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Books

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Shorter notice

by [Jonathan Leaf](#)

On *George Washington on Leadership* by Richard Brookhiser.

Richard Brookhiser

George Washington on Leadership.

Basic Books, 272 pages, \$26

George Washington on Leadership seeks to answer the question of what a contemporary business executive, entrepreneur, or politico can learn from the career of a man deprived of his father at age eleven and possessed of little formal education who grew up in a rural portion of a colony far from its motherland as the third of six sons. How did someone who started out with so many disadvantages in life come to be so rich, so singularly admired, and so accomplished? And how did he do it even though he was by most accounts far from gifted as a public speaker and not witty or brilliant?

Washington acquired two advantages early on: fame and money. Fame from his role in fighting against the French during the Seven Years' War (what we usually call the French and Indian War) and money partly through marrying well. But, as Brookhiser makes clear, the standard explanation that Washington's riches were derived from his marriage to the wealthy young widow Martha Custis is both right and wrong. While it's true that the future first First Lady had substantially more wealth than he did when they wed, Washington had already acquired much property from his labors as an industrious surveyor and a somewhat wily land speculator as well as from special dispensations given to him as a reward for his service to the crown during the Seven Years' War. Washington then greatly enhanced these paired fortunes through sensible and far-sighted investments. Brookhiser makes the politically incorrect but incontestable point that riches—or even simply the appearance of wealth—can be a very important aid to leadership since men respect the implied competence of those who have acquired it (to say nothing of their cynical calculations of its uses).

Brookhiser's larger concerns, though, are the moral aspects of character, the cultivation of worthy aspects of personality and the apt use of men, and he aims to show how Washington got each of these things through effort and application and how essential they were to his ultimate triumphs, including his success at providing a solid foundation to our republic through the first years of his presidency.

With this volume, Brookhiser appears to be making a conscious effort to appeal to a wider readership than with his earlier books on the Founding Fathers. In this pleasingly economical volume, stories from Washington's life show how he deliberately learned to be down-to-earth without being bumptious when among common folk and to be dignified and courtly without being stiff among the well-to-do. Brookhiser likewise demonstrates our first President's understanding of

the importance of magnanimity towards one's enemies as they may later become friends. But one talent of Washington's is of particular note. Commenting on Washington's skill in hosting a dinner party, a contemporary remarked that he "possessed the gift of silence. This I esteem as one of the most precious of talents."

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