



GEORGE WASHINGTON: A NEW MAN FOR A NEW CENTURY

By Barry Schwartz

George Washington never tolerated the notion, flaunted by some of his successors in the Presidential chair that the voice of the people, whatever its tone or its message, is the voice of God; nor was his political philosophy summed up in "keeping his ear to the ground, " in order to catch from afar the ramblings of popular approval or dissent.... Will any one say that there is no need of such men now, or that the common people would not hear them gladly if once it were known that they dwelt among us?
—The Nation, 1889¹

Every conception of the past is construed from the standpoint of the concerns and needs of the present.”² Could the sociologist George Herbert Mead’s statement be applied to George Washington at the 1899 centennial of his death? Was Washington the same man at the turn of the twentieth century, when America was becoming an industrial democracy, as he was at the turn of the nineteenth, when the nation was still a rural republic? The title of the present essay suggests that the question has already been answered, but the matter is more complex than that. Because any historical object appears differently against a new background, Washington’s character and achievements necessarily assumed new meaning from the Jacksonian era and Civil War through the Industrial Revolution. Washington’s changing image, however, is only one part of this story. Focusing on the first two decades of the twentieth century, the other part of the story—“Washington’s unchanging image”—must also be considered. During the Progressive Era, as it came to be called, America’s newly industrialized society was transformed by a host of political and economic reforms: Antitrust legislation, child-labor laws, a redistributive income tax, the direct election of United States Senators, and woman suffrage were among scores of significant measures ushering the United States into the twentieth century. What made Washington so serviceable to this era, however, were the features of his image that endured as well as changed.

Portrait and history painters originally depicted Washington in the neoclassical style. These images were credible to their intended viewers, but their continued relevance depended on realist models, evident as early as the 1820s and maturing by mid-century, showing Washington to be an ordinary man in whom ordinary people could see something of themselves. Although certain aspects of his image were reinterpreted as times changed, its fundamental character, deeply set in the reality of the late eighteenth century, could not be altered. The patrician image of Washington, originally captured in prints, paintings, and sculpture through a neoclassical paradigm, remained appealing through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, patrician and egalitarian traditions in the portrayal of George Washington coexisted, each articulating the concerns of a rapidly modernizing, imperfect society.

PROJECTING THE PRESENT INTO THE PAST: A MAN OF THE PEOPLE

The first generation of Washington biographers included Aaron Bancroft, John Marshall, James Kirk Paulding, David Ramsay, and, most prominently, Jared Sparks. Marshall’s and Sparks’s works were authorized by George Washington’s nephew Bushrod. In the 1840s a new corps of biographers, including John Frost, Joel T. Headley, and Benson J. Lossing, presented an idealized version of the man, as had their predecessors; but they humanized their hero, showing him performing in normal as well as spectacular ways.³ After the Civil War, Washington’s admirers far outnumbered his critics, but his prestige had diminished, and sympathetic intellectuals were concerned to clarify further the record of his life. Their efforts succeeded, and by the turn of the century he seemed an ordinary man embodying the greatness of which all men are capable—in short, a man with whom the masses could identify. “Nearly every recent biographer,” noted Wayne Whipple in his own book about the great leader’s life, “has announced that he was now taking down the wooden image called ‘Washington’ from its high pedestal.”⁴ Although some observers, such as the writer Edward C. Towne, regarded this shift as “a method of detraction...upon the theory that we gain a man while we lose a hero,” the general public, according to one *Chicago Daily*

Tribune editor, found “the newer Washington a far more attracting personage than the older one.”⁵

Washington was refashioned under the same paradigm that popularized the life of Lincoln. This “realist” model was a postwar development, well suited to the candid depiction of life in a new, industrially oriented society. Realism portrayed life “as it was” rather than idealizing it. By taking as its subject matter “the common, the average, the everyday,” realism expressed the nation’s increasingly egalitarian mood.⁶ Realist writings not only supported contemporary reportage of business villains and their abuses but also brought forth heroes of the past and reinterpreted their virtues. Many writers, even the socially privileged, wanted particularly to know what George Washington was “really” like in his everyday life; their discoveries made him seem less distant and more approachable than he had seemed earlier.

Since many in the late nineteenth century regarded the frontier as the ultimate source of democracy, those wishing to perpetuate the first president’s memory stressed his frontier experiences. Woodrow Wilson, the son of an upper-middle-class minister, asserted that Washington’s exploits in the wilderness made him as much a man of the people as Lincoln. “Living tolerably on the frontier” was a litmus test for the “true American type,” and Washington passed it. He was “a man fit either for the frontier or the council-room.”⁷ As the frontier disappeared, Washington’s admirers continued to identify him with it. President William Howard Taft, reared by an old and distinguished Ohio family, told one Washington’s Birthday audience how much he resented the idea that Washington was unlike common Americans and cited his experience as an “Indian fighter” and “pioneer.”⁸ Washington was, to be sure, an aristocrat, but his emotions and actions resembled those of the average man. “When there was active work to be done,” the *Chicago Daily Tribune* told its readers, “he did not hesitate to lay aside his coat and labor with his workmen, and there were few whose strength could vie with his.” In his relations with all people, “Washington was stretching out a hand to Lincoln.”⁹ Washington’s connection to Lincoln, the personification of American democracy, is made explicit in prints that circulated throughout the country during the early decades of the twentieth century. In one such image, a journal-cover illustration produced during the 1909 centennial of Lincoln’s birth, the People’s President reads from a stack of books and documents as Washington, pictured on the wall behind, figuratively guides him (figure 60).

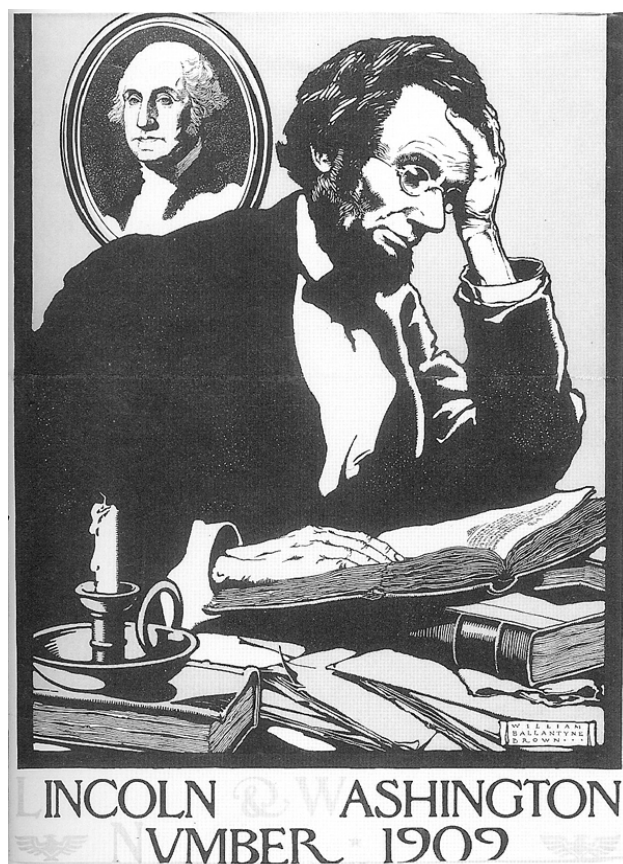


Figure 60

William Ballantyne Brown (American, fl. Early 20th century)
Lincoln and Washington, 1909 Cover from an unidentified journal.
 The Lincoln Museum, Fort Wayne, Indiana (Ref. no. 2431)

Late-nineteenth-century accounts of Washington's romantic life also conveyed his humanity. The press and popular literature stressed this theme more than any other. "He indulged in romantic dreams of youthful love," a Savannah reporter informed his readers, while the biographer Paul Leicester Ford detailed for the first time Washington's hands-off but nonetheless passionate friendship with Sally Fairfax, the wife of his close friend George William Fairfax. Washington's infatuation with Sally began in adolescence and lasted, secretly, through his young adulthood. His affection, however, might not have been invested in Sally alone. In particular, who exactly was this "Mrs. Neil," who was expected to provide the twenty-one-year old Colonel Washington a "delight only heaven can afford"?¹⁰ Ford left the matter unexplained.

Yet by all accounts, the love of Washington's life was Martha, and by the 1890s their wedding anniversary had become a day to be commemorated. Sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution, the celebration reawakened artistic as well as public interest. In 1849 Brutus Stearns had painted *The Marriage of Washington to Martha Custis* (color plate 9), which was made into a popular print five years later by August Regnier. By the early twentieth century, depictions of the couple were considerably less formal. Jean Leon Gerome Ferris, the son of a middle-class Philadelphia portrait painter, was by far the most prolific producer of this historical genre.¹¹ His painting *The Courtship of Washington, 1758*

(ca. 1917, color plate 21), to take one example, depicts George and Martha in a purely domestic situation. The ardent colonel holds the young widow's hand in his; he faces her and she, him. His gesture and her smile give the scene exceptional vitality. Disorder is also evident: Martha's cat, indifferent to the historic scene of which it is a part, grooms itself under the table; a doll and ball are on the ground at George's feet, bringing the two Custis children symbolically into the picture.

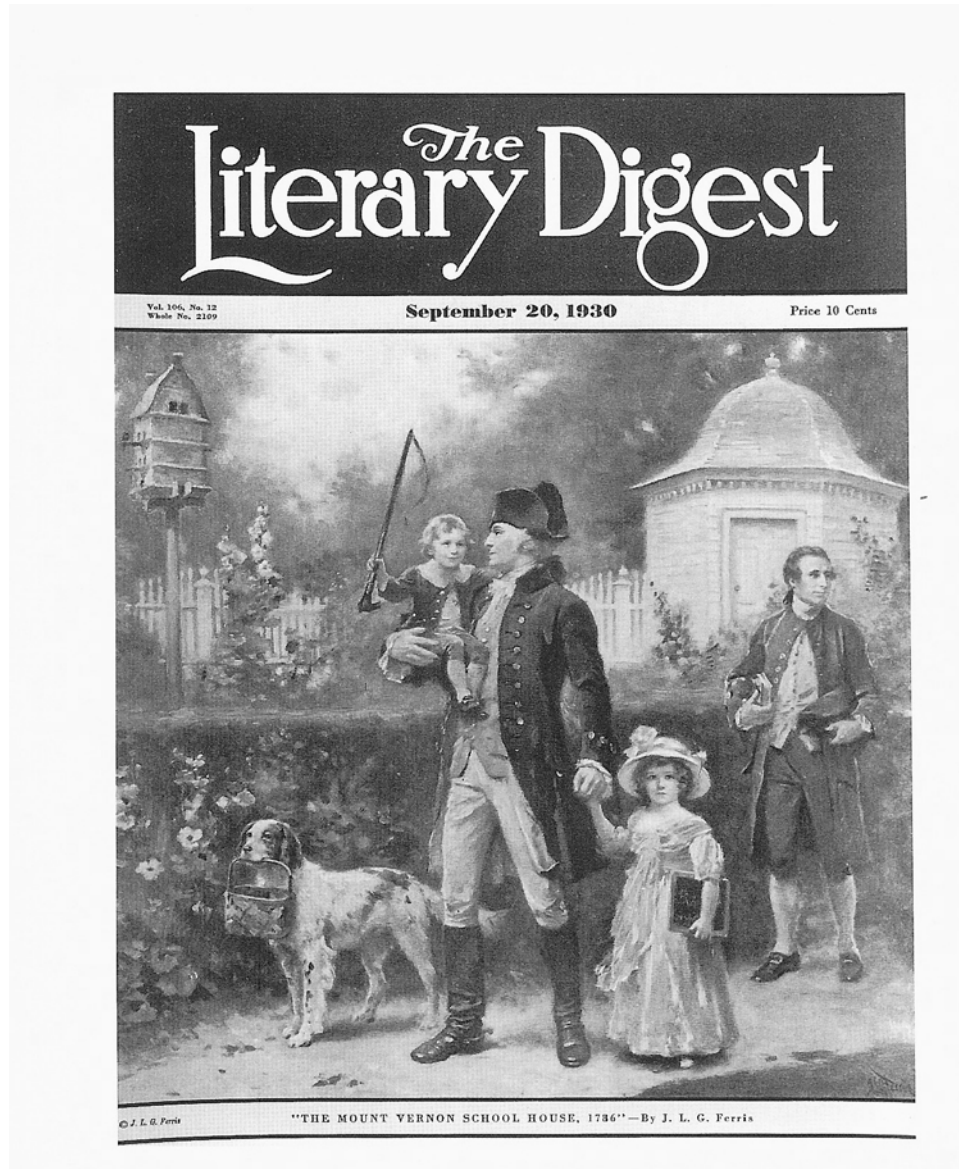


Figure 61

Jean Leon Gerome Ferris (American, 1863-1930)

The Mount Vernon School House, 1786, ca. 1913

Cover illustration, *The Literary Digest*, September 20, 1930. Private Collection.

Love of children characterized the authentic George Washington. Woodrow Wilson discovered that Washington not only played with children whenever possible but also enjoyed just being around them. Needing refreshment after working for a long stretch, he “would often

peep through the crack of a door and watch them play.”¹² Painters and publishers recognized this as an endearing part of Washington’s personality. Ferris, for example, shows him taking his two adopted grandchildren, George and Eleanor (Nelly) Custis, on a walk around the garden while their tutor, Tobias Lear, follows along, ready to begin lessons as soon as the indulgent grandfather can let them go (figure 61).

Ferris conceived his paintings of George, Martha, and their grandchildren during a period animated by a “moral movement in democracy,” one in which the ruling elite was expected to resemble the people it represented and served.¹³ John Ward Dunsmore’s *Marriage of Nellie [sic] Custis at Mount Vernon* (1909) depicts Washington in this light—one in which all viewers can see themselves. Nelly appears as a grown woman, greeted by her grandfather as she descends the steps on her wedding day (figure 51, p. 111). Resolved to marry on her grandfather’s sixty-seventh birthday, she has asked him to attend the ceremony in his military uniform, and he has readily agreed. It is a touching scene: Grandfather and granddaughter attract every eye in the room as they look tenderly upon each other. Washington’s back is to the viewer, but the warmth of Nelly’s expression mirrors his. The scene becomes even more poignant as we realize that this was the great man’s final birthday.



Figure 62
Unknown
Washington and His Successors, 1897
Lithograph, 24 3/4 x 207/8 in.
The Lincoln Museum, Fort Wayne, Indiana (Ref. no. 4281).

BRINGING THE PAST INTO THE PRESENT: A MAN ABOVE THE PEOPLE

The idea for the December 14, 1899, observance of the anniversary of Washington's death originally emerged in the Colorado Grand Lodge of Freemasons, but it soon spread throughout the country and was adopted by many non-Masonic organizations. In New York City, the Order of the Cincinnati and Sons of the Revolution jointly arranged commemorative services at St. Paul's Chapel, conducted by rectors of Trinity Church and of various universities in the area. The National Guard, the Society of the War of 1812, the Mayflower Society, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Colonial Dames, the Aztec Society, and the Society of Colonial Wars, among other organizations, conducted their own ceremonies. New York City's schools flew flags at half mast and held extensive lessons and exercises, which included Grand Army of the Republic representatives explaining the significance of the day.¹⁵

Washington's death was commemorated in 1899 because the virtues his contemporaries admired remained relevant to his successors. His Federalist and Whig biographers, ambivalent about democracy, had emphasized Washington's gentlemanly qualities and set him apart from the people. But their influence was far from absolute. New political symbols, such as log cabins, cider, and axes, and new representative men, such as Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison, had modified the heroic vision of the early nineteenth century. These developments achieved their fullest expression when Lincoln entered the national scene. Before then, the neoclassical paradigm, although noticeably weakened by the 1840s, had powerfully influenced Washington's image. Emphasizing the man's restraint and temperance, his well-balanced abilities, his steady judgment, and his devotion to justice and order, the neoclassical model reflected an enduring patrician ideal. The late nineteenth century brought the 1876 celebration of the nation's centennial and the Colonial Revival, both of which promoted nostalgia for the time when the country was founded; in that atmosphere, few Americans had difficulty thinking of great men in neoclassical terms. Many, in fact, could not conceive of greatness in any other way.

While Ferris and Dunsmore democratized Washington's image on canvas and Howard Pyle and others did the same in book and magazine illustrations, sculptors were constructing a stately man, the only kind whom Washington's own contemporaries would have recognized. That such an elevated conception is not inherent in the medium of sculpture is evident in contemporaneous representations of Abraham Lincoln. Few images seemed more natural than Gutzon Borglum's 1911 statue of the seated Lincoln wearing a sad expression, hunched over on a bench at street level where passersby could sit beside him; Charles Mulligan's 1911 sculpture of the youthful Lincoln with an ax beside a felled tree; George Grey Barnard's 1917 portrayal of Lincoln as a frontier lawyer, with big feet and shabby clothes; and Merrell Gage's 1918 depiction of Lincoln casually leaning forward, about to rise from a low-backed chair. No sculptural depiction of George Washington even remotely resembles these mundane images.¹⁶

There are many neoclassical forms, differing from one country, one generation, and one artistic medium to another. At the turn of the twentieth century, the neoclassical statue was identified by distinctive characteristics—formal or military attire and cloak; erect posture, with one leg slightly bent; one hand resting on a pillar or fasces or an ornate table or chair, or

holding a scroll, public document, or sword, or pointing in some direction; if seated, the figure's back and arms are fully supported by a symbolic chair of state; if on horseback, the upright figure grasps a weapon or reins. Thus depicted, Washington appears larger than life, always majestic, always performing sublime feats.



Figure 63
Rudolph Siemering (German, 1835-1905)
The Washington Monument, 1897
Bronze, h: 108 in. Benjamin Franklin Parkway at Eakins Oval, Philadelphia.

Rudolph Siemering's bronze equestrian statue, dedicated in Philadelphia in 1897 before a multitude that included President William McKinley, epitomizes Washington's neoclassical form (figure 63). Conceived and wrought in Berlin after Christian Rauch's 1852 statue of Frederick the Great, the work captures Washington sitting majestically on his spirited horse, holding a field glass in one hand and reins in the other. Symbols abound in Siemering's statue. Indian men and nude Indian women, situated beside four cascading fountains, represent the Delaware, Hudson, Potomac, and Mississippi Rivers. Siemering has employed indigenous species of moose, deer, bear, and buffalo, along with the Indians, to distinguish the New World from the Old. Thirteen steps, representing the colonies, lead to the three-tiered pedestal. At the back of the monument, invisible to the viewer, a seated female figure symbolizing America rouses her slumbering sons to battle. At the front, America holds a horn of plenty in one hand, a trident in the other. Her victorious sons lay the chains they have cast off and their emblems of allegiance at her feet. On the sides of the pedestal are two bas-reliefs: In one, several soldiers marching to war represent American determination and character; on the other side, a west-bound immigrant train represents peace and progress.¹⁷ Embodying the history, the very soil, of America, Washington looks toward Independence Hall, where he was appointed to lead the Continental Army.

Siemering had initially imagined his statue at the very time James Russell Lowell read his poem “Under the Old Elm” at the July 3, 1875, centennial of Washington’s taking command of his troops in Cambridge. Washington, as Lowell described him, lived in a world of “statelier” movement, and he prevailed over forces that dwarf those minor issues over which we now “fret.” Although Lowell’s world was more open, vital, and freer in emotional expression than was Washington’s, there was, nevertheless, something banally narrow about it. It was during America’s “roomier days,” a time of ampler leisures and stormier crises, that

Virginia gave us this imperial man
Cast in the massive mould
Of those high-statured ages old
Which into grander forms our mortal metal ran;
She gave us this unblemished gentleman
Mother of States and undiminished men
Thou gavest us a country, giving him.¹⁸

Yet how is this “imperial man” to be regarded by a society of ordinary men, of men cast in the modest mold of a low-statured age whose mortal metal runs into diminished forms? Thoughtful citizens everywhere asked themselves this question. They believed that without great men and great ideas there could be no civilization—only venality, mediocrity, and crassness. “Why was it,” asks Mrs. Lightfoot Lee, the main character in Henry Adams’s novel *Democracy* (1880), “that everything Washington touched, he purified, even down to the associations of his house? And why is it that everything we touch seems soiled? Why do I feel unclean when I look at Mount Vernon?”¹⁹

Lowell and Adams spoke not to their class alone. Most ordinary men and women recognized the moral decay of their Gilded Age generation and were ready to embrace the genteel Washington as an example to emulate. Throughout the Progressive Era, too, he embodied the ideals that America’s business and political leaders seemed to betray. In a poem published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in 1910 to commemorate his birthday, Washington is asked:

You, who were Freedom’s chosen spear—
Her organ—
Would you have traded, had you known,
The occupant of England’s throne
For Rockefeller or for Pier-Pont Morgan?”²⁰

True, Washington also had been wealthy, but because he was a selfless aristocrat rather than a self-serving businessman, he had been suited for public responsibility. In the words of a contributor to the staunchly progressive *Outlook* magazine, “He was in no sense commercial, and no American hero has ever been commercial.”²¹ The aristocratic ideal was thus harnessed to the antibusiness inclinations of the common man.



Figure 64

Lorado Taft (American, 1860-1946)

Apotheosis of Washington, 1901

Bronze, h: 168 in.

Pemco Webster and Stevens Collection, Museum of History and Industry,
Seattle, Washington.

For the sculptor Lorado Taft, the memory of Washington was a model for, rather than a model of, a diminished society. His 1901 bronze, *Apotheosis of Washington*, dedicated ceremoniously on the campus of the University of Washington in Seattle, stands fourteen feet tall on a twenty-foot-high pedestal (figure 64). Washington wears a long military cloak, his hands rest on an oversized symbolic sword, and his head is upright. Seeking to evoke the quality as well as the endurance of Washington's presence, Taft intended the statue to be

nonrealistic: “I wish this ... to have a touch of the ideal, to show ‘The Father of His Country’ rather than the General...in any particular situation.” He added, “I dream of it as a kind of apotheosis of Washington, a “mighty, shadowy presence serenely surveying the uttermost territory of the nation which he founded. I give him a certain aloofness.”²²

J. Massey Rhind’s *George Washington Bids Farewell* is, like Taft’s *Apotheosis*, lofty and distant (figure 65). The general, receiving news of the British evacuation of New York City, takes leave of his troops at Rocky Hill, New Jersey. Dedicated in Newark on November 2, 1912, the bronze statue shows Washington, dismounted but with commanding mien, head and shoulders elevated above his impatient steed.²³



Figure 65

J. Massey Rhind (American, 1860-1936)

***George Washington Bids Farewell*, 1912.**

Bronze, h: 120 in. Washington Park, Newark, New Jersey.

The Siemering, Taft, and Rhind statues all reflect the pervasive idealism and excess of the American Renaissance, an artistic movement that bridged the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Since it was “a new sense of history that most directly formed the mental set of the American Renaissance,”²⁴ the past was idealized not only in oversize statues but also in the widespread construction of massive museums, libraries, and imposing architectural structures such as temples, domes, colonnades, and, above all, triumphal arches. The Dewey Triumphal Arch and Colonnade in New York City, the Arch of the Rising Sun in San Francisco, and the Sailors and Soldiers Memorial Arch in Brooklyn were conceived and erected amid urban growth, surging nationalism, and the City Beautiful movement.²⁵ It was within this context that Hermon A. MacNeil and A. Stirling Calder installed their interpretations of Washington as military commander and president, respectively, in New York City’s Washington Arch in 1916 and 1918 (figure 66). MacNeil portrayed the general struggling to maintain his army through bitter winters. The great soldier appears in hat and cape, hands resting on his sword, standing upright in front of allegories of Courage and Fortitude. On the opposite pylon appears Calder’s President Washington, also accompanied by allegorical images—Wisdom and justice—dressed in the simplest style and exuding virile grace and dignity.²⁶



Figure 66

Hermon A. MacNeil (American, 1866-1947)

George Washington as Military Commander, 1916 (left)

and Stirling Calder (American, 1870-1945)

George Washington as President, 1918 (right)

Marble, h. of each: 144 in. Washington Arch, Washington Square Park, New York.

In the spirit of the American Renaissance and its celebration of distinction, the sculptors of Washington, including Daniel Chester French, Edward C. Potter, Frederick G. R. Roth, and Henry Merwin Shrady, were determined to perpetuate America's genteel legacy. If popular illustrators made Washington's image safe for modern democracy, sculptors encouraged viewers to know the man as his contemporaries had—that is, as a demigod whose virtues and feats no mortal could match. The sculptor's chisel expressed something the collective memory had set aside but never lost.²⁷

Ultimately, it was less important for twentieth-century Americans to know what policies and political measures Washington would have supported and opposed than to know what traits were revealed in that support and opposition. This attitude generated a seemingly inexhaustible number of articles on his character. Saturating the February issues of popular magazines and the Washington's Birthday editions of newspapers, these commentaries affirmed the compatibility of the dignity of the state and its citizens. Washington's character and life, on the one hand, and Progressive Era reforms on the other were thus infused by the same principle, so that the invocation of one invariably evoked the other. Distinction and democracy were, in this sense, reconciled: In Washington, the American people, although living through a period of rapid change, found a stalwart emblem of their unchanging ideals.

GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE GREAT WAR

The Great War, as it was called until World War II began, projected the ideals of the Progressive Era beyond national borders.²⁸ Just as Washington had been seen to stand for America's antiplutocratic reforms, he now came to symbolize the meaning behind its first involvement in an extended overseas war. During nineteen months of American fighting, from April 1917 through the November 1918 armistice, his image embodied American war goals, justified the suffering of American soldiers, the sorrow of their survivors and friends, the sacrifices of the society. Images of George Washington thus “framed” the Great War within the grand narrative of the nation.²⁹ “Every conscious perception,” notes the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “is an act of recognition, a pairing in which an object (or an event, an act, an emotion) is identified by placing it against a background of an appropriate symbol.”³⁰ Works of art are “appropriate symbols” because people rely on them to encompass, and to help make sense of, their experiences. Emphasizing orators' citations of Washington's advice on preparedness in their 1917 Washington's Birthday messages, Daniel Fitzpatrick, a St. Louis newspaper cartoonist, pictured General Washington standing resolutely in the snow, his military cape waving in the cold wind, his sword protruding from below the cape (figure 67). Six weeks later, the United States entered the conflict.



Figure 67
Daniel Fitzpatrick (American, 1891-1969)
Liberty and Justice at Any Price! February 22, 1917
 Editorial cartoon, St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

New images of Washington were created to inspire patriotism; old ones, such as John Quincy Adams Ward's 1889 statue above the steps of Federal Hall National Memorial in New York City, were invoked to the same end (figure 17, p. 50). Ward's work had been created to commemorate Washington's first presidential inauguration. In 1918 the actor Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., stood on the Federal Hall steps, beneath the leader's outstretched hand, and used a megaphone to urge a great throng of listeners to buy war bonds in support of their country's crusade for democracy (figure 68). As Americans engaged their "relentless enemy in a life-and-death struggle," a syndicated writer noted, "what Washington did and said, and caused to be done, is taking on a new and solemn meaning."³¹ The writer might have declared just as readily that the "life-and-death struggle" assumed its solemn meaning directly within the context of "what Washington did and said." In the twentieth century, as in the nineteenth, Washington was a lamp for, as well as a mirror of, the times.



Figure 17

John Quincy Adams Ward (American, 1830-1910)

Statuette of George Washington, 1889 (smaller version of the 1889 statue at Federal Hall National Memorial, New York)

Bronze, h: 24in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund 1972.



Figure 68

Douglas Fairbanks Sr., George Washington and Bonds for the Great War, 1918
Photograph, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Certainly he was for the sculptor Frederick MacMonnies. Before the war, when MacMonnies was living in France, he stalled on an agreement to produce a monument commemorating the Battle of Princeton. But in September 1914, when British and French forces stopped the German offensive at the first Battle of the Marne, uncomfortably close to the artist's home, MacMonnies changed his conception of the work. "I was groping for [the monument] in the past," he later wrote, "and suddenly the present was full of war. I had to admit that my attempt

to imagine it was pale indeed to its reality.” More than two years before Americans entered the Great War, MacMonnies had associated an Allied victory in Europe with Washington’s rallying his troops at Princeton in January 1777 for the first substantial American victory of the Revolutionary War. Attached to a monumental arch and dedicated on June 9, 1922, his bas-relief captures the confusion, trauma, and discouragement of the battle (figure 69). Columbia seizes the reins of George Washington’s horse and with her right hand takes the flag from a fallen soldier, whose comrade in death lies at her feet. These figures, along with the cold and exhausted drummer boy at the viewer’s lower right, the elderly soldier on the far left binding his own wounds in order to fight further and, beside him, the worn but sturdy soldier supporting the fallen General Hugh Mercer, are all subordinated to Washington. The commander’s clenched left hand protrudes from his cloak while his right hand pulls the sword from its scabbard. Critics complained that the monument was too bombastic for the significance of the battle, but for MacMonnies, as for the public, the work was “a composite symbol of the immensity of Washington’s achievement and lends a vivid force to the evocation of this tragic moment on which depended the fate of the Republic.”³²



Figure 69

Frederick MacMonnies (American, 1863-1937)

Princeton Battle Monument, 1922 Limestone, h: 300 in. Princeton, New Jersey.

As MacMonnies worked through the Great War on his relief, printmakers invoked Washington to situate the conflict historically. In a government poster, for example, Washington and Lincoln frame President Woodrow Wilson and the *Brave Boys of 1917* (figure 70), who extend the legacy of America's first great war leader and first president to the world. Propaganda posters portrayed Washington in both military and civilian dress, visualizing his being "first in war, first in peace" a symbolic bridge connecting the United States's military and political institutions.



Figure 70

Unknown

The Brave Boys of 1917— America, We Love you, 1917

Halftone, 19 3/4x16 in.

Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

The renewal of a traditional history-painting topic— Washington resigning his command at the end of the Revolutionary War— captured the vital principle of the subordination of this military to civilian authority. Edwin Blashfield's triptych *Washington Surrendering His Commission at the Feet of Columbia* (1902, color plate 19), painted for the Baltimore courthouse, is symbolic rather than realistic. The central panel shows him, in a long military coat, accompanied by personifications of the Virtues in medieval and classic dress carrying emblems of War, Peace, Abundance, and Glory. The great general is voluntarily resigning his military power. The "larger implication of the story," observed the artist and critic Kenyon Cox, "are much more clearly expressed than they could be by a realistic representation of the scene that occurred at Annapolis in 1783."³³ Only symbolic devices persuasively capture the transcendent majesty of Washington, the most powerful and influential man in America, subordinating himself to Congress.

CONCLUSION

In the 1840s, humanized representations of George Washington began appearing along with images of Washington the demigod. Between 1865 and 1920, the two versions were depicted more vividly and frequently than ever, and each was admired in the context of contrasting ideals and interests. Washington the man reflected the dignity of the common people;³⁴ Washington the demigod reflected a genteel standard before which the entire citizenry, regardless of wealth or patriotism, fell short. Affirming the "use value" of memory, these two conceptions conform to the sociologist Michael Schudson's recognition that "the past is constantly being retold in order to legitimate present interests" and to elaborate present ideals and realities.³⁵ Throughout the nineteenth century, however, the changing portrayals of Washington possessed similar elements, confirming Schudson's complementary belief that "the past is in some respects, and under some conditions, highly resistant to efforts to make it over." Legacies, Schudson adds, offer the most potent resistance, for the ways people reconstruct the past are "confined to the experiences of their own traditions."³⁶ Thus, at the turn of the twentieth century, Americans seeking idealism amid political corruption and economic exploitation came to know and revere the same Washington known and revered in the early nineteenth century. Self-sacrifice instead of self-interest; indifference to power instead of political ambition; moderation instead of excess; resoluteness instead of brilliance; rationality instead of fervent religiosity; harmony instead of inconsistency between public and private life: These patrician ideals appeared in the paintings, prints, drawings, and statuary of the new industrial era.

Washington's virtues were the very traits that eventually enabled Abraham Lincoln to surpass him in popular esteem. Aristocratic men, however selfless and wise, are respected, not loved—at least not in a maturing industrial society, with its emphasis on equality, rights over obligations, a loosening of institutional restraints, deepening sentimentality, and an enhanced appreciation of spontaneity and the senses.³⁷ In the journalist Norman Hapgood's words:

[M]en live little in their judgements, much in their sentiments. Lincoln was a great man; Washington was even greater; but Lincoln lived and expressed the sorrows, the longings, the humor of us all, and the abilities and character of Washington are not easy of approach.... The man around whose gigantic figure the American nation was formed is not romantic and he

is not to a high degree articulate; there is in the actual Washington little to reach the sentimental soul.”

For Hapgood, as for other commentators, Washington’s distinguishing trait was an undramatic devotion to duty. His “was a nature fit for bearing the greatest load ever carried by an American,” but it was precisely that nature that reduced his personal attractiveness. He spent his life, from late adolescence to old age, in positions of responsibility. Sacrificing youth, he grew into a stately and aloof adult, a man to be emulated rather than embraced.³⁹

Washington’s image has resisted fundamental revision because of the force of his character, the clarity of his political purposes, and the intensity of his charisma. Charisma, as the sociologist Edward Shils defined it, reflects the possession of “ordering power”—the capacity to destroy and recreate institutions and states,⁴⁰ The contemporary relevance of Washington’s ordering power in the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century was enhanced, but not explained, by America’s new industrial, political, and military strength. For this reason, democratized images of Washington could be superimposed upon the earlier epic images, but they could never replace them. George Washington was a “new man for a new century,” then, not because people changed their conceptions of what he did but because they related what he did to their new problems and conditions, because they discovered him to be a paragon not only for his own age but for theirs as well.

NOTES

1. “Washington,” *The Nation* 69 (December 21, 1899): 460.
2. George Herbert Mead, “The Nature of the Past,” in *Essays in Honor of John Dewey*, ed. John Coss (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), 353.
3. John Marshall, *The Life of George Washington*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: C. P. Wayne, 1804-7); David Ramsay, *The Life of George Washington* (New York: Hopkins and Seymour, 1807); Aaron Bancroft, *An Essay on the Life of George Washington, Commander in Chief of the American Army through the Revolutionary War and the First President of the United States* (Worcester, Mass.: Thomas and Sturtevant, 1807); James Kirk Paulding, *A Life of Washington*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1835); Jared Sparks, *The Writings of George Washington: Being His Correspondence, Addresses, Messages, and Other Papers, Official and Private, Selected and Published from the Original Manuscripts; with a Life of the Author; Notes, and Illustrations*. Half title *Life of George Washington*, 12 vols. (Boston: F. Andrews, 1834-37). The “humanizing” biographies, shaped in part by the romantic paradigm that peaked between 1830 and 1865, include John Frost, *The Pictorial Life of George Washington* (Philadelphia: Thomas Cowperthwait, 1848); Benson J. Lossing, *Mount Vernon and Its Associations* (New York: W. A. Townsend, 1859); and Joel T. Headley, *The Illustrated Life of Washington: Together with an Interesting Account of Mount Vernon as It Is* (New York: G. and F. Bill, 1859). See also William F. Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1960), 425-27, 429-32, and the essay by Barbara J. Mitnick in this volume.
4. Wayne Whipple, *The Story-Life of Washington* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1911), 1:xiii.
5. Edward C. Towne, preface to J. F. Schroeder and Benson J. Lossing, *Life and Times of Washington* (Albany, NY: M. M. Belcher, 1903), 1:iv; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 22, 1910.

6. See Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren, *American Literature: The Makers and the Making 1861-1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974); and Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman, *Handbook to Literature*, 397.
7. Woodrow Wilson, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966-90), 11: 105.
8. Quoted in the *New York Times*, February 23, 1910.
9. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 12, 1909.
10. Savannah (Ga.) Republic, February 22, 1873; Paul Leicester Ford, *The True George Washington* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1905), 84.
11. For a discussion of grand-style portrayals of Washington, see Mark Edward Thistlethwaite, *The Image of George Washington: Studies in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American History Painting* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1979). See also Thistlethwaite's general discussion in "The Most Important Themes: History Painting and Its Place in American Art," in William H. Gerdts and Mark Thistlethwaite, *Grand Illusions: History Painting in America* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1988), 7-58. Despite the prodigious quantity and popularity of Ferris's work, there is only one scholarly account of him: Barbara J. Mitnick, *Jean Leon Gerome Ferris, 1863-1930: American Painter Historian*, exh. cat. (Laurel, Miss.: Lauren Rogers Museum of Art, 1985).
12. Wilson, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 55:482.
13. Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 36.
14. Washington's overshadowing of Lincoln during this period is also evidenced by citation counts in the popular literature. Between 1875 and 1899, the *Congressional Record* accumulated 174 entries for Washington (relating mainly to speeches and legislation pertaining to monuments), compared to 64 entries for Lincoln. The *New York Times* shows an even greater disparity: 842 Washington-related articles and 293 related to Lincoln. Poole's Index for 1882-92 contains 181 Washington entries and 54 Lincoln entries. Late-nineteenth-century prints depicting American presidents articulated Washington's place in the nation's memory by foregrounding his image or placing it at the center, by rendering his image larger, or by placing it above those of his successors. *Our Presidents* (1876), one of many centennial-year prints, makes Washington the central figure and places Lincoln at his remote left. *Our Twenty-two Presidents* (1884) highlights both men, aligning them vertically (Washington placed above) with images of Columbia and the United States Capitol (see also figure 62). Political-campaign prints of the day conformed to the same pattern.
15. *New York Times*, December 10-15, 1899.
16. Borglum's seated figure of Lincoln is at the Essex County Courthouse, Newark, NJ.; Mulligan's sculpture of the young Lincoln is in Garfield Park, Chicago; Barnard's frontier-lawyer Lincoln is in Lytle Park, Cincinnati; and Gage's seated Lincoln is on the grounds of the Kansas Statehouse, Topeka.
17. For further discussion of the statue and the dedication, see John Tancock, "The Washington Monument," in *Sculpture of a City: Philadelphia's Treasures in Bronze and Stone* (New York: Walker Publishing Company for Fairmount Park Art Association, 1974), 132-41. For illustration of the convention of using indigenous animals and native people to distinguish the New World from the Old World, see Wendy C. Wick, *George Washington, An American Icon: The Eighteenth-Century Graphic Portraits*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.:

- Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and the National Portrait Gallery, 1982), 8-9. See also Frances Davis Whittmore, *George Washington in Sculpture* (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1933), 114-16.
18. James Russell Lowell, *The Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell* (reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 369.
19. Henry Adams, *Democracy: An American Novel* (1880; reprint, New York: Henry Holt, 1925), 135.
20. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 22, 1910.
21. "Washington the Man," *Outlook* 8 (February 1908), 388.
22. Quoted in Whittmore, *Washington in Sculpture*, 148-49.
23. For a discussion of Rhind's statue and the dedication, see Whittmore, *Washington in Sculpture*, 153-58; and *Newark Evening News*, November 2, 1912.
24. Richard Guy Wilson, "Presence of the Past," in Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne H. Pilgrim, and Richard N. Murray, *The American Renaissance, 1876-1917*, exh. cat. (Brooklyn: Brooklyn MLISCIH, 1979), 30.
25. Hirschl and Adler Galleries, *The Arts of the American Renaissance*, exh. cat. (New York: Hirschl and Adler Galleries, 1985), 7-15. See also Richard Guy Wilson, "The American Renaissance and New Jersey," in *Public Art in New Jersey During the American Renaissance* (Wayne, NJ: Museums Council of New Jersey, 1990), 5-17.
26. The Washington Arch and MacNeil and Calder statues are discussed in Whittmore, *Washington in Sculpture*, 159-66, and Donald Martin Reynolds, *Masters of American Sculpture: The Figurative Tradition from the American Renaissance to the Millennium* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 72-74. For more on the subject of Washington sculpture, see the essay by H. Nichols B. Clark in this volume.
27. Of the 1,066 articles about Washington cited in the New York Times Index between 1875 and 1920, about 13 percent commented on the traditional military and political aspects of his life; 28 percent dealt with the erection of memorials and monuments to him; 14 percent were about Washington statues or paintings; 18 percent reported on the discovery and trade of relics-things Washington wore, touched, or used; and 23 percent described observances related to the anniversaries of his birth or military and political achievements. Thus, almost all articles depicted Washington as anything but a common man, despite the efforts of many late-nineteenth-century scholars and publicists.
28. Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, *Progressivism* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1983), 105-11. See also F. Decker, "The Progressive Era and the World War I Draft," *Magazine of History* (winter-spring 1986): 15-18.
29. Barry Schwartz, "Frame Images: Toward a Semiotics of Collective Memory," *Semiotica* 121 (July 1998), 1-40.
30. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 215.
31. Los Angeles Times, February 22, 1918.
32. Robert Judson Clark, "Frederick MacMonnies and the Princeton Battle Monument," *Record of the Art Museum: Princeton University* 43, no. 2 (1984): 45. See also Whittmore, *Washington in Sculpture*, 169.
33. Kenyon Cox, *The Classic Point of View* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 76.
34. Since the democratized image of Washington affirmed nationalistic sentiment, it was invoked often in the context of ethnic strife. Nativists' use of him was manifest in many ways,

from pamphlets describing “General Washington’s Vision”—a prophecy of America’s struggle against European influence (reprinted from Wesley Bradshaw, *National Tribune* 4 [December 1880])—to inflammatory anti-immigrant orations by clergymen and politicians. For the latter, see Karal Ann Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 128-31, 191, 235-36. The existence of a large immigrant population, unschooled in Americanism, prompted a group of prominent citizens to ask a Congressional committee in 1924 to support their proposal for a federally organized observance of the bicentennial of Washington’s birth. The pedagogical intent, expense, and scope of this observance, detailed in *History of the George Washington Bicentennial Celebration*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission, 1932), must have satisfied the original planners. For documentation of nativist motives attending the conception of the bicentennial, see Activities of the Commission and Complete Final Report of the US. George Washington Bicentennial Commission (Washington, D.C.: United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission, 1932), 5:600.

35. Michael Schudson, “The Present in the Past versus the Past in the Present,” *Communication* 11, no. 2 (1989): 105.

36. *Ibid.*, 108, 109.

37. Barry Schwartz, “The Reconstruction of Abraham Lincoln, 1900-1920,” in David Middleton and Derek Edwards, eds., *Collective Remembering* (London: Sage, 1990), 81-107.

38. Norman Hapgood, “Washington and Lincoln,” *Dial* 67 (July-November 1919): 93.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Edward A. Shils, “Charisma, Order, and Status,” in *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 256-75.