

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Washington and the Constitutional Convention from “Washingtonianism”

MYRON MAGNET

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Independence had been won for the new nation, but the large problems of governance and political structure remained. As this selection by American author and editor Myron Magnet (b. 1944), excerpted from his 2012 essay titled “Washingtonianism” (other excerpts appear above and below) indicates, there was a growing sense that the original Articles of Confederation needed to be replaced if the new republic was to flourish. Although eager to continue in his retirement and enjoyment of private life, George Washington once again answered the call to public service. He presided over the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, and, as Magnet points out, played a key role in the outcome.

What, according to Magnet, did Washington see as the defects and dangers of the Articles of Confederation? Why did he favor an “energetic central government” and growth of commerce? How might Washington’s presence at the Constitutional Convention have influenced the Constitution’s provision for energetic executive power? Although Washington was a proponent of a vigorous national government and an energetic executive, he distinguished between what Magnet calls (a) the machinery of government and (b) the culture of liberty. What is meant by each? How might they be related to each other? Why, and for what purposes, does a culture of liberty matter? Can its perpetuation be taken for granted or does it require self-conscious cultivation? What does Washington mean by “the sacred fire of liberty,” and why is it so important for the preservation of the republic? Why does Washington believe that he will have to serve as the nation’s first president?

The war was over, but neither George Washington nor George III knew it, so different does lived experience look from history crystallized in books. Almost two more years passed before the Paris peace treaty was signed in September 1783. Not until the 18th of April in '83, eight years to the day after Paul Revere’s midnight ride, could Washington announce to his troops the official end of hostilities. The war—in which one American soldier in four had died, compared with one in five in the Civil War and one in 40 in World War II—was really over, and all soldiers should be proud of “the dignified part they have been called to act . . . on the stage of human affairs” in “erecting this

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stupendous fabrick of Freedom and Empire . . . and establishing an Asylum for the poor and oppressed of all nations and religions,” he told them in his favorite theatrical imagery. “Nothing now remains but for the actors of this mighty Scene . . . to close the Drama with applause; and retire from the Military Theatre.”

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Continue reading Magnet’s essay at *City Journal*: www.city-journal.org/2012/22_2_urb-george-washington.html. This excerpt begins about halfway through the essay, at paragraph 49—“The war was over, but neither George Washington nor George III knew it”—and continues for 15 paragraphs, the final paragraph of which begins: “As he saw, with ‘a kind of gloom upon my mind,’ that he would have to served as the nation’s president. . . .”