

5-23-2005

1776

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features>

ScholarWorks Citation

"1776" (2005). *Features*. 75.

<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features/75>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Features by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

David McCullough's latest book, a highly-anticipated portrait of General George Washington at a turning point in the war for American independence, was released this week. In 1776, the acclaimed author of *John Adams* and *Truman* turns his attention to a year that included the publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, the signing of the *Declaration of Independence*, costly American defeats at Long Island, White Plains, and Manhattan, and a staggering American victory at Trenton. In addition to gathering the best reviews written about David McCullough's *1776*, the Hauenstein Center features some of its own contributions to our understanding of America's founding father.

What Washington knew

+ *By William M. Fowler Jr. - Christian Science Monitor - (May 24, 2005)*

"In December 1776 Thomas Paine reflected on the year past and wrote, 'These are the times that try men's souls.' No American who lived through 1776 doubted the truthfulness of Paine's lament, and no one had had his soul more tried than the commander in chief of the Continental Army, George Washington."

[FULL TEXT](#)

+ **'1776': Revolutionary Road**

By Tony Horwitz - New York Times - (May 22, 2005)

"This is a sly book, beginning with its title, '1776.' It's a story of war, not words -- the great declaration in Philadelphia occurs offstage. Yet no combat takes place for most of the narrative. George Washington often pales beside his supporting cast, and readers are invited to empathize with traditionally reviled figures: Tories, Hessian mercenaries, even King George III."

[FULL TEXT](#)

+ **A Nation Is Born, and You Are There**

By Michiko Kakutani - New York Times - (May 24, 2005)

"Of the miraculous turnaround that the Battle of Trenton, late in 1776, effected in the fate of the American Revolution, the British historian Sir George Otto Trevelyan once wrote, 'It may be doubted whether so small a number of men ever employed so short a space of time with greater and more lasting effects upon the history of the world.'"

[FULL TEXT](#)

+ **'1776' teaches a worthy, timely history lesson**

By Bob Minzesheimer - USA Today - (May 24, 2005)

"1776, released Tuesday, is about the darkest year in American history. It is filled with military mistakes and the heroism of ragtag rebels."

[FULL TEXT](#)

+ **The year that tried men's souls inspired McCullough's '1776'**

By Bob Minzesheimer - USA Today - (May 24, 2005)

"David McCullough was one-third of the way through writing his last book, the best-selling *John Adams*, when he conceived his new book, *1776*."

[FULL TEXT](#)

+ **Born Fighting**

By Gordon S. Wood - Washington Post - (May 22, 2005)

"David McCullough, America's most celebrated popular historian, has done it again -- written another engaging work of narrative history. This book, however, is very different from his Pulitzer Prize-winning biographies of Harry Truman and John Adams. Not only is it much shorter than those gigantic tomes, but it is not the life of a famous person. Instead, it's the story of a single year, the birth-year of the United States."

[FULL TEXT](#)

+ From Gleaves Whitney's "General Washington's Address to his Army on March 15, 1783"

The Ides of March in 1783. Washington had to keep his army from marching against Congress. The officers were understandably upset that Congress had not given them back pay for their many years of service to their country. They had willingly left their families and farms to aid the cause of freedom, and they simply wanted to be able to pay off their debts. As frustration mounted, someone high up the chain of command circulated a memo through the officer corps, urging insurrection. The malcontents planned a secret meeting.

Washington caught wind of the caucus and intervened swiftly. He denounced the treasonous plot and postponed the gathering by three days. This gave him critically needed time to think about how to give perhaps the most important speech of his life.

Now Washington, as you know, was crafty. He kept his own counsel and didn't alert the officers that he would be confronting them personally. So when they met on March 15th, they assumed their commander-in-chief would exert his authority through a surrogate. In this, they miscalculated badly. Remember, Washington had a keen sense of drama. All his adult life he had been a devotee of the theater.

Imagine the officers' surprise when, in the middle of their meeting, their commander strode in and made straight for the lectern. There was a tense silence. The General spoke from a prepared text for approximately five minutes. The remarks were built around a series of parallel constructions that emphasized the men's common sacrifice. They had become like family, and he only wanted what was just and right for them. But they must not be imprudent or disloyal, not after having gone through so much together, and not when so much was at stake. The men were moved by his appeals -- in fact, it was the most powerful speech they had ever heard him deliver.

But all this, powerful as it was, was just contrived to set the stage for the final act. After Washington finished his prepared remarks, he removed a letter from his coat pocket that he said he wished to read aloud. He began to read, then all of a sudden fell silent. Not a word came from his mouth as he fumbled awkwardly with the letter. Then he pulled a new pair of eyeglasses out of his pocket and remarked, 'Gentlemen, you must pardon me. I have grown gray in your service and now find myself growing blind.'

The high drama had its intended impact. The men stood in stunned silence. The gesture and words did more than any armed force could have to dissolve the insurrection, for it dissolved the rebellion in their hearts. As one officer later recorded, Washington's action was so disarming that it brought tears to the eyes of every man present. They suddenly felt inexpressible shame mixed with a renewed love for their leader. They pledged their abiding support to Washington and to the new republic.

+ From Matthew Spalding's, "It's George Washington's Birthday"

James Flexner, George Washington's greatest biographer, called him the "indispensable man" of the American Founding. Without Washington, America would never have won our War of Independence. He played the central role in the Constitutional Convention and, as our first President, set the precedents that define what it means to be a constitutional executive: strong and energetic, aware of the limits of authority but guarding the prerogatives of office. Washington not only rejected offers to make him king, but was one of the first leaders in world history to relinquish power voluntarily. His peaceful transfer of the presidency to John Adams in 1797 inaugurated one of America's greatest democratic traditions.

From 1775 onward, when the Continental Congress appointed him military commander of continental forces, Washington personified the American Revolution. For eight years, General Washington led his small army through the rigors of war, from the defeats in New York and the daring crossing of the Delaware River to the hardships of Valley Forge and the ultimate triumph at Yorktown. Through force of character and brilliant political leadership, Washington transformed an underfunded militia into a capable force that, although never able to take the British army head-on, outwitted and defeated the mightiest military power in the world. And when the job was done, Washington resigned his commission and returned to his beloved Mount Vernon.

Washington was instrumental in bringing about the Constitutional Convention, and his widely publicized participation gave the resulting document a credibility and legitimacy it would otherwise have lacked. Having been immediately and unanimously elected president of the convention, he worked actively throughout the proceedings, and an examination of his voting record shows his consistent support for a strong executive and defined national powers. The vast powers of the presidency, as one delegate to the Constitutional Convention wrote, would not have been made as great "had not many of the members cast their eyes towards General Washington as president; and shaped their ideas of the powers to be given to a president, by their opinions of his virtue."

Washington wrote extensively and eloquently about the principles and purposes of the American Founding; he was a champion of religious freedom, of immigration, and of the rule of law. His most significant legacy is his Farewell Address of 1796, which ranks with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as one of the greatest documents of the Founding. The Farewell Address is best remembered for its counsel about international affairs: Washington recommended commercial relations with other nations but as few political entanglements as possible. Often overlooked is his sage advice about the character of our political system:

1. Uphold the Constitution. Washington reminds us that the Constitution--by which our government is carefully limited yet strong enough to defend our rights and liberties--is our strongest check against tyranny and the best bulwark of our freedom. He warns us to guard against oppositions to lawful authority and those that seek to circumvent the rule of law, the customary method by which free governments are destroyed.

2. Beware of the politics of passion. Washington was concerned about the excessive partisanship that stirs up individual passions, bringing out the worst aspects of popular government. While partisan spirit is rooted in human nature, it should not come to dominate our politics to the exclusion of deliberation, persuasion, and reason but should, like other passions, be moderated by better motives.

3. Protect American independence. Although often remembered as an isolationist, Washington advocated an active policy of building the political, economic, and physical strength for America to defy external threats and pursue its own long-term national purpose. He wanted liberty to be the objective of our international relations and commerce, not conquest, to be the primary means by which America would acquire goods and deal with the world.

Encourage morality and religion. Public virtue cannot be expected in a climate of private vice, Washington reminds us, and the most important source of virtue is religion and morality. Religion is the bedrock of morality, and morality is the foundation of a good society, he believed; together, they teach Americans their obligations to each other and create the conditions for decent politics and public justice.

Although it was celebrated as early as 1778, and by the early 18th century was second only to the Fourth of July as a patriotic holiday, Congress did not officially recognize Washington's Birthday as a national holiday until 1870. The Monday Holiday Law in 1968--applied to executive branch departments and agencies by Richard Nixon's Executive Order 11582 in 1971--moved the holiday from February 22 to the third Monday in February. Section 6103 of Title 5, United States Code, currently designates that legal federal holiday as "Washington's Birthday." Contrary to popular opinion, no action by Congress or order by any President has changed "Washington's Birthday" to "President's Day."

Each year, a few members of Congress introduce legislation to direct all federal government entities to refer to the holiday as George Washington's Birthday. Better yet: the President could issue an executive order that, in one stroke of the pen, would not only enforce the law, but also remind all Americans that this George W--George Washington, that is--still deserves to be "first in the hearts of his countrymen."

+ From William B. Allen's "George Washington: On the Wrong Side of the Slavery Issue?"

Washington's Will is as much one of our founding state papers as his 1796 Farewell Address. It conveys not merely his wishes but also the principles he wished to guide the nation. Among the founders Washington was unique in providing such specific moral guidance. Just as he committed the new nation to lift up the poor and oppressed of all nations and religions, he showed how to realize that commitment through public and private acts. His ultimate private act became in that sense his consummate public act. He completed the Will on July 9th, 1799, and in it -- subject only to the opening bequest of "the use, profit, and benefit of my whole Estate, real and personal, for the term of her natural life," to his dearly beloved wife Martha -- he declared,

...th[at] all the Slaves that I hold in [my] own right, shall receive their free[dom]... ac[cor]ding to this devise, there may b[e] some, who from old age and bodily infir[m]ities, and others who on account of [thei]r infancy, that will be unable to [su]pport themselves; it is [my] Will a[n]d de[s]ire that all who [come under the first] and second descrip[tion shall be comfort]ably clothed and [fed by my heirs while] they live; and that such of the latter description have no parents living, or are living but unable, or unwilling to provide for them, shall be bound by the Court until they should arrive at the age of twenty five years.... The negroes thus bound, are... to be taught to read and write, and to be brought up to some useful occupation, agreeably to the Laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia, providing for the support of Orphan and other poor Children. And I do hereby expressly forbid the Sale, or transportation out of said Commonwealth, of any Slave I may die possessed of, under any pretense whatsoever. And I do moreover most pointedly, and most solemnly enjoin it upon my Executors hereafter named, or the Survivors of them, to see that *this* [cl]ause respecting Slaves, and every part thereof be religiously fulfilled at the Epoch at which it is directed to take place; without evasion, neglect or delay....

Let me pause to say that people often ask, 'Why wait until he's dying and in his will to do this?' I ask you, I beg you, to pay attention to the provision he is making, and to ask what prudent activities are required to assure resources for the purposes that he has in mind. He didn't merely free his slaves, he provided for them. This meant he devoted years, husbanding his resources and increasing them, to make it possible to provide for them. He also had to deal with the difficulties of manumission itself under the laws at that time which greatly restricted it, apart from circumstances of providing full provision for the freed slaves. So it's not merely a question of emancipation, it's a question of emancipation to what -- emancipation with what -- and Washington demonstrated how to answer that question.

So, I continue, Washington did not leave to interpretation his religious injunction regarding the treatment of the slaves. Under no subterfuge of necessity, or the need to satisfy claims on the estate, were any of his people to be sold or given away. By providing for his wife during her natural life he did not defer the freedom of the slaves, he dealt with a legal problem. He dealt with the problem of "The Widows Third," meaning that his slaves could not effectively become hers, to be disposed of by her or her successors. You must simply appreciate the thoroughness of his prudence, his thinking about every single eventuality, for had he done it otherwise there was a lawful provision called "The Widows Third" that would have transferred those slaves to his wife's ownership and left them to be disposed of by other people, and not George Washington himself. This, as is the case of many of his other relatives, would have meant sale and separations.

Precisely because Washington had participated in the ordinary transactions affecting slavery in the social state, he was keenly aware of the provisions required in order that freedom for his slaves would be a blessing and not a curse. As he said to Lafayette, merely to set them afloat would be a curse. Now in his will he demonstrated what great provisions must be made in order to ensure the slaves were not worse off in freedom than they had been in slavery.

Nor was Washington content only to influence the fate of the slaves for whom he was directly, or indirectly through marriage, responsible. In a further provision of his Will he addresses the status of slaves held by a sister-in-law, but ultimately entitled to him. These were slaves Washington had not known, nor even owned, save by legal prescriptions. Thirty-three such persons, in settling the estate of Bartholomew Dandridge, had been taken in execution, sold, and purchased in on his own account. This illustrated, by the way, how one becomes a major slave holder without so much as lifting a finger; it had happened to Washington before. Of these slaves, whom he had never owned or used, Washington provided that they would continue to attend the widow, his sister-in-law, while she lived, but thereafter without regard to any other heirs or relations they shall receive their freedom if forty years old and upwards. For those under forty but above sixteen they shall serve seven years and then be freed in the terms of indentured servitude, primarily for whites at that time. While those sixteen and under shall serve until 25 years of age and then be free.

The common principle for Washington was freedom, subject to such conditions as a social state made prudent or necessary. But clearly announced and consistently provided, it was important Washington showed himself a responsible steward before his own example could compel the stewardship of others. Washington provided for his own estate in a manner that reveals his excellence in judgment and in character.