

February 2005

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Something to Ponder On Presidents' Day

[I]f we cannot aspire at his talents as a General, a President, or a Statesman, we may imitate his virtues as a man, a citizen, and a Christian. --Abiel Holmes, Revolutionary War Surgeon

Sn two weeks, retailers will bid millions to the malls for super blowout Presidents' Day sales. But Presidents' Day wasn't always a shopper's holiday. It wasn't even called "Presidents' Day." But it did begin with George Washington, our first President.

It was 1796, Washington's last year as president that Americans thought to honor their beloved hero by celebrating his birthday with much fanfare and revelry. Within a decade, Washington's Birthday had become a deeply rooted unofficial "national holiday." Celebrations throughout the land included receptions hosted by prominent public figures, much speech making, and "Birth-night Balls." In 1885, President Arthur signed a bill making February 22, Washington's Birthday, a federal holiday.

There was also another highly esteemed president. Following Abraham Lincoln's assassination in 1865, both houses of Congress gathered for a memorial address on the occasion of his next birthday. While Lincoln's Birthday on February 12 never became a federal holiday, it was celebrated as a holiday in many states outside the old South.

In 1968, legislation designed to give federal employees three-day-weekend holidays was enacted, shifting Washington's Birthday observance to the third Monday in February. A proposal to officially change the holiday to "Presidents' Day" in honor of both Washington and Lincoln was rejected by Congress. But in 1971, when the Act went into effect, President Nixon proclaimed the third Monday in February as Presidents' Day to commemorate all past presidents. Although this idea was never intended or authorized by Congress, it gained support in many states.

Some believe that commemorating Washington, Lincoln, and "the others" on the same day, has served to diminish the importance of our two greatest statesmen in the eyes of younger Americans. Lynne Cheney, the Vice President's wife, and former director of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) under Bush 41, agrees. But she believes fading recognition of the pair is part of a bigger problem than just one fuzzy holiday.

When Democrats gained control of the White House in 1993, the NEH became a cash cow for all sorts of leftwing causes, including new standards for teaching history that placed stories of Marilyn Monroe and Gloria Steinam in school textbooks, but made no mention of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Edison. When Mrs. Cheney complained about the new standards, the U.S. Senate voted 99-1 to repudiate them.

The result of placing America's legacy in the hands of reckless caretakers is evidenced by a recent poll of seniors in America's top 55 colleges, most of whom cannot identify what period of history either Washington or Lincoln served in office. More than 56 percent do not even know that Abraham Lincoln presided over the Civil War. ¹

When Bruce Cole, the current NEH director, says his goal is to combat America's "amnesia" about its own history, he is not just thinking about college seniors or public educators. Of late, the Church has become falsely persuaded that history is divided into two compartments: Church history and secular history. HIStory, however, is one. It is the story of the growth of the God's Kingdom on Earth, and the deeds of men who serve Him, and those who do not.

As in former times, God still deals in the affairs of men. That means it is permissible, yea, profitable to be inspired by mighty men of valor living in our era; even to compare and contrast their character qualities with those who lived in earlier ages.

There are, for instance, interesting comparisons that can be made between King David and George Washington. As young men, both kept written prayer journals, both sensed a call to destiny, and both were acclaimed for astonishing feats—one in the Valley of Elah, the other at the *Battle at the Monongahela*. Both men were severely tested—one in the cave at Adullam, the other at Valley Forge; and both presided over rising empires guided by biblical principals. David impacted the fortunes of the Old World, and "George," the Modern World.

Many have heard of the deprivations endured by Washington and his army at Valley Forge, but few know that the wretched sufferings were even worse during the winter of 1779-80 in Morristown. New York harbor froze over and howling blizzards swept down on the desperate soldiers, blowing their ragged tents away, leaving them buried deep in drifts of snow. Some died for want of tents, blankets—even rags for their bare feet. Washington wrote in his journal, "We have never experienced a like extremity at any period of the war."

Perhaps the greater tragedy was that while soldiers starved and died at Morristown, not a few in the colonies were prospering under a booming wartime economy. Nearby farmers preferred to sell to the British for hard currency and many merchants would not move government clothing off their shelves at profits less than 1,000 to 1,800 percent. Congress, too, passed the buck that winter by authorizing Washington to "commandeer" supplies—which he was loathe to do. Alexander Hamilton, Washington's aide, wrote, "We begin to hate the country for its neglect of us. The country begins to hate us for our oppression of them."²

Not long after the decisive victory at Yorktown, Washington received a disturbing letter from one of his officers, complaining that soldiers had been denied food, clothing, and pay, and had risked their lives for a people that did not come to their aid. In all of this, wrote the officer, was neither justice nor gratitude. The officer went on to say that there was only one man who could give the soldiers their dues—George Washington. They were prepared to employ necessary means to make him King George I of the United States.

Washington was horrified, saying it was the worst thing that happened to him in the whole war. Unlike some under his command, the root of bitterness had found no place in George Washington. He was a forgiving man who trusted God. Thomas Jefferson later wrote, "The moderation and virtue of a single character have probably prevented this revolution from being closed, as most other have been, by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish."

Could it be that world events sometimes depend on the "moderation and virtue" of a single character? Something to ponder as we head to the malls for those super blowout sales.

Rick Forcier

Executive Director

¹ Leming, Ellington & Porter-McGee, *Where did social studies go wrong?* 8/2003, Thomas B Fordham Institute, www.edexcellence.net

² Skousen, W., *The Making of America*, 1985, The National Center for Constitutional Studies, Malta, ID, pg. 96