

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

George Washington! A Funeral Oration on his Death

HENRY LEE

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On December 14, 1799, at the age of 67, George Washington died at home in Mount Vernon of pneumonia, contracted a mere two days earlier. His death was widely and deeply mourned in the United States and abroad. On December 26, 1799, at the request of Congress, Representative Henry “Light-Horse Harry” Lee III (1756–1818) of Virginia—former cavalry commander in the Revolutionary War, later governor of Virginia, and father of Robert E. Lee—delivered the following funeral oration before a joint session of both houses of Congress. Lee reviews in order the significant events in Washington’s life of devoted service, from the French and Indian War to his final letter to President Adams; offers a stirring two-paragraph summation; describes his comportment as he lay painfully dying; and finishes by conjuring a vision of Washington’s ghost, offering posthumous comfort and instruction to his people. The epithet “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen” we owe to Henry Lee.

What are the dominant themes of Lee’s eulogy of Washington? Which parts of it do you find most impressive or most moving? What, according to Lee, is the core of Washington’s character? The core of his achievement? What is the meaning of each line of praise in the paragraph fourth from the end (“To his equals . . .”)? With what final impression are you left? What does the United States today owe to Washington? What do we owe to his memory?

In obedience to your will, I rise, your humble organ, with the hope of executing a part of the system of public mourning which you have been pleased to adopt, commemorative of the death of the most illustrious and most beloved personage this country has ever produced; and which, while it transmits to posterity your sense of the awful event, faintly represents your knowledge of the consummate excellence you so cordially honor.

Desperate, indeed, is any attempt on earth to meet correspondingly this dispensation of Heaven; for, while with pious resignation we submit to the will of an all-gracious Providence, we can never cease lamenting, in our finite view of Omnipotent Wisdom, the heart-rending privation for which our nation weeps. When the civilized world shakes to its centre; when every moment gives birth to strange and momentous changes; when our

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peaceful quarter of the globe, exempt as it happily has been from any share in the slaughter of the human race, may yet be compelled to abandon her pacific policy, and to risk the doleful casualties of war; what limit is there to the extent of our loss? None within the reach of my words to express; none which your feelings will not disavow.

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The founder of our federate republic—our bulwark in war, our guide in peace, is no more! Oh, that this were but questionable! Hope, the comforter of the wretched, would pour into our agonizing hearts its balmy dew. But, alas! there is no hope for us; our Washington is removed forever! Possessing the stoutest frame and purest mind, he had passed nearly to his sixty-eighth year in the enjoyment of high health, when, habituated by his care of us to neglect himself, a slight cold, disregarded, became inconvenient on Friday, oppressive on Saturday, and, defying every medical interposition, before the morning of Sunday put an end to the best of men. An end, did I say? His fame survives! bounded only by the limits of the earth, and by the extent of the human mind. He survives in our hearts—in the growing knowledge of our children—in the affection of the good throughout the world. And when our monuments shall be done away; when nations now existing shall be no more; when even our young and far-spreading empire shall have perished; still will our Washington's glory unfaded shine, and die not, until love of virtue cease on earth, or earth itself sinks into chaos!

How, my fellow-citizens, shall I single to your grateful hearts his pre-eminent worth? Where shall I begin, in opening to your view a character throughout sublime? Shall I speak of his warlike achievements, all springing from obedience to his country's will, all directed to his country's good?

Will you go with me to the banks of the Monongahela, to see your youthful Washington supporting, in the dismal hour of Indian victory, the ill-fated Braddock, and saving, by his judgment and by his valor, the remains of a defeated army, pressed by the conquering savage foe? or when, oppressed America nobly resolving to risk her all in defense of her violated rights, he was elevated by the unanimous voice of Congress to the command of her armies? Will you follow him to the high grounds of Boston, where, to an undisciplined, courageous, and virtuous yeomanry, his presence gave the stability of system, and infused the invincibility of love of country? Or shall I carry you to the painful scenes of Long Island, Work Island, and New Jersey, when, combating superior and gallant armies, aided by powerful fleets, and led by chiefs high in the roll of fame, he stood the bulwark of our safety, undismayed by disaster, unchanged by change of fortune? Or will you view him in the precarious fields of Trenton, where deep gloom,

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unnerving every arm, reigned triumphant through our thinned, worn down, unaided ranks—himself unmoved? Dreadful was the night. It was about this time of winter. The storm raged. The Delaware, rolling furiously with floating ice, forbade the approach of man. Washington, self-collected, viewed the tremendous scene. His country called. Unappalled by surrounding dangers, he passed to the hostile shore; he fought; he conquered. The morning sun cheered the American world. Our country rose on the event; and her dauntless chief, pursuing his blow, completed in the lawns of Princeton what his vast soul had conceived on the shores of Delaware.

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Thence to the strong grounds of Morristown he led his small but gallant band; and through an eventful winter, by the high efforts of his genius, whose matchless force was measurable only by the growth of difficulties, he held in check formidable hostile legions, conducted by a chief experienced in the art of war, and famed for his valor on the ever memorable heights of Abraham, where fell Wolfe, Montcalm, and since, our much lamented Montgomery;¹ all covered with glory. In this fortunate interval, produced by his masterly conduct, our fathers, ourselves, animated by his resistless example, rallied around our country's standard, and continued to follow her beloved chief through the various and trying scenes to which the destinies of our Union led.

Who is there that has forgotten the vales of Brandywine, the fields of Germantown, or the plains of Monmouth? Everywhere present, wants of every kind obstructing, numerous and valiant armies encountering, himself a host, he assuaged our sufferings, limited our privations, and upheld our tottering republic. Shall I display to you the spread of the fire of his soul, by rehearsing the praises of the hero of Saratoga, and his much loved compeer of the Carolinas? No; our Washington wears not borrowed glory. To Gates, to Greene,² he gave without reserve the applause due to their eminent merit; and long may the chiefs of Saratoga and of Eutaws receive the grateful respect of a grateful people.

Moving in his own orbit, he imparted heat and light to his most distant satellites; and combining the physical and moral force of all within his sphere, with irresistible weight

¹ *The Battle of the Plains of Abraham, fought on September 13, 1759 outside of Quebec City, was a decisive battle in the Seven Years' War; as a result of the battle, the British gained control of much of modern-day Canada. Both Louis-Joseph de Montcalm (1712–59), the French commander, and James Wolfe (1727–59), the British commander, were killed in the course of the battle. Richard Montgomery (1738–75), a major general in the Continental Army, was killed near Quebec City during Benedict Arnold's invasion of Canada in November 1775.*

² *Horatio Gates (1727–1806) and Nathanael Greene (1742–1786) served as generals under George Washington during the Revolutionary War.*

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he took his course, commiserating folly, disdaining vice, dismaying treason, and invigorating despondency; until the auspicious hour arrived, when, united with the intrepid forces of a potent and magnanimous ally, he brought to submission the since conqueror of India; thus finishing his long career of military glory with a lustre corresponding to his great name, and, in this his last act of war, affixing the seal of fate to our nation's birth.

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To the horrid din of battle sweet peace succeeded; and our virtuous chief, mindful only of the common good, in a moment tempting personal aggrandizement, hushed the discontents of growing sedition, and, surrendering his power into the hands from which he had received it, converted his sword into a ploughshare; teaching an admiring world that to be truly great you must be truly good.

Were I to stop here, the picture would be incomplete, and the task imposed unfinished. Great as was our Washington in war, and as much as did that greatness contribute to produce the American republic, it is not in war alone his pre-eminence stands conspicuous. His various talents, combining all the capacities of a statesman with those of a soldier, fitted him alike to guide the councils and the armies of our nation. Scarcely had he rested from his martial toils, while his invaluable parental advice was still sounding in our ears, when he, who had been our shield and our sword, was called forth to act a less splendid, but more important part.

Possessing a clear and penetrating mind, a strong and sound judgment, calmness and temper for deliberation, with invincible firmness and perseverance in resolutions maturely formed; drawing information from all; acting from himself, with incorruptible integrity and unvarying patriotism; his own superiority and the public confidence alike marked him as the man designed by Heaven to lead in the great political as well as military events which have distinguished the era of his life.

The finger of an over-ruling Providence, pointing at Washington, was neither mistaken or unobserved, when, to realize the vast hopes to which our revolution had given birth, a change of political system became indispensable.

How novel, how grand the spectacle! Independent States stretched over an immense territory, and known only by common difficulty, clinging to their union as the rock of their safety; deciding, by frank comparison of their relative condition, to rear on that rock, under the guidance of reason, a common government, through whose commanding

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protection, liberty and order, with their long train of blessings, should be safe to themselves, and the sure inheritance of their posterity.

This arduous task devolved on citizens selected by the people, from knowledge of their wisdom and confidence in their virtue. In this august assembly of sages and of patriots, Washington of course was found; and, as if acknowledged to be most wise where all were wise, with one voice he was declared their chief. How well he merited this rare distinction, how faithful were the labors of himself and his compatriots, the work of their hands, and our union, strength, and prosperity, the fruits of that work, best attest.

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But to have essentially aided in presenting to his country this consummation of our hopes, neither satisfied the claims of his fellow-citizens on his talents, nor those duties which the possession of those talents imposed. Heaven had not infused into his mind such an uncommon share of its ethereal spirit to remain unemployed, nor bestowed on him his genius unaccompanied with the corresponding duty of devoting it to the common good. To have framed a Constitution was showing only, without realizing, the general happiness. This great work remained to be done; and America, steadfast in her preference, with one voice summoned her beloved Washington, unpracticed as he was in the duties of civil administration, to execute this last act in the completion of the national felicity. Obedient to her call, he assumed the high office with that self-distrust peculiar to his innate modesty, the constant attendant of pre-eminent virtue. What was the burst of joy through our anxious land on this exhilarating event is known to us all. The aged, the young, the brave, the fair, rivaled each other in demonstrations of their gratitude: and this high-wrought, delightful scene was heightened in its effect by the singular contest between the zeal of the bestowers and the avoidance of the receiver of the honors bestowed.

Commencing his administration, what heart is not charmed with the recollection of the pure and wise principles announced by himself, as the basis of his political life? He best understood the indissoluble union between virtue and happiness, between duty and advantage, between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy, and the solid rewards of public prosperity and individual felicity. Watching with an equal and comprehensive eye over this great assemblage of communities and interests, he laid the foundations of our national policy in the unerring, immutable principles of morality, based on religion, exemplifying the pre-eminence of a free government by all the attributes which win the affections of its citizens, or command the respect of the world.

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“O fortunatos nimium, sua si bona norint!”³

Leading through the complicated difficulties produced by previous obligations and conflicting interests, seconded by succeeding Houses of Congress, enlightened and patriotic, he surmounted all original obstruction, and brightened the path of our national felicity.

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The Presidential term expiring, his solicitude to exchange exaltation for humility returned with a force increased with increase of age; and he had prepared his Farewell Address to his countrymen, proclaiming his intention, when the united interposition of all around him, enforced by the eventful prospects of the epoch, produced a further sacrifice of inclination to duty. The election of President followed; and Washington, by the unanimous vote of the nation, was called to resume the chief magistracy. What a wonderful fixture of confidence! Which attracts most our admiration, a people so correct, or a citizen combining an assemblage of talents forbidding rivalry, and stifling even envy itself? Such a nation ought to be happy; such a chief must be forever revered.

War, long menaced by the Indian tribes, now broke out; and the terrible conflict, deluging Europe with blood, began to shed its baneful influence over our happy land. To the first, outstretching his invincible arm, under the orders of the gallant Wayne,⁴ the American eagle soared triumphant through distant forests. Peace followed victory; and the melioration of the condition of the enemy followed peace. Godlike virtue! which uplifts even the subdued savage.

To the second he opposed himself. New and delicate was the conjuncture, and great was the stake. Soon did his penetrating mind discern and seize the only course, continuing to us all the felicity enjoyed. He issued his proclamation of neutrality. This index to his whole subsequent conduct was sanctioned by the approbation of both Houses of Congress, and by the approving voice of the people.

To this sublime policy he inviolably adhered, unmoved by foreign intrusion, unshaken by domestic turbulence.

*“Justum et tenacem propositi virum,
Non civium ardor prava jubentium,*

³ Virgil, “O, how happy are the tillers of the ground, if only they knew their blessings!”

⁴ Anthony Wayne (1745–96), a general in the Continental Army.

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*Non vultus instantis tyranni,
Mente quatit solida.”⁵*

Maintaining his pacific system at the expense of no duty, America, faithful to herself, and unstained in her honor, continued to enjoy the delights of peace, while afflicted Europe mourns in every quarter under the accumulated miseries of an unexampled war; miseries in which our happy country must have shared, had not our pre-eminent Washington been as firm in council as he was brave in the field.

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Pursuing steadfastly his course, he held safe the public happiness, preventing foreign war, and quelling internal discord, till the revolving period of a third election approached, when he executed his interrupted, but inextinguishable desire of returning to the humble walks of private life.

The promulgation of his fixed resolution stopped the anxious wishes of an affectionate people from adding a third unanimous testimonial of their unabated confidence in the man so long enthroned in their hearts. When before was affection like this exhibited on earth? Turn over the records of ancient Greece; review the annals of mighty Rome; examine the volumes of modern Europe—you search in vain. America and her Washington only afford the dignified exemplification.

The illustrious personage called by the national voice in succession to the arduous office of guiding a free people had new difficulties to encounter. The amicable effort of settling our difficulties with France, begun by Washington, and pursued by his successor in virtue as in station, proving abortive, America took measures of self-defense. No sooner was the public mind roused by a prospect of danger, than every eye was turned to the friend of all, though secluded from public view, and gray in public service. The virtuous veteran, following his plough, received the unexpected summons with mingled emotions of indignation at the unmerited ill treatment of his country, and of a determination once more to risk his all in her defense.

The annunciation of these feelings in his affecting letter to the President, accepting the command of the army, concludes his official conduct.

⁵ Horace, “The just man, firm of purpose, cannot be shaken in his rocklike soul, by the heat of fellow citizens clamouring for what is wrong, nor by the presence of a threatening tyrant.”

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First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in the humble and endearing scenes of private life. Pious, just, humane, temperate, and sincere; uniform, dignified, and commanding, his example was as edifying to all around him as were the effects of that example lasting.

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To his equals he was condescending, to his inferiors kind, and to the dear object of his affections exemplarily tender. Correct throughout, vice shuddered in his presence, and virtue always felt his fostering hand. The purity of his private character gave effulgence to his public virtues.

His last scene comported with the whole tenor of his life. Although in extreme pain, not a sigh, not a groan escaped him; and with undisturbed serenity he closed his well-spent life. Such was the man America has lost! Such was the man for whom our nation mourns.

Methinks I see his august image, and hear, falling from his venerable lips, these deep sinking words:

“Cease, Sons of America, lamenting our separation. Go on, and confirm by your wisdom the fruits of our joint councils, joint efforts, and common dangers. Reverence religion; diffuse knowledge throughout your land; patronize the arts and sciences; let liberty and order be inseparable companions; control party spirit, the bane of free government; observe good faith to, and cultivate peace with all nations; shut up every avenue to foreign influence; contract rather than extend national connection; rely on yourselves only: be American in thought and deed. Thus will you give immortality to that union, which was the constant object of my terrestrial labors; thus will you preserve undisturbed to the latest posterity the felicity of a people to me most dear; and thus will you supply (if my happiness is now aught to you) the only vacancy in the round of pure bliss high Heaven bestows.”