

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Trials and Triumphs of Presiding from “Washingtonianism”

MYRON MAGNET

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In this final excerpt from his 2012 essay, “Washingtonianism,” Myron Magnet offers a synoptic account of Washington’s presidency, its trials and its successes. The position of popularly elected chief executive of a large republic was simply unprecedented, not only in America but throughout human history, and a crucial part of Washington’s task was “inventing the presidency.” In addition, he had to endure mounting public criticism and manage huge battles, with formidable opponents even within his cabinet, over policies domestic and foreign, regarding the nation’s financial system, economic development and commerce, the French Revolution and the ensuing war between France and England, the insurrection of the Whiskey Rebellion, and the opening of the Mississippi River and expansion into the Ohio territory and the southwest. But in the end, Magnet concludes, “despite all the rancor—irksome to him but mere static in the music of history—he had done what he set out to do.”

Imagining yourself in Washington’s unscripted position, how would you go about writing the script for the American presidency? Why would it be important to maintain a fine line between “superiority” and “equality,” and to separate private life and affections from public duties? Why was Washington so roundly criticized, and for what? Why did Washington back Hamilton’s plan for a national bank, and was he wise to do so? Why, despite great opposition from within his administration, and his own longing for home, did Washington take a second term of office? What challenges to Washington’s presidency, and to the new republic, were raised by the French Revolution and the activities of the undiplomatic French ambassador, Genêt? What was the significance of the Whiskey Rebellion, and why did Washington personally lead the troops against it? How would you assess the significance of the Neutrality Proclamation for the development of the United States? What, in sum, was the legacy of Washington’s presidency?

After he took the oath of office in a trembling voice on the balcony of New York’s Federal Hall on April 30, 1789, he began his inaugural address by confessing his “anxieties” over accepting the presidency, and he described the “conflict of emotions” he felt over “the magnitude and difficulty of the trust” he was assuming, and his

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“despondence” over the “inferior endowments” he brought to it. This wasn’t just formulaic modesty. As he explained to Graham, he realized that he would have to play a role for which no one had written the script. There had never been such a thing as the president of the United States before, or a president of any modern republic. There was no State of the Union Address, no “Hail to the Chief,” no cabinet, no White House, no chief of protocol. “It was to be, in the first instance, in a considerable degree, a government of accomodation as well as a government of Laws. Much was to be done by *prudence*, much by *conciliation*, much by *firmness*.” There was so much he had to make up as he went along, out of his own judgment, experience, and instinct, and he had to bring his audience along with him by force of character. “Few . . . can realise what a difficult and delicate part which a man in my situation had to act,” he wrote Graham. “I walk on untrodden ground. There is scarcely any action, whose motives may not be subject to double interpretation. There is scarcely any part of my conduct wch may not hereafter be drawn into precedent.”

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Continue reading Magnet’s essay at *City Journal*: www.city-journal.org/2012/22_2_urb-george-washington.html. This selection is composed of the last 31 paragraphs of that essay.