

Washington by Leo Rosten

¹HE WAS NOT THE WINTRY PATRIARCH of our folklore. He was a complex man, sensitive, ambitious, harboring emotions that made him “most tremendous in his wrath,” wrote Jefferson. He was honest enough with himself to be troubled by his near-deification: “The loud acclamations... which rent the skies as I walked along the streets, filled my mind with sensations as painful as they are pleasant.” Elected President, he was overwhelmed “with despondence [about my] inferior endowments.”

²A majestic figure, 6’2”, straight as an Indian, Washington was very strong, very graceful, a superlative horseman. His detractors thought him vain, haughty, condescending, but after his last official speech, he turned from the crowd with tears wetting his cheeks. He thrived amidst the spacious courtesies of the Virginia gentry, dressed in velvets, loved to dance, hunt, race horses, play cards. He was an aristocrat, but “intensely republican,” and when an old Negro bared his head and bowed, Washington responded in kind. “I cannot be less civil than a poor Negro.” His will freed his 119 slaves.

³He took long journeys alone into the frontier wilderness before he was 16, became a public-land surveyor, fought in several battles against the French and Indians. At 27, he made a most happy marriage with Martha Custis, a Tidewater planter’s widow with two children and a great fortune. He was an outstanding farmer, rotating his crops (a then-radical experiment), and made Mount Vernon one of the Colonies’ finest estates.

⁴For 15 years, Washington sat in the Virginia House of Burgesses while England’s political and economic repressions rubbed the colonists raw. British mercantilists wanted to keep the Colonies agricultural, and pressured them

to sell to, and buy from, the homeland alone. Punitive taxes (e.g., on tea) were foolish, the quartering of troops in private homes was incendiary.

⁵No orator, no rabble-rouser, by temperament no rebel, Washington envisaged no break with the Crown, at first, but more and more opposed Parliament’s taxes. The Thirteen Colonies would soon be “drenched with blood, or inhabited by slaves,” he said. “Can a virtuous man hesitate in his choice?” In 1774, he made an electrifying statement: “I will raise a thousand men, subsist them at my own expense and march myself at their head for the relief of Boston.” He became commander in chief of the Revolutionary forces. His salary: expenses. He led his motley soldiers and bickering generals for eight bitter years.

⁶Washington was not a great military strategist; he committed serious tactical blunders; but he was unmatched as a leader of men. He hammered out a fighting force with inflexible justice: courts-martial, floggings. “Discipline,” he wrote, “is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable.” His resolution was as unlimited as his courage. “Defeat is only a reason or exertion.” His absolute determination won his troops’ confidence, his absolute fairness, their loyalty. Few commanders were ever so beleaguered. “Hideous civil strife” tore the Colonies apart. A feeble Congress could not tax the states and would not give Washington enough men, ammunition, food, clothing. Recruits served a few months and disappeared after training. The army (paid in paper so depreciated that a colonel’s pay could not buy oats for his horse) was riddled by rumors, desertions, intrigues against Washington.

⁷He consistently avoided battles that might destroy his army, warring instead

with raids and retreats from Boston to Pennsylvania. Many cried that his procrastinations were lengthening the war, but he knew that so long as he kept an army in the field, England had not beaten his cause. A movement to make Washington king brought his blistering rejection of an idea "I view with abhorrence and reprehend with severity."

⁸At Valley Forge, he husbanded and drilled a desolate, badly battered force—half-starving, half-naked—that slept "under frost and snow without... blankets." Keeping any army together over that brutal winter (a third of his men deserted) was unbelievable. His great military coup was the march from the Hudson southward to corner Cornwallis at Yorktown, where 11,000 American and 9,000 French troops—and Admiral de Grasse's naval blockade with 30 French ships—brought victory on October 19, 1781.

⁹Washington presided over the Constitutional Convention for five months. He rarely spoke, but there might well have been no Constitution and no union of the states without him. Now, he yearned only for Mount Vernon, but he was unanimously elected President, and he could never deny his sense of duty.

¹⁰He endowed the Presidency with a stateliness, and his nation with a stature, that won universal respect. Probably he alone could have resolved the conflict between states' rights and Federal power, free traders and protectionists, Jefferson, his brilliant Secretary of State, and Hamilton, his brilliant Secretary of the Treasury, whom his temperament and principles favored.

¹¹He was no political thinker or theorist, but his judgment was almost infallible. He established executive power, firmly circumscribed the Senate's right to "advise and consent," put down a rebellion in Pennsylvania's backcountry. He helped Hamilton persuade Congress to assume the states' debts and establish confidence in

the nation's financial viability. Power neither seduced nor corrupted him, nor tempted him to exploit his gigantic prestige. He was no Caesar, no Cromwell, no Napoleon.

¹²Indifferently educated, he held "knowledge...the surest basis of public happiness," urged Federal aid to colleges and encouraged science and letters. Against tremendous pressure, he refused to fulfill our military alliance with France, in its war with England. This and the ill-starred Jay Treaty brought him virulent abuse not suited "to a Nero...or even to a common pickpocket."

¹³The Republic found sustenance in his counsel: "Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair." "To be prepared for war is one of the [best] means of preserving peace." His Farewell Address advised Americans to avoid "permanent alliances with...the foreign world"-- but continued, "we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extra-ordinary emergencies." He refused a third term.

¹⁴He could not equal Jefferson in brilliance, Franklin in philosophic breadth, Madison in statecraft, Hamilton in intellectual power, Adams (who called him "too illiterate, unlearned, unread for his station") in political sophistication. But no man in all that scintillating congregation surpassed him in valor, in fortitude, in selfless fidelity to his country. He was a monument of honor, a triumph of sheer character. "His integrity was most pure," said Jefferson. "No motives of interest...friendship or hatred [biased] his decision. He was...in every sense of the words, a wise, a good, and a great man...[He merits] from Man an everlasting remembrance."

—LEO ROSTEN

FROM *LOOK* MAGAZINE, "THEY MADE OUR WORLD," 8 MARCH 1966.