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Paterfamilias

by [Harvey Mansfield](#)

Richard Brookhiser remarks, and laments, that George Washington is no longer first in the hearts of his countrymen. Brookhiser's aim is to restore him in our hearts by way of our minds, an aim that if accomplished would better both our hearts and minds. His book is concise, deft in style, and animated with thought in every sentence. It is, the author says, moral biography in the mode of Plutarch. Its material is history and moral and political philosophy, but it is more practical than either because we are led to see things from Washington's point of view and thus to understand not so much his time, or the forces impinging on him, or the theories implicitly adopted by him, as his choices. The result is a wonderful success.

Brookhiser is not a historian, but he is a reproach to historians and to moral philosophers and academics generally. He uses the multi-volume biographies written by Douglas Southall Freeman and James Thomas Flexner, but, despite the lavish detail of their books, these historians did not know how to analyze the greatness of a great man. Brookhiser does. He selects the accidents in Washington's life that are not accidental, that reflect Washington's character or the habit of his anticipations and responses. He shows how Washington's character was suited to his attainments, so that the latter, while extraordinary, are no surprise.

Brookhiser says that we are not willing enough to be awed by such a man, as were his contemporaries. We believe simultaneously as idealists that ideas are self-executing and as reductionists that the men involved with them have trivial motives. Perhaps the two are connected: the ideas are advanced by historical forces men cannot adopt or control as their own but must adjust themselves to, as petty-self-seekers. The heralds of these forces are the "democratic historians" Tocqueville spoke of, a group much larger than professional historians that includes the social scientists of our day, all of them levelers and denigrators of everyone save fellow-denigrators (and only the most fashionable of them).

Brookhiser's concern with character does join with a recent trend in moral philosophy of rebellion against the notion, long dominant in analytic philosophy, that moral behavior is a matter of obeying rules and moral thinking a matter of fixing them. But the philosophers who promote character are too democratically confident that we can enjoy all the virtues, and they are professionally incapable of awe. Their remarks on character—certainly a refreshing change—do not extend to the study of actual characters. But Brookhiser shows admiringly, and without any intention to theorize, how the relation of passion to interest had to be Washington's concern in getting the troops of the Continental army to reenlist, or how he had to think of his reputation, his character in the eyes of others, as a factor in his own character. These are only two of several moral questions that are raised. With the aid of Brookhiser's appreciation, George Washington becomes a teacher of morality. His example

does not merely illustrate the moral principle (thus falling short of it) but expands or sharpens it. Aristotle speaks of the importance of example in morality, and perhaps, if he had been more interested in morality, he would have written a version of Plutarch's *Lives* to extend the generalities in the *Ethics*.

Brookhiser, who is not an academic, is more open than academics to the possibility of learning unacademically. He does not—to use an academic word—thematize. Neither did George Washington. Washington was concise, and his conciseness requires interpretation from observers—but not too much, please. Too much interpretation leads us into condescension as we begin to think we understand the subject better than he understood himself, and we lose our awe for the individual being explained. But in the upper reaches of morality it is the individual who matters. Having a moral character prepares one for the exercise of judgment, and judgment is always individual, always better or worse than following a rule. So a certain detachment from academic detachment was necessary to this fine book.

Only a third of the book is on Washington's "career." (I cannot call him "George"; Brookhiser relates that John Marshall in his biography spoke of the birth of "Mr. Washington.") Brookhiser moves quickly from one insight to the next in his account of what ought to be familiar incidents and events: Washington's reproof of mutineers in the Continental army (other armies have suffered worse for lesser causes, he told them, implying simultaneously that they were something special and nothing special); his refusal to entertain a proposal by Colonel Lewis Nicola that he become king, which featured his appeal to the Colonel to show "respect for me"; Washington's objection to Shays's Rebellion, which he saw as a crisis of self-government, as opposed to Thomas Jefferson's distant, Machiavellian approval for such uprisings that may cost lives but preserve the spirit of resistance; the effect of Washington's presence in the Constitutional Convention, though he merely presided and said nothing during the deliberations except with the expressions on his face—especially on the decision to have a single executive, which would of course be himself; and his reactions to the Whiskey Rebellion and to Jay's treaty, seen by Brookhiser as Washington's insistence on constitutional propriety—the necessity that (again contrary to Jefferson) decisions of a republican people "only be unmade in the same way they had been made." These, and others, are lessons in politics as well as items of a career.

After dealing with Washington's career, Brookhiser turns to character, the core of the book. He finds Washington's character compounded of his nature, his morals, and his ideas; and he explains their relationship. His natural good looks and passionate temper forced people to take notice of him, and his ideas (much underestimated by his modern biographers) gave him direction. But his morals, especially his concern for civility and reputation, held him together, connected him with his fellow Americans, and gave power to his ideas.

To many philosophers of our day, who believe that natural endowments are an unjustifiable privilege, it would seem unfair to use such gifts to advantage. A handsome man should be clumsy and keep his face in a grimace; a brainy one should act dumb (which, indeed, these philosophers do). George Washington did just the contrary. He actually cultivated his imposing good looks by learning to dance and ride a horse well, and he enhanced them by wearing splendid uniforms. No doubt he wanted to put himself in the opposite of what Jürgen Habermas calls the "ideal speech situation." Whereas for the egalitarian Habermas that situation is one in which no one has an advantage, for Washington it was the one in which you get your way by saying little or nothing. Washington also had a hot temper, and he took advantage of that, too, by letting it show now and again so that people were afraid of it. As a result even his self-control was impressive and he got credit for both keeping and losing his temper.

Washington's morals took the form of politeness in doing honor to others and in accepting honors from them. Honor is the spring of monarchy, said Montesquieu, but Washington practiced the honor

due among equals or near equals, republican honor. How should a man behave who gets the acclaim of a Napoleon—twice elected president by a unanimous Electoral College— but who wants neither the office of a tyrant nor the submission of a subject people? Washington always acted with a view to his reputation, that is, his reputation among a free people. He would not have cared for “authenticity,” the tyrannical desire to free the inner self from external control or concern for opinion, which we have persuaded ourselves to believe superior to reputation.

The “Rules of Civility,” a list of one-hundred and ten specifics that Washington copied out by hand as a boy and, according to Brookhiser, followed as a man, make an enlightening and humiliating contrast to a moral handbook of authenticity in our time, such as *Catcher in the Rye*. The list would also make an interesting comparison with Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, a rival, contemporary presentation of republican civility. Franklin is less Roman, less political, and more bourgeois. He also discloses himself to be something of a scamp and a sneak, which one cannot imagine of Washington. Washington, a sometime land speculator, sought his own interest and thought it right to do so, but his principal interest was his ambition, suitably republicanized.

And what is the highest ambition that is suitably republican? To be father of one’s country. George Washington was not a man of ideas, but he had ideas that he took from men of ideas, above all from Hamilton, Madison, and Jefferson. These were the mentors of a man who had hardly more than a grade school education. Yet Washington remained above them, choosing to accept their advice as he thought right. Brookhiser diminishes the seriousness of their disagreements, which were, one is sure, more than quarrels. His book could well have been longer if he had explained at length why Washington took the side of Hamilton and the Federalist party versus Madison and Jefferson and the Republicans. These men were not Washington, but they were not lesser men to be disdained, of the caliber, say, of Lincoln’s cabinet.

Brookhiser takes fatherhood seriously. We can forgive him for not discoursing on the fact that George Washington was a gentleman, because defending both gentleman and father would require superhuman bravery today. He discusses modern sources for the idea of political fatherhood, including Sir Robert Filmer and Viscount Bolingbroke. His treatment of Bolingbroke is a special delight because he has the good sense, and is sufficiently lacking in academic conscience, to call him a scoundrel. But, it might be suggested to him, the true model is in Aristotle. For Aristotle, the highest moral character is the magnanimous man whose actions are few but great and distinguished. What would he do? The answer appears in Aristotle’s discussion of political friendship, in which political regimes are compared to the family, not vice versa. We call George Washington the father of his country, not the president of his family. A president is not a father but he is like a father, or approaches one, in his benevolence and willing responsibility; a president in a family would be chilly and remote because he would be too lawful. Thus the family, the more natural association, is the model (though an unrealizable one) for politics. As Brookhiser says, fatherhood “must go beyond what is merely natural”— but political fatherhood goes beyond that toward what is fully natural, an investment in the welfare of family members as a father, not a stranger, sees it.

As Brookhiser points out, the father in this case is republican, a father who knows that he must let go of his charges, and who therefore deliberately dramatizes the occasion of his departures from public life. Washington, an avid theater-goer, staged his exit from the office of Commander in Chief of the Continental Army as well as from the presidency in order to serve as an example for “millions yet unborn.” He shared in the modern, and peculiarly American, ambition (foreign to Aristotle and Plutarch) to provide for the edification of all mankind an example of the success of a new, improved republican form of government. His fatherhood is quite without paternalism, so much so that, if successful, it would obviate almost any need for political fatherhood to go further than his own. We admire him, and are obliged to him, as much for his forbearance as for his great deeds: Washington is a hero of freedom. If our generation of Americans remains unappreciative, it will not be the fault

of Richard Brookhiser.

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