a heavy infusion of public virtue.

Where Country men departed from their more "metropolitan" brethren was in their respective notions about which sorts of political arrangements were best suited to promoting these values. If, indeed, the devil is in the details, Country men saw far too much of the devil in distant Williamsburg or in even more distant London. Each viewpoint conceded that institutions such as the monarchy and the church were necessary instruments for maintaining the social equilibrium. But where "metropolitans" were satisfied to entrust the protection of their cherished rights and privileges almost entirely to the good offices of the king and his ministers (or, in Virginia, the governor and his council­lors), Country men retained a profound skepticism toward political power. Like most conservatives they believed power exercised an almost irresistible allure for the self-interested and ambitious. Human character was surely capable of virtue, public-spiritedness, and disinterestedness, but, just as surely, it ought not to be tested too severely.

Corruption was the watchword of Country ideology. Political power, especially centralized power, was a corrupting vortex that, like a great sun, sought to bring all into its orbit. Even when acting for good purposes, such as maintaining the social cohesion and harmony deemed essential to a virtuous community, those in power would tend in time to enrich their own authority by coopting all who might oppose them.
Corruption would inevitably ensue. The virtue of prominent citizens would be eroded by offers of government positions (e.g., tax collectors, magistrates, councillors) or by offers of charters and franchises granting oligopolistic economic privileges to a few favored fellow travelers. To assure the continuing loyalty of these placemen, they had to be provided for. Meeting those demands meant a greater and greater burden on the people, especially those within the landed gentry still loyal to Country principles, and a greater and greater loss of the liberty that wealth and social station were intended to promote. All forms of government, whether monarchical, aristocratic, or mixed (no one seriously spoke of democracy as a legitimate option—it lacked all of the conservative qualities noted earlier), were subject to these same corrupting tendencies. Even a government populated by erstwhile Country men could not long prevail against the centripetal forces of political power. Indeed, for this reason alone Country ideology can be thought of more as an ideology of opposition than as a philosophy of governance.

Fear of corruption, then, best explains the linkages between land, wealth, independence, and self-government that characterized the Country ideology and the politics of deference in which Washington was steeped. Land, especially the possession of vast quantities of land, was at the heart of the Country ideology. Country proponents' concern, one is tempted to say avarice, for land was not rooted in the sort of romantic agrarianism often ascribed to the Jeffersonians. Theirs was not an endorsement of "sweat of thine own brow" industry as a builder of character. (By that criterion, the slaves, indentured servants, and tenants who worked the land and constructed the great estates were the most virtuous members of society!) Washington, at least, never took seriously the claim that the land was endowed with mystical properties that imbued those who worked it, or possessed it, with a kind of liberty that mere tradesmen or men of money could never understand, much less enjoy.

Rather, Washington and many of his fellow Virginia aristocrats had a more functional regard for land. Land was, first of all, a constant. It was not subject to the changing fortunes of paper money inflation, royal mercantile policies, the loss of political favor, or the decline of one's skills through age or poor health. The whims of public taste or the interdependent and therefore unreliable nature of business enterprises seemingly posed no threat to the great landowner.

This preference for "realty" over "personalty" can be seen in Wash-
ashington’s paternal concern for John Parke Custis. Washington had developed a deep and abiding affection for his wife’s son, but he was constantly vexed by “Jacky’s” poor head for business. When Custis determined to sell a substantial portion of his landed inheritance, Washington implored him not to. But Custis persisted and his stepfather finally assented, though not before Washington pleaded with his stepson to reinvest the money in other land, because “lands are permanent, rising fast in value, and will be very dear when our Independancy is established, and the importance of America better known.” Money, on the other hand, “will melt like Snow before a hot Sun, and you will be able to give as little acct. of the going of it.”

There was a self-deluding quality to this notion of land as a symbol of economic and therefore political independence. Scorned though it was, money was still indispensable in building a proper Virginia gentleman’s estate. Most of the trappings of the good life had to be imported and usually could only be purchased with cash. Unless one was engaged in land speculation, mere possession of land, then, was not enough. It had to generate money. Thus young Washington, striving within this deferential culture to attain the honor and recognition that he so deeply craved, had to manage his lands with an eye toward productivity—productivity sufficient to generate hard cash.

Ironically, the prices Washington got for his tobacco, wheat, corn, and hemp were often disappointing. He complained to his London agent, hinting that the “pitifully low” prices at which they sold his “Sweet-scented Tobacco” were the result of inattention to his interests rather than the fickle fortunes of the market. In truth, Washington, like many of his planter friends, was periodically in debt. From time to time a few were even ruined. Wealth in land did not automatically provide the wherewithal needed to maintain the lifestyle expected of a Virginia gentleman. But most Virginians believed that land was the most sure sign of wealth and personal success, and in the end that is what really matters.

The Virtues of Disinterestedness

Wealth in land was central to Country ideology because of its political as well as its economic and social significance. Deference was due to Virginia’s landed gentry because their wealth provided them with a
quality essential to opposing corruption—disinterestedness. Many of these well-educated aristocrats had read Mandeville’s *The Fable of the Bees.* Its protoliberal philosophy suggested that the pursuit of private interests (Mandeville referred to it as “vice”) might, if properly directed, be a means of improving the public welfare—an argument that should have been well received in a society structured on commercial expansion and a seemingly boundless appetite for acquiring land. Virginians admired virtue and went to great lengths to be seen as virtuous in the eyes of their peers. So the temptation of the fable is obvious. If true virtue could be attained by blurring the distinctions between pursuit of private advantage and contributions to the community interest then surely one could, to employ a phrase not in the Founders’ lexicon, have one’s cake and eat it too. Self-aggrandizement could be clothed in the garments of public virtue.

Interestingly, though, Mandeville was not highly regarded by his American readers. We recognize the language of Mandeville’s fable more readily today than Washington would have. The language of self-interest and individual enterprise is our language. The vocabulary of private consumption and limited state regulation is our vocabulary. Washington and his contemporaries still used the language of classical republicanism to define “interest.”

To the Virginia aristocracy of 1750 all men had interests. Men could no more ignore their passions, lust, ambitions, and avarice than they could avoid eating or drinking. It was, therefore, no sin to pursue one’s self-interest. But in addition to these private interests there was a separate, identifiable public interest. Just as individuals had to be self-interested in order to prosper and even survive, the commonwealth (or public good) demanded that its collective interest be served. It was understood, in the language of classical republicanism, that only those who were “disinterested”—that is, those who could at least temporarily set aside their own self-interest—were capable of acting in ways likely to promote the commonweal. To act disinterestedly, in fact, was the sign of true virtue and honor for a citizen. It was part of their conservative world view, however, that only those with substantial property and wealth or, in Virginia, land were good candidates for exhibiting such virtue. Their wealth and social standing gave them an independence—an ability to view things from above the hurly-burly of self-interested factions—that no person of lesser means could maintain for
long. Those with little money or property lacked this independence. All men naturally had interests, but ordinary men were especially susceptible to having their public responsibilities seduced by the serpent of corruption.

Paradoxically, disinterestedness was the manifestation of a different kind of self-interest. Fame and glory were aspirations, or interests, of a peculiar kind because they could be attained only by acting on behalf of the public interest. Fame's special allure was that it converged with classical notions of the virtuous republican widely held by the Virginia aristocracy. Today we view fame as a by-product of notoriety. Michael Jordan is famous, as are Madonna, Dan Rather, Lee Iacocca, and even high-profile criminals like Bernhard Goetz. But in Washington's time fame meant something very different from mere celebrity. Fame was an accolade reserved for those who had served their fellow Virginians with distinction. To call a Virginian virtuous was to pay him the greatest tribute to which a citizen could aspire. Not wealth, not piety, not education, not even property could elevate a man's standing in the community so much as the exhibition of public virtue. To achieve that fame a man had to demonstrate his willingness to promote the well-being of the community without regard for its effect on his private interests.17

Fame's close cousin was glory. Here virtue could be exemplified by one who sacrificed, or at least set aside, personal fortune in order to protect the interests of king and country. The more heroic the service, the greater the glory. The greater the responsibilities one exercised (e.g., the higher one's rank), the greater the glory. The greater the personal interest (fortune) that one risked on behalf of the common interest, the greater the glory.

A Monument to Corruption

Even though fame and glory were the most admirable of human achievements, self-conscious ambition for fame and glory offered great opportunities for corruption. The outward manifestations of fame and glory—political office and military rank—could often be obtained on the cheap, without providing the tangible evidence of genuine public service that virtue demanded. Where government or a ruling faction
was able to dispense rank and office without regard to real merit, cor-
ruption was sure to follow.

Washington’s own early career was as much a monument to this cor-
rup tion as it was to genuine virtue. In his youth Washington was only a
peripheral member of the Virginia gentry. His landholdings were mod-
est, and he had no immediate prospects for increasing them. Had he
entertained any political ambitions, of which there is little evidence,
his status as a minor planter would have severely constrained them.
But Washington was not without powerful friends. The greatest land-
holder in Virginia was Lord Fairfax, whose family Washington had be-
come closely connected to through his brother Lawrence’s marriage to
Anne Fairfax and by Washington’s subsequent friendship with George
William Fairfax and his wife, Sally. When Washington was only twenty-
one, with little military training or experience, Fairfax used his sub-
stantial influence to garner a colonel’s commission for him in the Vir-
ginia regiment. This was the highest rank available to a colonial officer
in Virginia.

In short, Washington’s first entry onto the public stage did not result
from any display of exemplary public service or virtue. Rather, it came
unmerited from political patronage—the very sort of seductive corru-
pition Country ideologues warned against. Washington was not unmind-
ful of the debt he owed the Fairfaxes and the governor for his quick, one
might even say premature, elevation to a post sure to offer great oppor-
tunities for glory and status. Washington’s letters to Lieutenant Gover-
nor Dinwiddie, Speaker of the House John Robinson, and the Earl of
Loudoun, supreme commander of the king’s forces in British North
America, have an obsequious, toadying quality that goes beyond the
normal deference and respect due to a superior. To Dinwiddie he wrote,
“nothing is a greater stranger to my Breast, or a Sin that my Soul more
abhors, than that black and detestable one Ingratitude. I retain a true
sense of your kindnesses, and want nothing but opportunity to give tes-
timony of my willingness to oblige you, as far as my Life or fortune will
extend.”

Even more disingenuous were his entreaties to the Earl of Loudoun.
Loudoun had arrived in Boston to coordinate the efforts of all His Maj-
esty’s forces in the colonies—regular army regiments, colonial troops,
and militia. At this time (1757), Washington’s military leadership had
fallen under something of a cloud because of his inability to protect the
frontier settlements from Indian raids. Dinwiddie, in particular, had become increasingly critical of his actions. In an effort to restore his reputation Washington decided to appeal directly to Loudoun, thus bypassing his immediate superiors, Dinwiddie and the Virginia assembly. He penned a lengthy summary of Virginia’s military predicament to Loudoun before their face-to-face meeting. After chronicling his frustrations of the previous months he proceeded to lay the blame at the doorstep of Dinwiddie and the assembly. He was especially critical of the assembly’s passage of a military code “in order [I suppose] to improve upon the act of Parliament . . . but such a one as no military discipline could be preserved while it existed.” What he neglected to tell Loudoun was that these were changes that Washington himself had remonstrated for again and again. The assembly seemed not always to fully comprehend Washington’s situation or the specific nature of his requests. Thus, the irony of Washington’s complaints was that he often got what he asked for, then discovered that it wasn’t what he really wanted or needed.

There was ample blame to go around for the mess on Virginia’s frontier, but Washington was especially sensitive, even thin-skinned, about his own reputation. He could never escape the tenuousness of his rank and its dependence on the patronage of others. Thus, he once again resorted to flattery of the most sycophantic and self-serving kind to attract the support of Lord Loudoun: “Your Lordship’s name was familiar to my ear, on account of the important services performed to his Majesty in other parts of the world. Do not think, my Lord, that I am going to flatter; notwithstanding I have exalted sentiments of your Lordship’s character and respect your rank, it is not my intention to adulate. My nature is open and honest and free from guile!” Indeed!

The pursuit of rank and its perquisites was a constant quest for Washington. Not only were his superiors blistered by his complaints, but letters to his friends railed against his ill-treatment. First, he complained that his initial appointment made him subordinate to a more senior colonel of, in Washington’s mind, less merit. [The issue became moot when the infirm Colonel Fry died before assuming command.] Then he was offended at the common colonial practice of divorcing colonial commands from those of the regular British army. In particular, when a contingent of British troops commanded by a Captain McKay was attached to Washington’s regiment, McKay refused to acknowl-
edge Washington's command. He argued that permanent royal commissions were superior to temporary colonial commissions regardless of relative rank. McKay's view was correct according to the military protocols of the day, but Washington nevertheless complained that colonial officers "have the same Spirit to serve our Gracious King as they have" and that the inferiority of colonial rank "will be a canker that will grate some Officer's of this Regiment beyond all measure to serve upon such different terms when their Lives, their Fortunes, and their Characters are equally . . . as . . . expos'd as those who are happy enough to have King's Commissions." Washington offered the grievance on behalf of all colonial officers, but his stake in the complaint was more personal than corporate.

Rank, then, was important to Washington. Rank symbolized one's relative position within Virginia's deferential society; it cemented one's social and political reputation; and it was the outward manifestation of a person's capacity for honor. Without rank and the preferments that went with it, no honorable gentleman could be induced to serve his country. When Washington complained that the pay of Virginia's officers was insufficient, that it was "the most trifling pay, that ever was given to English officers," and that it amounted to little more than an ordinary soldier's pay, his complaint was not really concerned with considerations of equity and a living wage. No colonial officer saw the military as providing enough income to enter the gentlemanly life. Most served in the hope of attaining glory, not for the wages. Rather, Washington believed that the worth of one's rank, and therefore its standing in the community's eyes, was measured by the differences in compensation between officers and the enlisted ranks, as well as by the relative pay among the officers. If a colonel in Virginia were paid less handsomely than a British captain, the implication was that the Virginia colonel was less capable of offering useful service to the king.

That social status, not rank or pay, was the crux of Washington's persistent whining can be seen by his offer, made on several occasions, to serve as a volunteer rather than accept the ignominy of a rank or pay beneath his station ("if you think me capable of holding a Commission that has neither rank nor emolument annexed to it; you must entertain a very contemptible opinion of my weakness"). Eventually he did serve as a volunteer aide-de-camp to General Braddock when he correctly perceived that no permanent British officer was obliged to ac-
knowledge the superiority of any rank bestowed by a Virginia com­mission, a circumstance unlikely to provide Washington the honor he craved. Ironically, it was Washington's heroism under fire during Brad­dock’s ill-fated campaign that first brought the young Virginian to the notice of his countrymen. Popular accounts noted with approval that he had served out of love of glory and country rather than for mere pay. To one who aspired to be a gentleman, what greater honor could there be than this?

The purpose here in documenting Washington's early military career is not to suggest that his self-serving maneuverings for rank reveal serious flaws in his public character. Such behavior was hardly unusual or even exceptionable in his time. Instead, these episodes are symptomatic of a political culture in which social rank was everything. So long as one's rank or station in life was dependent on the patronage of someone else, status anxiety and political unreliability were sure to be the result. The landed aristocracy in Virginia, therefore, claimed the right to exercise power on behalf of the whole community because they lacked for none of the inducements (land, wealth, position, status) that corruptible government could offer an ambitious young man like George Washington.

When Washington acquired ample lands through his marriage to Martha Custis his unseemly supplications about rank and pay disappeared. Never again did Washington write in the conniving, ingratiating way that permeates these early letters. Never again did he need to rely on patronage and political intrigue for the public honors he craved. As an independent landed gentleman of considerable means he was now prepared to play his part as a disinterested, virtuous public citizen.

Washington's startling change of demeanor between the 1750s and the 1770s—from a hot-tempered, fawning, reckless, young court pleader to a reflective, somewhat diffident, and politically astute leader—has baffled many of his biographers. Douglas Freeman, for example, resorted to near-mysticism in his account: "Many other men matured after 25; Washington was almost transformed." But the notion of independence provides a simpler explanation. So long as Washington remained on the periphery of the great circle of Virginia's planter aristocracy, the honor and fame that he so desperately craved was dependent on currying the favors of others. He shaped his actions, whether noble or self-serving (and most would say there is ample evidence of
both), to conform to the expectations of men who were socially and politically his "betters." But once he obtained the independence provided by land and wealth his betters became his peers; Washington was now self-confident enough to pursue his own notions of public virtue free from the need to please the governor or his patrons. The Virginia elite's claim to political deference was based on the superior virtue to be found in a wealthy, landed, independent, and therefore disinterested aristocracy. Washington's early career exemplifies the validity of those notions.

A Constitutional Revolutionary

How, then, could the politics of Virginia culminate in revolution? How could this aristocracy, full of the collective arrogance of social place and privilege, committed to the most conservative principles of good government, and allied in defense of the rule of law and of property, come to the point of actually leading an armed struggle against the Crown—that very symbol of order and stability? One could understand Massachusetts. There, the discontents of a rising petite bourgeoisie explained much. But Virginia?

There is no simple answer to the question. We cannot presume that the factors that animated each of Virginia's patriots were identical. People can unite toward a common goal, including even a political revolution, with quite different grievances and aspirations in mind. We can say with some confidence that Virginia's aristocrats became increasingly self-assured and increasingly protective of the economic and political liberty that their wealth and independence had purchased. Collective assessments that purport to explain more than that, however, tend to gloss over the shifting motives and political ends of individual Virginians.

But the principles that governed one Virginia aristocrat, George Washington, can be clearly discerned. His words and deeds on the eve of revolution reveal a Patriot with a well-defined sense of purpose and a coherent, if limited, set of political ideas. Added to the opposition instincts nurtured by the Country ideology he shared with many of his fellow Virginians was now a strong strain of constitutionalism. These pre-1775 constitutional principles go far in explaining how a man so po-
politically and socially conservative, so much an embodiment of the aristocratic Virginia culture, could become a committed revolutionary. Indeed, it is clear that at least at the beginning of the struggle with Britain, Washington defined his role almost exclusively in constitutional terms.

As early as 1765, during the Stamp Act crisis, Washington had written his wife's British uncle that the act was an "unconstitutional [my emphasis] method of Taxation" and a "direful attack upon their Liberties." At the time, the comment was something of a throwaway. The bulk of the letter contained a carefully reasoned critique of colonial economic matters and Washington's confession of bewilderment at Parliament's insistence on pursuing such obviously counterproductive policies. At this point, he still perceived the growing conflict between Parliament and the American colonies as a misunderstanding. If their British brethren could more fairly appreciate the practical realities of living in and doing business in America, then surely they would refrain from this burdensome heavy-handedness.

But subsequent events led Washington to abandon this accommodationist stance. The Stamp Act had only signaled the opening volley in a parliamentary effort to assert its sovereignty over British trade and taxing policy. Subsequent salvos included the Quartering Act, the Declaratory Act, the Restraining Act, and the Townshend Acts. These continued "misunderstandings" made no sense, unless one concluded that Parliament knew very well what it was doing and that, sooner or later, the center would induce the periphery into a closer orbit.

For most of these prerevolutionary years Washington was a member of the Virginia Burgesses. And as he listened to the arguments of Patrick Henry and George Mason and observed developments in Virginia and other states he began to realize that the "troubles" were not the result of a mere misunderstanding. They resulted, instead, from increasingly divergent, and incompatible, visions of the Anglo-American constitution. Like many other Americans, Washington had come to believe that the American version of that constitution was morally and legally superior to Parliament's version. If the "old" constitution were not restored, by resistance if need be, then the "new" (parliamentary) constitution would strip away the rights and liberties that independent Virginians like himself had grown accustomed to.

We can see the outlines of Washington's emerging constitutional
ideas in his efforts on behalf of the Fairfax Resolves. In the summer of 1774 Washington actively campaigned for these Resolves and even may have helped to write them.28 The resolutions, although amounting to little more than unofficial statements of community outrage, asserted in highly provocative terms that the abuses heaped upon the people of Boston threatened the very fabric of American constitutional liberties and would be resisted, with force if need be, by Virginians as well as New Englanders. The resolutions also included several specific provisions (e.g., no trade with Britain until she nullified the acts directed at suppressing the people of Boston, a day of fasting in support of their Massachusetts brethren) that, while voluntary, were intended to mobilize the citizens of Fairfax County—in 1774 already a hotbed of sedition.

Particularly revealing of Washington's constitutional principles at this time was a series of letters he wrote to Bryan Fairfax, the son of his old friend, William Fairfax. Given the closeness between the two families there is no reason to think that the ideas that Washington expressed here were disingenuous or in any way intended as propaganda or public posturing. It pained Washington to oppose the interests of his great benefactors, but he candidly revealed the heart of his revolutionary convictions and why those principles dictated his support for the opposition cause.

His more conservative friend entreated Washington to go slowly, to continue to work toward some accommodation with the British. But Washington had had enough of appeasement. "Have we not addressed the Lords, and remonstrated to the Commons? And to what end?"29 Now was the time for men of true "virtue and fortitude" to be put "to the severest test."30 Further petitions to the king and his ministers were not only futile, they were becoming increasingly unmanly. "What hope then from petitioning, when they tell us, that now or never is the time to fix the matter? Shall we, after this, whine and cry for relief, when we have already tried it in vain? Or shall we supinely sit and see one province after another fall a prey to despotism?"31 To Washington, honor and virtue demanded that Americans not kowtow to the sort of intimidation that had become business as usual for the king's ministers.

Washington's conservative sensibilities had been especially shaken by events in Virginia that immediately preceded the Resolves. The colo-
ny's royal governor had refused to accept any more "insulting" petitions from the Burgesses and had dissolved the assembly. Now, not only was Virginia's government prevented from dealing with pressing legislative matters, the assembly had been dissolved before it could authorize any appropriations. With no source of revenue, the governor closed the courts. To a law-and-order constitutionalist like Washington this abdication of official authority threatened the very security of Virginia society. "This Dissolution . . . has left us without the means of Defense" against the "cruel and blood thirsty Enemy at our backs [the Indians]." Washington believed that the one unalterable principle of Britain's ancient constitution was that the sovereign was obliged to do all in his power to protect the people and assure their safety. The closure of the courts was to Washington a monstrous violation of that constitutional obligation. Colonial subjects were thus not only justified in submitting meek and respectful petitions to their king for a restoration of these fundamental constitutional principles, they were bound by honor and virtue to "assert our rights, or submit to every imposition, that can be heaped upon us, till custom and use shall make us as tame and abject slaves, as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway." A people who willingly acceded to the corruption of their constitution deserved subjugation.

Fairfax was perplexed by Washington's confident insistence that the patriotic opposition was grounded in constitutional principles. If the Patriots could be satisfied with arguing that Parliament had no power to lay revenue taxes on the colonies (as opposed to taxes related to trade or collective defense), then Fairfax would be happy to join their cause. This principle of no internal taxation had an honorable lineage and had served the colonists well in many of their previous constitutional disputes with Parliament. But Fairfax saw something new and frightening in the Resolves. The second resolution suggested that Parliament had no authority in the colonies; that it was the king in conjunction with his colonial assemblies, not Parliament, that exercised constitutional authority in America. Fairfax could not bring himself to such a sweeping repudiation of the old order. Pointing out that the Patriots' claims went beyond the "no taxation without representation" argument, he appealed to Washington's conservatism: "Whatever we may wish to be the case, it becomes good subjects to submit to the Constitution of their Country. Whenever a political Establishment has been settled, it
ought to be considered what that is, and not what it ought to be. To fix a contrary principle is to lay the Foundation of continual Broils and Revolutions. Conform this second resolution to good constitutional principles, Fairfax intimated, and the patriotic cause would have more supporters.

Washington refused to take the bait. His support of the Resolves and other patriotic activities was based on two interconnected principles. First, he believed that objection to all parliamentary taxation really was the core of America’s constitutional case. If taxation by Parliament were a legitimate part of the constitutional scheme, then resorting to further petitions made perfect sense. As subjects of Parliament they would only be entitled to appeal to the wisdom or paternal sentiments of their lawful representatives—‘‘we should then be asking a favor, and not claiming a right.’’ But Washington was confident that Parliament had no such constitutional power. ‘‘I think the Parliament of Great Britain hath no more right to put their hands into my pocket, without my consent, than I have to put my hands into yours for money.’’

Second, when Fairfax appealed for loyalty to the ‘‘constitution of our Country’’—a request calculated to appeal to one so steeped in the language of Virginia’s politics of deference—he was surprised to find that its effect was quite the opposite of what he expected. Washington insisted that he was loyal to the constitution of his country, but, as noted earlier, Washington, like a generation of his fellow Virginians, had come to define his country as British Virginia, not Britain itself. The constitution that he wished to defend was not the British Constitution, but the constitution between the king and the colonial governments created by royal charter. The people of Britain were represented by the British Parliament, and they were subject to its laws and its taxes. But the people of Virginia were represented in the king’s domain not by Parliament, but by the Burgesses. Parliament, by this view, had no more sovereignty over the internal affairs of Virginians than it did over the French. Thus it was the extraconstitutional aggressions of Parliament, not the actions of Virginia’s dissidents, that undermined the ‘‘constitution of our country.’’ It was Parliament that sought to coerce the people to give up their ancient constitutional rights and privileges; it was Parliament that abolished the charter government of Massachusetts (and by doing so threatened to impose unconstitutional arrangements on all of the colonies); it was Parliament that sought to under-
mine lawful order at the point of a sword. Washington believed that his actions were dedicated to saving the constitution and to conserving the political and legal principles that had served his country so well.

Washington was a Patriot, but he was also still a conservative and a constitutionalist. For example, he opposed that part of the Fairfax Resolves that called for complete nonexportation of goods or revenues to Britain. Many Virginians, including himself, owed substantial sums to English merchants. Some had imported goods from those merchants on credit; others had already sold their tobacco or grain through their agricultural agents in Britain who were now awaiting shipment. But the resolutions urged Virginians not to export anything to Britain, including money to pay lawful debts, until the miseries of Massachusetts were resolved satisfactorily. Washington thought this recommendation unjust and dishonorable. Like many Patriots, he insisted that Britain respect the ancient rights to life, liberty, and property. Washington's dilemma was that he took those admonitions seriously. Just as the British government could not use "the troubles" as an excuse to diminish the property rights of Patriots, neither could legitimate opposition activities by Americans absolve them from an obligation to respect the property rights of British citizens: "Whilst we are accusing others of injustice, we should be just ourselves; and how can this be, whilst we owe a considerable debt, and refuse payment of it to Great Britain, is to me inconceivable."

A true Patriot loved not just liberty, but honor and virtue as well; and honor demanded that a man deal justly and fairly with everyone. The high ground of virtue seized by the Patriots would be undermined, Washington thought, if their resistance could be portrayed as little more than a handy excuse for avoiding their obligations. Patriotism could then be characterized by its opponents as merely the pursuit of self-interest, not the disinterested defense of sacred principle that would do honor to a virtuous gentleman.

Washington's conservatism and commitment to constitutional principles can also be observed in his attitude toward political independence in 1774. He was troubled by reports that certain Massachusetts men were set on nothing less than total independence and, to that end, were terrorizing good men of property who did not share their dire assessment of affairs. Washington's understanding of the constitution at that time assumed that each state would maintain its connection with the Crown. Thus, it was right and just (and constitutional) to resist par-
liamentary usurpation of colonial rights and privileges (the rights of Englishmen in America), but like most Americans he was reluctant to renounce the historic relationship between the king and his loyal subjects that characterized the "old" constitution he wished to conserve. He assured his correspondent that "no such thing is desired by any thinking man in all North America; on the contrary, that it is the ardent wish of the warmest advocates for liberty, that peace and tranquility, upon constitutional grounds [my emphasis], may be restored, and the horrors of civil discord prevented." 

Nevertheless, he insisted that the constitutional crisis had been precipitated by Parliament. Patriots were merely reacting to this provocative assault on the political rights and liberties guaranteed them by the "old" constitution. Restoration of that constitution was the goal of many within the Patriot opposition. And Washington made clear his feeling that if Britain persisted in its efforts to impose this new political order (Washington hesitated to call it a constitution) by intimidation or force, then these same loyal, constitutionalist Patriots might well come to the conclusion that Britain no longer wished to govern under a constitution and that Americans would, of necessity rather than preference, have to go their own way. Thus, while Washington could claim that few of his fellow Virginians were advocates of independence from Great Britain, he also warned that "this you may at the same time rely on, that none of them will ever submit to the loss of those valuable rights and privileges, which are essential to the happiness of every free state, and without which, life, liberty, and property are rendered totally insecure." 

Independence was a foreboding step for a man of Washington's conservative predilections. But it was a step he was clearly prepared to take if Britain continued in its obstinate behavior. An honorable constitutionalist had to have a constitution to honor—ordered liberty was impossible without one. And if Britain refused to live up to her own constitution, then Washington was willing to join a revolution to defend a new one. In this sense, George Washington was both truly conservative—and truly revolutionary.

As the conflict with Britain escalated and Washington prepared to move onto the national stage, it is useful to remind ourselves that his vision for the continent was essentially grounded in the political values of his native Virginia. He believed in self-government, but only by
the "better" sort of men—men who, through the education, experience, and independence provided by their property, could act disinterestedly on behalf of the community. He evinced many elements of the deferential culture and Country ideology common in his social circle: a belief in virtue as the measuring stick against which all governments and citizens were evaluated, an abiding distaste for corruption, a love of liberty (especially liberty in property), the desire for a social order based on harmony and a sense of one's place, and a deeply felt need for a constitution to serve as the glue that held society together.

As his experiences in public life expanded his political horizons beyond the woods of bucolic Mount Vernon to the courts of the Old World, his constitutional vision took on, of necessity, more complex layerings. Virginia politics, rich though it was, could never fully prepare him to cope with all the problems inherent in building a new nation and a new constitutional order. Yet while Washington was to add many new rooms to his constitutional edifice, he never abandoned the foundation he had laid in Virginia.