

**“ON BECOMING A LIBERAL:
GUIDANCE OF GEORGE WASHINGTON”**

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**by
William B. Allen
Director, State Council of Higher Education for Virginia**

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Cover your ears—for this evening I will use a word that many shy away from. But I know you will not cover your ears—not when you have taken up the work of opening the ears, eyes, and minds of society through public policy institutes. Your endeavor is closely related to mine as an educator. I salute you and welcome you as partners in the broad enterprise of educating the citizen body. In particular, I want to commend the work of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, under the leadership of my good friend, Michael Thompson.

Your aspiration to develop principled positions through inquiry, reflection, and discourse traces its ancestry back to Socrates and Aristotle. Prominent in the lineage are the Founding Fathers of this country, who chose ideas and reason—as well as passion combined with self-discipline—as their tools of choice to build this Nation. You heard this afternoon about the thinking of one of our forebears, Thomas Jefferson. I will talk with you this evening about the life and words of another, George Washington.

The Meaning of “Liberal”

I have titled this address “On Becoming a Liberal: the Guidance of George Washington.” There—I have said it. The “L” word. You know as well as I that it is a term that has fallen into disfavor in recent years in many venues. But it is a word with several meanings. One of these meanings has drawn most of the fire. That meaning is the understanding of liberalism that evolved from the New Deal and the Great Society and that seeks to “bring about greater social equality through reliance on the federal government.”² If we look to alternate—or earlier—meanings of the word, “liberal,” I believe we can find within them ideas that inspired the Founding Fathers of this country, including Washington, and that might still inspire us today.

If we look to its origin in the Latin *liberalis*—meaning “suitable for a freeman”—we immediately can see one reason why liberal philosophy (particularly as developed by Locke and the Scottish Enlightenment) appealed to many of the thinkers in the thirteen colonies. The *Oxford*

¹ Published in *The Locke Luminary* 2 (summer 1999): 3-14.

² James T. Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10.

English Dictionary gives this as its fifth meaning for the term liberal: “Favorable to constitutional changes and legal or administrative reforms tending in the direction of freedom or democracy.” The third meaning—“free from restraint; free in speech or action”—is also relevant in this context.

Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, Washington and many of their contemporaries believed that the liberty they held so dear was not “a vacation from restraint but a duty to govern.” They understood that freedom is inextricably bound to duty—the duty to govern self and the duty to abide by the laws developed by a self-governing people. Washington certainly lived out his belief in adherence to duty, accepting his countrymen’s calls for his services as Commander-in-Chief of the continental force and, twice, as President—despite personal disinclination. He wrote in his Farewell Address in 1796: “The acceptance of, and continuance hitherto, in the office to which your Suffrages have twice called me, have been a uniform sacrifice of inclination to the opinion of duty, and to a deference for what appeared to be your desire.”

The Founding Fathers also perceived a close alliance between liberty and virtue. Benjamin Franklin wrote that “only a virtuous people are capable of freedom.”³ In his Farewell Address, Washington echoed this sentiment with these words: “‘Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.”⁴

Virtues of Liberalism

In *The Virtues of Liberalism*, James Kloppenberg describes how the central virtues of liberalism—as understood in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—“descend directly from the cardinal virtues of early Christianity: prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice.” He writes:

Liberals elevated individual freedom over the acceptance of imposed hierarchy. They conceived of freedom, however, not as license but as enlightened self-interest, not as the ancient vice of egoism but as ‘self-interest properly understood,’ in the phrase of Alexis de Tocqueville. Exercising liberal freedom requires the disposition to find one’s true good and to choose the proper means to it, which is the meaning of prudence. . . They conceived of the good life, however, not as gluttony but as moderation in the enjoyment of pleasures. . .

Liberals elevated the private life over the earlier demand of theocrats and republicans that individual citizens can find fulfillment only in, and thus must sacrifice themselves for, the good of the church or the state. They conceived of the liberal polity, however, as a legal and moral order necessary not only to protect them from each other and adjudicate their conflicts but also to enable them to achieve their goals. The liberal polity could survive only through the faithfulness of its citizens and their persistent loyalty to it—and to its procedures of resolving disputes through persuasion rather than force. . . Finally, then, liberals elevated the rights of every citizen over the privileges and preferences of an elite. They conceived of such rights, however, as bounded by the firm command that individu-

³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴ All Washington quotations in this address are taken from Allen, *George Washington: A Collection*.

als must render to God and to their neighbors what is their due, which is the meaning of justice.⁵

These central virtues of early Christianity and eighteenth-century liberalism—prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice—are exemplified in the life and writings of George Washington. Indeed, a 1779 portrait of His Excellency General Washington by John Norman depicts Washington's image atop a pedestal on which are inscribed the words "Temperance," "Prudence," "Fortitude," and "Justice." The liberal virtues lost much cachet in the waning decades of the twentieth century, just as the liberal impulse became blurred. Yet, they remain fundamental components to sustain a self-governing, democratic society.

It is the way he lived his life—even more so than his philosophy and thought—that made Washington a hero in his day and should make him one today as well. My fellow Washington admirer, Brookhiser, made his telling of that life in *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* into "a moral biography, in the tradition of Plutarch."⁶ Brookhiser's goal in his work is "to shape the hearts and minds of those who read it—not by offering a list of two-hundred-year-old policy prescriptions, but by showing how a great man navigated politics and life as a public figure."⁷ He notes that "When he lived, Washington had the ability to give strength to debaters and to dying men. His life still has the power to inspire anyone who studies it."⁸

As someone who has studied Washington's life and writings and been inspired by them, I will share some of those sources of inspiration with you this evening, focusing particularly on his intention to guide his countrymen toward the liberal virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice.

Justice

Starting with the last on this list, a concern for justice influenced Washington from an early age up to the firm instructions in his Last Will and Testament that "all the Slaves which I hold in [my] own right, shall receive their free[dom]" and his provisions for the continued support of any slaves too old or infirm at the time of his death to support themselves. Like many of his compatriots, Washington chafed under certain British policies toward the colonies, which they saw as contrary to natural justice. Washington's understanding of the origin of justice in natural law was passionately stated in his letter to Bryan Fairfax in 1774: "an innate spirit of freedom first told me, that the measures, which the administration hath for some time been, and now are most violently pursuing, are repugnant to every principle of natural justice ..."

Washington urged the citizens of the young nation to shape foreign as well as domestic policy in accord with their love of natural justice, writing in his Farewell Address: "Observe good faith and justice towds. [*sic*] all Nations. . . It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and at no distant period, a great Nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a People always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence."

⁵ Kloppenberg, 5-6.

⁶ Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

Temperance

Temperance was a widely held virtue in eighteenth century America, conveying not only the meaning mentioned by Kloppenberg—“moderation in the enjoyment of pleasures and a proper respect for the different preferences of others”—but also encompassing diffidence, frugality, and evenly balanced traits of character and intellect. Personal wealth was seen both as a potential source of corruption and the means for a man to secure the independence that might render him less vulnerable to corrupting influences. Washington won great honor and elevated the high regard in which he was held by his decision to serve as Commander-in-Chief and as President without remuneration. His love of temperance also was exhibited in his steps to minimize or eliminate debt in his personal life and in his warning to the young nation, in his Farewell Address, to avoid “the accumulation of debt, not only by shunning occasions of expence [*sic*], but by vigorous exertions in time of Peace to discharge the Debts which unavoidable wars may have occasioned, not ungenerously throwing upon posterity the burthen which we ourselves ought to bear.”

Many of Washington’s biographers comment upon his well-rounded competence—his “evenly balanced traits of character and intellect.” Barry Schwartz in his book, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol*, notes that in Washington’s day, excessive intellect—or genius—was suspect but wisdom was prized. He writes, “Almost everyone who spoke approvingly of Washington’s intellect made reference to its wisdom and judiciousness and declared these attributes to be of greater value to the nation than the glittering intelligence. . . .”⁹

Prudence

Kloppenber defines “prudence” as “the disposition to find one’s true good and to choose the proper means to it.” A more contemporary definition would be “the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason.” Schwartz observes that Washington’s self-control was “discovered after America had shifted from the revolutionary to an institutional mood.”¹⁰ In fact, it was essential for leading the nation to victory in the war, capturing passion and fervor for a work that had to carry beyond the war—namely, avoiding licentiousness and establishing a new government. “Self-control alone protected liberty from this kind of licentiousness . . . many Americans were quick to focus on Washington’s self-control and to find in it the keystone of his character.”¹¹

The virtue of prudence also involves caution, circumspection, and taking steps to minimize risk. In his Farewell Address, Washington issued several cautions to the country, including the often-quoted advice to “steer clear of permanent Alliances, with any portion of the foreign world.” He warns posterity to “resist with care the spirit of innovation upon” the principles of the

⁹ Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 162.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

newly formed Government, adding: “In all the changes to which you may be invited, remember that time and habit are at least as necessary to fix the true character of Government, as of other human institutions. . .” His most forceful warning is to hold in check the dangers of factionalism and the tendency for one area of the government to exceed its limit of power. He acknowledged that “There is an opinion that parties in free countries are useful checks upon the Administration of the Government and serve to keep alive the spirit of Liberty.” He went on to add, however:

But in those of the popular character, in Governments purely elective, it is a spirit not to be encouraged. From their natural tendency, it is certain there will always be enough of that spirit for every salutary purpose. And there being constant danger of excess, the effort ought to be, by force of public opinion, to mitigate and assuage it. A fire not to be quenched; it demands a uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into a flame, lest instead of warming it should consume.

Fortitude

The final of these four virtues, fortitude, in this context pertains to the loyalty of citizens to the government they have created and their intention to resolve difficulties by persuasion rather than force. Washington urges the importance of this virtue eloquently in the Farewell Address:

This government, the offspring of our own choice uninfluenced and unawed, adopted upon full investigation and mature deliberation, completely free in its principles, in the distribution of its powers, uniting security with energy, and containing within itself a provision for its own amendment, has a just claim to your confidence and your support. Respect for its authority, compliance with its Laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true Liberty. The basis of our political systems is the right of the people to make and to alter their Constitution of Government. But the Constitution which at any time exists, ‘till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole People, is sacredly obligatory upon all. The very idea of the power and the right of the People to establish Government presupposes the duty of every Individual to obey the established Government.

Restoring Liberal Virtues and Liberal Education

If, then, we wish to heed Washington’s guidance through his life and his words to adopt the liberal virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice, how might we today restore their value and practice?

To answer this question, we must look to yet another meaning of the word “liberal,” which is the meaning listed first by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This is the meaning used in the term “liberal arts education.” Originally, “liberal” was “the distinctive epithet of those ‘arts’ or ‘sciences’ that were considered ‘worthy of a free man;’ opposed to servile or mechanical.” A more current definition of this usage describes “the studies . . . in a college or university intended to provide chiefly general knowledge and to develop general intellectual capacities (as reason and judgment) as opposed to professional or vocational skills.”

There is a strong and sure connection between liberal education and democracy—one that was held fast by many American founders. Since I am speaking in Charlottesville, I must acknowledge that Jefferson's obsession with this connection may burn brightest in the public eye of today. And deservedly so—especially given the excellence of the university that he founded. But other Founding Fathers also championed the connection between education and democracy, including George Wythe, Benjamin Rush, and George Washington.

We shall not overlook Washington's efforts to establish a national university. While he did not succeed in that project, the funds left in his will for the establishment of a national university did support the founding of Washington & Lee University.

In the months ahead, I mean to engender a broad public conversation about the value of a liberal education. You may ask why this is important. Imagine writing a letter to a young friend or relative, providing guidance for his future educational choices. You might say to a youth that education would provide valued skills, extensive knowledge, and enduring discipline to serve throughout life. However, it is still more likely that you would discuss the acquisition of character and judgment that would strengthen the youth's confidence in his own decisions. The cultivation of good habits of decision on sound moral and religious grounds is the single most important gift that education conveys. And a liberal education is the surest way to convey this gift.

In fact, Washington wrote such a letter to his nephew, George Steptoe Washington, on March 23, 1789. He does point young Washington in the direction of training for employment, writing: "The first and great object with you at present, is to acquire, by industry and application, such knowledge as your situation enables you to obtain, as will be useful to you in life." Much of the letter, however, advises the nephew on the development of character—particularly in the virtues of prudence and temperance. It is worth noting that Washington is paying for his nephew's education, which leads to the final definition of the word "liberal" that I will mention this evening—"free in bestowing, bountiful, generous, open-hearted."

Washington was liberal in bestowing the gift of education upon his nephew—through his advice and example and by footing the bill for his formal education. In this, and similar practices and characteristics of Washington's life, we can identify elements that bring the comprehensive understanding of liberalism—not to resemble but—at least into the neighborhood of contemporary liberalism. Stripped of its taste for authoritarianism and a paternalistic disregard for the ordinary judgments of ordinary souls, and purged of its very recent alliance with militantly atheistic social engineering, contemporary liberalism resolves into a generous regard for the well-being of our fellows.

George Washington provides the pre-eminently emulable model for such regard. Throughout his life he displayed large generosity and not infrequently fell susceptible to the hard-luck tale. Just as he embraced as his own mission the future prosperity of all of his countrymen, he easily assisted friends and relatives—and sometimes just fellow citizens—from his own substance. Washington believed that the liberal society would yield not just better citizens but also better human beings—the liberal wish *par excellence*. His plans and exertions to develop the western lands began with defending the rights of the troops he commanded in the

French and Indian Wars but ended with his dreams of continent-wide commerce and integrated social and political life for all Americans. Thus, he expressed the liberal wish to perfection, merging the general and the particular in a mission of uplift.

Nowhere does Washington so clearly reveal these motions of his soul as in his meditations on education. As he instructed Jonathan Boucher on the education of Washington's stepson, Jack Custis, one sees him proceed from detailed care for the youth's progress in understanding and character—including a watchful eye on his immediate deportment—to an eventually frustrated attempt to urge dignity and moderation on the tutor himself. Boucher eventually returned a Tory to England, from where he railed against Washington and the fledgling United States. He had failed Washington not only by a lax attention to young Jack's deportment but by a greedy demand for pay unearned. Education warrants adequate support, Washington believed. But he also believed that it deserves the reward of support where it succeeds in advancing the liberal wish and not otherwise.

Washington wrote to Alexander Hamilton in 1796 that, "I mean education generally as one of the surest means of enlightening and givg. [*sic*] a just way of thinking to our Citizens. . . ." He continued:

But that which would render it of the highest importance, in my opinion, is, that the Juvenal [*sic*] period of life, when friendships are formed, and habits established that will stick by one; the youth, or young men from different parts of the United States would be assembled together, and would by degrees discover that there was not that cause for jealousies and prejudices which one part of the Union had imbibed against another part: of course, *sentiments of more liberality in the general policy of the Country would result from it* [education]. (Emphasis added)

This argument defends Washington's proposal for a national university. No less, though, it reveals the liberal wish as tied to an expectation of "more liberality in the policy of the Country."

Washington also knew how to describe life without the nurture of the liberal wish. In 1788, while forswearing interest in the new presidency, he took the occasion further to observe the consequence of a college faltering for lack of cash.

This is one of the numerous evils which arise from want of a general regulating power, for in a Country like this where equal liberty is enjoyed, where every man may reap his own harvest, which by proper attention will afford him more than is necessary for his own consumption [thus enabling necessary generosity!], and where there is so ample a field for every mercantile and mechanical exertion, if there cannot be money found to answer the common purposes of education, not to mention the necessary commercial circulation, it is evident that there is something amiss in the ruling political power which requires a steady regulating and energetic hand to correct and control. . . if. . . property was well secured, faith and justice well preserved, a stable government well administered, and confidence restored, the tide of population and wealth would flow to us, from every part of the globe, and with a due sense of the blessings, make us the happiest people upon the earth.

Under the influence of Washington's ideas have I come to the Council of Higher Education. And I find under his guidance that the liberal wish provides a compelling, organizing foundation upon which to erect the public's concern with higher education. That is the reason I have grown in confidence, that setting forth principles of intellectual and moral growth on grounds of conceded liberty, with expectations of prosperity and generosity will secure an education in self-government appropriate to the Commonwealth. Upon reflection, I would think it very difficult for anyone who took Washington seriously not to rediscover an impulse toward liberalism. And in the event learn to celebrate becoming a liberal.