

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Greatness of George Washington

GORDON S. WOOD

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In this wide-ranging essay, published in 1992, the distinguished historian of the American Revolution and early republic Gordon S. Wood (b. 1933) offers a penetrating account of the character and career of George Washington, in defense of his thesis that Washington “was truly a great man and the greatest president we have ever had.” Wood’s review of Washington’s life and deeds revisits many matters presented in earlier selections—for example, Washington’s interest in “Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour” and Addison’s Cato, and Washington’s surrender of his commission as head of the American armies. But he weaves them together into a coherent picture that, he thinks, should clear up the apparent enigma of George Washington and re-establish Washington’s pre-eminence on the roster of American greatness.

Early in the essay, Wood calls Washington “a thoroughly 18th-century figure” and “our only true classical hero.” What does he mean by these characterizations? How does Wood explain and defend his claims (in Part II) that “Washington’s genius, his greatness, lay in his character”? What is the connection between Washington’s moral greatness and (1) his earnestness, (2) his modesty, and (3) his concern for fame—and how might they be important for his capacity to lead? Has Wood succeeded in defending Washington’s preoccupation with his reputation? Why does Wood regard Washington’s laying down his sword as “the greatest act of his life,” and, in combination with his 1783 circular letter¹ promising to retire from public life, as his “legacy” to his countrymen? What, according to Wood, are Washington’s greatest achievements as president, and why does he (again) regard his most important act as the one when he cedes power? Wood’s Washington became an anachronism even before the end of his life, no longer suited for the politics of the country he fathered. He was “an extraordinary heroic man who made rule by more ordinary mortals possible.” Is making the world safe for less excellent human beings to rise a sufficient reason to keep Washington first in our (more ordinary) hearts?

George Washington may still be first in war and first in peace, but he no longer seems to be first in the hearts of his countrymen. Or at least in the hearts of American historians. A

¹ Read Washington’s circular letter at http://www.pbs.org/georgewashington/multimedia/heston/circular_letter.html.

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recent poll of 900 American historians shows that Washington has dropped to third place in presidential greatness behind Lincoln and FDR. Which only goes to show how little American historians know about American history.

Read the rest of Wood's essay at <http://www.vqronline.org/articles/1992/spring/wood-greatness-george-washington/>.

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