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His Excellency: George Washington,

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time when Japan had conquered vast swaths of South East Asia and the South West Pacific.

There are chapters devoted to a number of distinguished wartime Australian senior naval officers, and others that (re)address some of the perennial mysteries, such as the complete loss (and vanishing) of the cruiser HMAS *Sydney* on the eve of the Japanese entry into the war. The book also devotes a significant amount of attention to the Australian-U.S. alliance. Indeed, such concentration is not surprising. World War II represented a sea change for Australian security thinking, with attention diverted away from the United Kingdom and toward the United States as strategic partner within the region. Indeed, American readers will surely find interesting the accounts in chapter 7 (“The Pacific War: A Strategic Overview”) and chapter 8 (“Forging an Alliance? The American Naval Commitment to the South Pacific, 1940–42”) of the Australian-U.S. military partnership within the Pacific campaign. Particularly enlightening are the conclusions drawn of the essential correctness of prewar U.S. strategic naval thinking and the thorough testing of naval war plans at the Naval War College. On the other side, I am sure that American interest will also be piqued by the chapter by Commodore Loxton (retired), giving his account of postwar American revisionism concerning the battle of Savo Island. In this chapter he notes his attendance as a student at the Naval War College’s newly founded Naval Command Course (as the Naval Command College, today the senior of the school’s two international programs, was then known), and in 1959, his participation in a study that emphasized U.S. virtue

and Australian failings in that battle. Having been a badly wounded participant in the battle, he observes, “My arguments against some of those hypotheses were therefore largely based on an innate belief that we Australians and our Royal Navy Admiral could not have done as badly as we were led to believe. At the time I thought that I had not made much of an impression, but the following year Savo was not studied.”

David Stevens has produced a book that is both highly readable and engaging. He provides a much needed public face for the Royal Australian Navy wartime experience, and he effectively preserves the legacy of the period. Since the Second World War, the RAN has continued to fight alongside its U.S. Navy allies in conflicts ranging from Korea and Vietnam through Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.

For the American reader, this book provides rare insight into the historical events that formed the genesis of the modern Royal Australian Navy identity and thus has allowed an inside understanding of the impulses that continue to drive it. The RAN is a steadfast and reliable partner to the USN; gaining this appreciation of it is reason enough to read this valuable book.

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Ellis, Joseph J. *His Excellency: George Washington*. New York: Knopf, 2004. 320pp. \$26.95

Fischer, David Hackett. *Washington’s Crossing*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004. 564pp. \$35

Wiencek, Henry. *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves and the Creation of America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. 404pp. \$26

Our nation's first commander in chief, George Washington, is back in the news. At Mount Vernon they are striving to recast Washington's image as America's first action hero, while also sponsoring a high-tech, computer-driven rejuvenation of him to figure out exactly what he looked like at ages nineteen, forty-five, and fifty-seven. These current labors, part of an eighty-five-million-dollar "To Keep Him First" campaign, have been bolstered by the efforts of others. The University of Virginia is in the process of publishing *The Papers of George Washington* (fifty-two of the ninety volumes have been completed), and the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art recently exhibited thirteen stunning portraits of Washington by the Rhode Island-born artist Gilbert Stuart.

A recent outburst of serious and extremely enjoyable books about the man has reinforced this worthwhile cause. The three books chosen for this review, all published within the last two years, emphasize a particularly important theme concerning Washington's incredibly eventful life—the development of his character and his growth as a man. One is a full biography, one focuses on the American Revolution, and the third explores Washington's attitudes on slavery; they make for a rich collection of informative reading.

It is generally accepted that Washington has become ever more remote from the hearts and minds of his countrymen and women. To use a prevalent expression, he is perhaps the "deadest, whitest male in American history." To paraphrase

Richard Brookhiser, he is in our textbooks and in our wallets but not in our hearts. Perhaps these books will at least help put him back in our minds, if not in our hearts.

The leadoff selection, *His Excellency: George Washington*, is a concise and exceedingly readable biography by Joseph Ellis, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (Knopf, 2000). Ellis's earlier biographies examined the characters of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. He once again has chosen to center his work on the character of his subject. Ellis has set out to write not another epic portrait of Washington but rather a fresh picture focused tightly on his character and based in part upon new scholarship on the revolutionary era. Ellis's goal is to relate how Washington became who he was. He gives us this new portrait of Washington's growth most admirably.

In looking for patterns of emerging behavior, Ellis cites the combination of Washington's bottomless ambition and near obsession with self-control. He also traces the development of Washington's personality, beginning with his experiences as a young man in the wilderness of the Ohio Valley. The author states that what in later years would be regarded as aloofness and cold reserve began with Washington's need as an inexperienced colonial officer in the French and Indian War to insulate himself and his reputation from criticism. To do this, he had to rely on the hard core of his own merit and self-control, his strongest assets as a young man on the way up.

Ellis notes that nothing had a greater influence on Washington's rise to distinction than his marriage to the widow

Martha Dandridge Custis. Her immense dowry launched Washington to the level of great planters in Virginia's Northern Neck region and provided the foundation for his rise in wealth and influence.

Ellis is particularly effective in reminding readers that nothing was inevitable about the success of either the American Revolution or Washington's role in it. If Washington had not been able to learn from his mistakes early in the war, caused in large part by his naturally aggressive strategy, the conflict could well have ended in defeat and subjugation for the colonies. Washington himself wrote, upon initially arriving at Yorktown, "What may be in the Womb of Fate is very uncertain." Nonetheless, Washington was the centerpiece around which the Continental Army and the cause had formed in 1775, and it was Washington who sustained the army for nearly eight years of desperate fighting, which enabled the ultimate victory.

Ellis also notes that historians have recently concluded that the American Revolution occurred simultaneously with a virulent smallpox epidemic in the colonies; it claimed about a hundred thousand lives, many of them soldiers. He makes the compelling case that one of Washington's most consequential and strategic decisions during the war was his policy of requiring smallpox inoculation for all troops serving in the Continental Army.

In what Ellis calls "the greatest exit in American history," Washington returned his commission to Congress in 1783. His retirement from power and return to Mount Vernon have been noted by other biographers as the greatest act of Washington's life. However, the author also argues that

Washington's unique character was primarily molded by his experiences during the Revolution. Just as he had employed a Fabian strategy of avoiding battles that would have risked the Continental Army's destruction, he also "fashioned a kind of Fabian presidency that sustained the credibility of the federal government by avoiding political battles that threatened to push federal sovereignty further and faster than public opinion allowed."

In the final chapter of this well written book, Ellis states that there were two distinct creative moments in the founding of America: the winning of independence and the creation of nationhood. Washington was the central figure in both events, and his judgment, in Ellis's view, on all major political questions proved prescient—this "remarkably reliable judgment derived from his elemental understanding of how power worked in the world."

Ellis ends his search for how Washington became the "unquestioned superior" of all the Founding Fathers by declaring that Washington "was that rarest of men: a supremely realistic visionary, a prudent prophet . . . devoted to getting the big things right. His genius was his judgment."

If the American Revolution was the key experience in forming Washington's personality and character, David Hackett Fischer's outstanding book *Washington's Crossing* goes a very long way to explain why. Fischer, a historian at Brandeis University and author of the equally masterful *Paul Revere's Ride* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1994) and *Albion's Seed* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), reminds us again that historical events are

not the products of irresistible forces outside the influences of human choice. They are instead the result of “decisions and actions by people who had opportunities to choose and act otherwise.” The summer, fall, and winter of 1776 was a time when human choices and actions truly mattered in determining the fate of the rebelling American colonies. In the famous words of Thomas Paine, first published in *The American Crisis* on 19 December of that year, they were “times that try men’s souls.”

The British had landed more than thirty-three thousand crack troops near New York during the summer and had driven Washington and the Continental Army from New York across New Jersey all the way to the banks of the Delaware River. They also had seventy warships lurking off the coast. America had none. The British had taken Rhode Island and threatened Philadelphia. American morale was at a nadir, while British smugness and confidence were soaring, and the “glorious cause” hung by a slender thread. This “cataract of disaster” was compounded both by the thousands of Americans who were signing oaths of loyalty to the crown and by the hard evidence at roll call that the Continental Army was shrinking daily. To reverse this desperate situation seemed almost hopeless, but it happened; Fischer masterfully relates not only how but why, and the deeper implications of it all.

Fischer expertly recounts the even now unbelievably dramatic facts. On Christmas night of 1776, Washington led a ragged army of 2,400 colonials across the ice-choked Delaware River during a raging storm. After marching all night, they surprised and defeated a garrison of 1,500 tough and well-led Hessian

soldiers at Trenton. These professional troops were not drunk from celebrating Christmas but exhausted from standing vigilant guard and fighting off harassing militia attacks. Within a few days after the New Year, the American forces had thwarted a violent British counterattack in Trenton, then slipped away overnight to surprise and defeat a British brigade at Princeton. These victories assuredly revitalized the American cause and saved the American Revolution.

Fischer greatly enriches the story of these historic and climactic events. He argues that after the loss of New York, Washington changed and adopted a new strategy that became an element of the new American way of war. This strategy was in part Fabian, as noted by Joseph Ellis—that is, to avoid a risky general action but strike only when a “brilliant stroke could be made with . . . probability of success.” Washington also adapted and learned to use artillery, initiative, speed, and intelligence as force multipliers, and he evolved an adaptive system of counsel and command that contrasted markedly with the rigidity of control in the British military.

The new way of war also included much more. It embodied Washington’s belief in what John Adams called a “policy of humanity,” extending quarter in battle and insisting on the decent treatment of prisoners, which aligned the conduct of the war with the values of the Revolution. These values were further extended by Washington’s strict prohibitions against the pillaging of civilian property and by his insistence on deference to his civilian superiors in Congress.

Fischer also comments on the unabashedly heroic painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, by Emanuel Leutze.

He reminds us that the magnificent (twenty by twelve feet) canvas that now hangs in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art is highly symbolic. Completed in 1851, the painting was intended to inspire the mid-nineteenth-century European revolutionaries and depict the crucial importance of Washington's ability to unite the diverse Americans pictured in the boat to pull together in the common cause of freedom.

Fischer concludes his superlative book in the same manner Leutze conceived his painting—with a message for his contemporaries. He states that the message of Washington's crossing "tells us that Americans in an earlier generation were capable of acting in a higher spirit, and so are we." Trenton and Princeton were brilliant strokes, and *Washington's Crossing* is both a brilliant description of the events and an illumination of the man who made them possible.

If Americans in an earlier generation were capable of acting in a higher spirit, there is a reasoned argument to be made that George Washington himself did so particularly in the fourth paragraph of his last will and testament. After the brief first sections of the will, where Washington declared himself a citizen of the United States, settled his few debts, and provided for his wife, Martha, he began the fourth paragraph with the following extraordinary sentence: "Upon the decease of my wife, it is my Will & desire that all the Slaves which I hold in my own right, shall receive their freedom."

The story tracing Washington's tortured journey to personal awareness and moral change concerning slavery, and ultimately to the act of emancipation, is

superbly told by Henry Wiencek in his revisionist work *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*. Wiencek, winner of a National Book Critics Circle Award for his earlier book *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White* (St. Martin's, 1999), sees the Revolution as the primary experience that motivated Washington's reflection and ultimate change on slavery. Wiencek does not see Washington's freeing of his slaves as a parting act of grace or as a sign of his natural benevolence but as a testament to a "profound moral struggle," one that represented a "repudiation of a lifetime of mastery."

Tracing Washington's path to repudiation of slavery is a difficult task, necessarily filled with subtleties of interpretation. As one historian has said of Washington, "no more elusive personality exists in history." Nonetheless, *Imperfect God* aptly reinforces what Joseph Ellis notes, that the Revolution transformed almost everything, both for the country and for Washington.

Washington initially came to own slaves through inheritance from his father (at age eleven) and then from his half-brother Lawrence. Although he used his slaves and his wife's dower slaves to work the five joining farms of Mount Vernon his entire life, there are clues that Washington's long transformation concerning slavery began at least as early as 1769. Wiencek emphasizes that Washington took part in a slave lottery in Williamsburg that year and witnessed a slave auction "consisting chiefly of boys and girls, from 14 or 15 down to the ages of two or three years." Wiencek believes that this auction and similar experiences caused Washington to reflect on the monstrous cruelty of breaking apart families, so

that by the mid-1770s he had offered to buy an entire family he did not need rather than separate its members. In 1786, Washington wrote that he never wanted to purchase another slave unless there were most unusual circumstances, referring to “that species of property which I have no inclination to possess.” Yet it was as commander in chief in Boston in 1775 that Washington really began to see blacks as human beings rather than as something to be owned. He must have been shocked on arriving in Massachusetts to see large numbers of black men bearing arms. He was introduced to a black hero of Bunker Hill, and the black poet Phillis Wheatley wrote a poem in his honor. In response to Wheatley’s poem and her accompanying letter, Washington invited her to his headquarters in Cambridge. He was changing his view of blacks, and the greatest impact of this change was in the Continental Army. His general orders issued 30 December 1775 stated: “As the General is informed, that Numbers of Free Negroes are desirous of enlisting, he gives leave to recruiting Officers, to entertain them, and promises to lay the matter before the Congress.” This was a new policy, and according to Wiencek, “Washington won the Revolutionary War with an army that was more integrated than any military force until the Vietnam War.”

Wiencek further traces Washington’s change in attitude after the war. With the encouragement of the Marquis de Lafayette, Washington, before he became president, had deeply reconsidered the implications of slavery. In 1786, he wrote that he hoped the Virginia legislature would abolish slavery “by slow, sure, & imperceptible degrees.” Wiencek believes there is evidence that

by 1789 Washington had experienced a moral epiphany, as he outlined a plan in secret to sell his western lands to finance gradual emancipation of his slaves. In 1794, Washington wrote to a relative, “I am principled against selling negroes, as you would do cattle in a market,” and he later stated to a friend that the “unfortunate condition” of his slaves “has been the only unavoidable subject of regret.”

In the end, he did what no other slave-owning Founding Father did. He freed the 123 slaves he had legal control over at Martha’s death and provided from his estate for the care and basic education of those who most needed it for the next thirty-three years. All this was done despite his wife’s (and his extended family’s) embittered opposition. He realized that this act made him a stranger in his own land. He had once remarked to Edmund Randolph that if slavery continued to divide America, “he had made up his mind to move and be of the northern.”

Wiencek’s book gives a balanced view of his subject. He is careful to place Washington in the context of his times, neither apologizing for nor condemning him. He does not avoid the fact that Washington owned, worked, punished, bought, and sold slaves. Yet the sum of Washington’s stature as a founder is not diminished by Wiencek’s portrait but rather better brought to light.

In sum, these three excellent books help to reveal Washington as a man in full who had the self-awareness, the will, and the moral courage to change. He saw life steadily, and he tried to see it whole. There is still a great deal to admire and to learn from his personal journey as a human being.

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