

In Defense of George Washington: The True Multiculturalist

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Not once but many times have I urged Western Civilization as the true original and soundest meaning of “multiculturalism.” In Virginia’s recent study of general education in all of its colleges and universities, I specifically criticized the debate that would oppose western civilization to multiculturalism. I spoke in these terms:

Every academic calendar produces new and dramatic examples of this debate. Currently, the University of Chicago lies beneath the microscope of inspection, as a result of a thirty-year trend of changing core requirements and a pending major renovation. A year ago CUNY’s Brooklyn College underwent the same inspection, eventuating in a retrenchment from a plan to broaden requirements. At Chicago as elsewhere, the overriding question has been the departure from a sharply defined focus on the achievements of western civilization in favor of standards loosely understood as multicultural. At the core of the debate we find far less an ideological stand-off between defenders of one culture versus defenders of plural cultures than a fundamental misunderstanding of the contents of the previous curricula and the intellectual justification of the newer standards.

The newer standards pose a challenge to a supposed “canon” of sources believed to be rather narrow in their focus. In fact, however, the fundamental rationale for the focus on western culture has been its origin in the true original of multiculturalism. It has historically been western science and western civilization that have systematically advanced the goal of a broad understanding of humanity – as opposed to any particular culture – as the measure of intellectual progress. To that extent, a shift away from western culture toward multiculturalism is in fact a contradiction in terms.

When I have held forth in such language, honest listeners could perhaps be forgiven for imagining that I had missed the point. For, very often, if not almost always, discussions of multiculturalism in the United States at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century aim far less at “measures of intellectual progress” than at what Tocqueville would call the “progress of equality” in a democracy. More often than not the discussion of multiculturalism is meant to be a discussion of the failure of the America of the Declaration of Independence. It would therefore seem ob-

tuse of me to resist the implication and to insist upon speaking of an intellectual struggle where a political struggle is the true goal.

That is the reason that in these brief remarks I defend George Washington. Who else, after all, is more eminently the white, male, Anglo-Saxon Protestant American archetype, than the father of our country? And the brief against him is well known; it is that he was ignorant of true human diversity. As a slave-owner who exploited innocent Africans to his own advantage, and who built not only his personal but also his country's fortune on the back's of their labor, his encomiastic praises of liberty must be seen as hypocritical at best and meanly self-serving at worst. He did not recognize the humanity of the African slave. Therefore, he could not have reasoned from the rights of humanity in defending the nascent United States. Most importantly, as the distinguished John Hope Franklin once insisted to me, we have nothing to learn from him regarding the true meaning of equality and , therefore, of respect for diverse cultures.

Just a few days ago I received a telephone call from a minister in Northern Virginia, who specifically wanted to know of me, since I had published a book of Washington's writings, what I could say in defense of such a creature. And since he knew already that Washington had freed his slaves in his will, he was not prepared to accept that as a genuine gesture of moral commitment. At best, such an act bespeaks, in his view, an unacceptably low standard, placing self-indulgence during one's own life above the intrinsic rights of other human beings. If Washington had meant anything serious, he would not have waited until his own death to free his slaves.

I wish to rehearse, therefore, just those views of slavery, and Washington's actions in relation thereto, that I have conveyed in my one-volume edition of his writings. My goal is to demonstrate that Washington's respect for humanity was complete and consistent, that he acted prudently and well within the context that was given to act in, and that he advanced in crucially important ways the cause of human liberty and equality, such that we are today enabled to play with notions of multiculturalism or human equality without very much regard for the consequences of our opinions.

Before taking up Washington directly, I do need to remind listeners that it was in the middle of the founding of the United States that Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur visited this country and penned what became the model of the phrase, "the melting pot." Very early on there existed an ideal in the United States of peoples deriving from diverse societies and melding their energies into a cauldron of political and moral creativity that would bring forth a new model – what Ronald Reagan loved to call the "new man." Crevecoeur's idealism was not unfounded. It found expression in many of the public utterances and writings of American leaders. And toward the end of the struggle with Britain, with only a definitive peace treaty still pending, George Washington gave voice to this idealism in his "General Orders" to the troops on April 18, 1783:

for, happy, thrice happy shall they be pronounced here after, who have contributed any thing, who have performed the meanest office in erecting this stupendous *fabrick* of *Freedom* and *Empire* on the broad basis of *Independency*; who

have assisted in protecting the rights of humane nature and establishing an Asylum for the poor and oppressed of all nations and religions.

These “general orders” were very public documents, as much policy statements as exhortations to the faithful. And in this case we can not mistake the meaning. George Washington believed and preached that “the rights of humane nature” bore a *necessary* relation to the needs of “the poor and oppressed of all nations and religions.”

While multiculturalism as an intellectual concept need have no special relationship to ideas of oppression and want – and culture as high expression of social accomplishment almost rules that out – it is nevertheless certain that the American discussion of multiculturalism grows out of the disposition to “lift up” the poor and oppressed of *all* nations and religions. Now we can see that George Washington is the author of that disposition as he is also the Father of our country. In order for America to serve as “asylum” for so great a range of political and religious difference (“all” nations), it would have to be necessary that America were meant to be in some fashion a “melting pot,” an agglomeration of all social possibilities. In those terms, multiculturalism is not about celebrating but rising above cultural origins in the pursuit of something far better.

Thus, it is a serious question how someone so dedicated could participate in and even help to perpetuate the institution of slavery, which certainly seems to rule out of consideration for participation in the melting pot at least those nations that had been enslaved.

George Washington always acknowledged the reality of slavery. He also always believed it a grievous wrong. However, in reviewing dealings with it, it is necessary to see them in the context of a constrained social and political environment. That is the picture that the few glimpses we will now take provide. From them, we should be able to conclude not only what was Washington’s attitude toward slavery, but also how meaningfully he acted in the context to sustain his deepest moral principles. What we will gain from this view, in my opinion, is a sound foundation for interpreting multiculturalism not in terms of strategies for preserving cultural differences but rather in terms of prudent means to foster common moral progress in spite of cultural restraints.

It is not my intention to provide a historical survey, capturing every incident of Washington’s relationship to slavery from his boyhood to his death. It is well known that he principally inherited slaves, whether directly or through marriage, but also participated in purchasing slaves (including efforts to unite families). Nor is it necessary to repeat the testimony of his correspondence with relatives, in which he describes the feeling of owning slaves as itself an oppression. What is germane to our purposes is to establish, first, that he routinely carried out the transactions entailed by a system of social relations of which slavery was a central part and, second, that he believed slavery a wrong. From there all that remains is to pose the issue of what obstructed Washington’s acting on the basis of his belief prior to his death.

On June 10, 1774, Washington replied to George William Fairfax, who had left Belvoir for England, never to return, and given instructions relative to the discharging of his property. After discussing newspaper and hand bill advertisements for the rental of Fairfax's lands and property, Washington, noted, among other things, that "the other parts of your Letter relative to the removal of your Negro's stock &ca. Shall be complied with..." Washington did not enter the same level of detail in providing assurances about the handling of the slaves, whom Fairfax wished to sell, that he did regarding the other property. We know, though, that he complied with Fairfax's wishes. In other words, Washington accepted to act under the impulse of necessity, even when he could barely utter the words that described the necessity.

Little more than two months later, on August 24, 1774, Washington wrote to Fairfax relative, Bryan Fairfax, and commented on the impending crisis with Britain. The Mount Vernon master invoked principles of natural justice, and observed in passing that "the crisis is arrived when we must assert our rights, or submit to every imposition, that can be heaped upon us, till custom and use shall make us as tame and abject slaves, as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway."

What is it merely a metaphorical or rhetorical twist that enabled Washington to liken the prospects of British oppression of the Americans to the Americans oppression of the slaves? Or, is it not rather plain that Washington could see no difference in the cases than that between acquiescence in the case of the slaves and resistance in the case of the Americans? It is certainly plain that Washington could well understand the necessity that imposed acquiescence upon the Africans, at the same time that he could see that the necessity did not constitute a justification of the slavery. Rule based on "arbitrary sway" is precisely unjustified rule, or at least rule incompatible with natural justice. This is the purest expression of Washington's attitude toward slavery: he found himself an unwilling and unhappy holder of slaves, nonetheless resolved to act in the circumstance as well as he was able.

A fact often overlooked in discussing the social state of slavery in revolutionary America was the difficulty in ending the practice in proportion as it had become embedded in the society and consequently implicated in legal protections and social expectations. It is no accident that the process of emancipation progressed from the north southward, beginning with the least dense populations of slaves and, accordingly, with the social states least directly dependent on slaves. When we reach regions in which the numbers of slaves begin to rival to numbers of free men and women, we discover also the growth of laws and social arrangements specifically aimed at perpetuating slavery. Among other things, real obstacles were placed in the path of manumissions with the result that even a willing emancipator would have to think twice about the legal and financial implications. Add to that dilemma the sensibility of a George Washington, who honestly believed it entirely unjust for the masters simply to declare the slaves free and to wash their hands of them. What would such unwanted residents do in the midst of a society that spurned them? What means did they command to improve their circumstances or even to secure their basic safety? Washington thought they had none and, therefore,

that it was incumbent on those who would free them to do so in a manner that would also secure for them a humane future.

As the final peace to conclude the American Revolution approached, Washington on April 5, 1783 conveyed to Marquis de La Fayette general news on the political scene and their mutual colleagues. In the course of this letter he remarked: "The scheme, my dear Marqs. which you propose as a precedent, to encourage the emancipation of the black people of this Country from the State of Bondage in wch. they are held, is a striking evidence of the benevolence of your Heart. I shall be happy to join you in so laudable a work; but will defer going into a detail of the business, `till I have the pleasure of seeing you."

We can be quite certain that this correspondence resumes conversations General Washington and his French ally held during their time together in the field. Washington's reluctance to enter into particulars in a letter, however, suggests wariness on his part about the public atmosphere that still prevailed in the United States. About his correspondence we know two things: first, he did not hesitate to write long letters, with much detail, when that was appropriate; and, second, his letters had an amazing facility to end up published in newspapers. The security of the day was considerably less than reassuring, and in fact Washington became very good in writing "private" correspondence that had a discernible "public" purpose in order to take advantage of that disadvantage. Accordingly, his clear approval of a scheme to emancipate all black people from a "state of bondage" is conveyed by his citing LaFayette's "benevolence." At the same time, he avoid inciting opposition to the specific plan by withholding his own opinion about what would be required.

We do know something of what LaFayette's plan looked like from subsequent correspondence between the two friends. At the same time, Washington's response to it demonstrates a very serious concern on his part regarding the state of the public mind in the United States and a general hostility to any plan of emancipation. Before we look at that in detail, however, let us take a longer look at a still more revealing portrait of Washington's mind on this vexing question.

In spring, 1786 Washington found himself inveigled to intervene on behalf of a Virginia slave-owner seeking fair treatment in Philadelphia. He undertakes the intercession, which involves attempting to defeat a law suit aimed at freeing the slave of one Mr. Dalby, who had made the mistake of traveling with his slave in the free republic of Pennsylvania and thereby exposing himself the efforts of activist to strike a blow for freedom. Washington does so, however, with a plainly evident spirit of embarrassment for having to defend a slaveholder seeking to hold onto his slave but a no less evidently keen awareness of the importance of a rule of a law as the only basis on which a solution to the problem of slavery can be accomplished. He argues, in effect, that the use of law willy-nilly as an expression of popular will is a far cry from the "rule of law," and that such tyranny would at length serve only to entrench rather than to dismantle slavery and many another oppression. Although the passage is a long one, it is necessary to see Washington's argument in full in order to appreciate the balancing act he undertook:

I give you the trouble of this letter at the instance of Mr. Dalby of Alexandria; who is called to Philadelphia to attend what he conceives to be a vexatious lawsuit respecting a slave of His, which a Society of Quakers in the city (formed for such purposes) have attempted to liberate. The merits of this case will no doubt appear upon trial, but from Mr. Dalby's state of the matter, it should seem that this Society is Not only acting repugnant to justice so far as its conduct concerns strangers, but, in my opinion, extremely impolitickly with respect to the State, the City in particular; and without being able, (but by acts of tyranny and oppression) to accomplish their own ends. He says the conduct of this society is not sanctioned by Law: had the case been otherwise, whatever my opinion of the Law might have been, my respect for the policy of the State would on this occasion have appeared in my silence; because against the Penalties of promulgated Laws one may guard; but there is no avoiding the snares of individuals, or of private societies. And if the practice of this Society of which Mr. Dalby speaks, is not discourtenanced, none of those whose *misfortune* it is to have slaves as attendants, will visit the City if they can possibly avoid it; because by so doing they hazard their property; or they must be at the expence (and this will not always succeed) of providing servants of another description for the trip.

I hope it will not be conceived from these observations, that it is my wish to hold the unhappy people, who are the subject of this letter, in slavery. I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it; but there is only one proper and effectual mode By which it can be accomplished, and that is by Legislative authority; and this, as far as my suffrage will go, shall never be wanting. But when slaves who are happy and contented with their present masters, are tampered with and seduced to leave them; when masters are taken unawares by these practices; when a conduct of this sort begets discontent on one side and resentment on the other, and when it happens to fall on a man, whose purse will not measure with that of the Society, and he loses his property for want of means to defend it; it is oppression in the latter case, and not humanity in any way; because it introduces more evils than it can cure.

I make no apology for writing to you on this subject; for if Mr. Dalby has not misconceived the matter, an evil exists which requires a remedy; if he has, my intentions have been good, though I may have been too precipitate in this address." [April 12, 1786, to Robert Morris, directly addressing question of emancipation, in context of Quaker activism on the subject.]

George Washington maintained, then, that slavery needed to be abolished, but that the state of society had become such that abolition needed to be by act of general legislation, not individual or even group interventions. At stake, he reasoned, was the rule of law itself, which alone could permanently remove the stain of slavery. The fact that this slaveholder, Washington, in this particular case, reiterated most forcefully his own opposition to slavery, and in what was ultimately a public document, goes a long way to indi-

cate Washington's approach to the question. Just as he hoped to lead his countrymen to embrace a national constitution (a work then very much underway), he hoped also to lead them to resolve to eliminate slavery. He does so, however, only by giving generous reassurance that no one need fear his neighbor's interference in the social practice, so long as laws clearly providing for an alternative social state had not been adopted. While some will see that as not granting very much of leadership or of hope for the future, it is important to recall, one, that Washington here acts publicly and, two, that the very nation itself remained to be constructed before any meaningful response to the problem of relations between Virginia and Pennsylvania on this question could be resolved. In that sense, his leadership as evidenced here reflects the finest, measured statesmanship.

Nor will it suffice to condemn Washington's observation that some "slaves who are happy and contented with their present masters, are tampered with and seduced to leave them." Apart from the credible humanity of such an observation (slaves are humans, too, and as such as likely to form affections even under duress as are any other humans) Washington's point is clearly the larger one: only a stable social order, with predictable legal assurances, can lay a foundation for emancipation.

Finally, it must be observed that Washington wrote his letter only nominally on behalf of Mr. Dalby. The very expressions in the letter make clear that he does not take Dalby's representations at face value and provides in advance approval for anything Pennsylvania may do, in the event the evidence shows Mr. Dalby not deserving this intervention. Washington in fact has intervened for the larger purpose of providing instruction for the nation on the question of slavery and the means of resolving it, starting from the assumption that it must be abolished. That is a powerful statement from the man who will shortly confirm a new constitution for the nation and also become its first chief magistrate. Moreover, his effort here specifically addresses the question of the state of public opinion on the question, and he seeks a common ground between Quakers (or anti-slavery activists in general) and principled slaveholders who may come to see their interest joined with the interest of a free nation rather than a slave society.

Washington believed in this as in most public matters that the public opinion would ultimately determine the course to be followed. With regard to slavery, however, he hovered near despair regarding public opinion. The letter to Morris on the Dalby case represented his *most optimistic* intervention. The reality he more typically observed was conveyed only one month later, in his letter of May 10, 1786, to Marquis de La Fayette. In a general commentary on democratic government and the political scene, Washington noted La Fayette's maturing plan of emancipation:

The benevolence of your heart my Dr. Marqs. is so conspicuous upon all occasions, that I never wonder at any fresh proofs of it; but your late purchase of an estate in the colony of Cayenne, with a view of emancipating the slaves on it, is a generous and noble proof of your humanity. Would to God a like spirit would diffuse itself generally into the minds of the people in this country; but I despair of seeing it. Some petitions were presented to the Assembly, at its last session, for the abolition of slavery, but they could scarcely obtain a reading. To set them afloat at once would, I really believe, be productive of much inconvenience and

mischief; but by degrees it certainly might, and assuredly ought to be effected, and that too by legislative authority.

Washington holds steadfast to confidence in “legislative authority,” but here we may see that it is largely informed by his awareness of the need somehow to shape and influence “the minds of the people in this country.” Moreover, he understands that it is not just the opinions of this or that group that is needed, but rather a “spirit” to “diffuse itself generally” among the people. The fact that the General Assembly in Virginia would barely notice petitions for emancipation, of which Washington was informed and doubtless in which he had a hand, is the immediate cause of his despair. The greater cause, however, is the country’s failure to realize the urgent necessity. Needless to insist, La Fayette’s plan to plant the slaves of the United States on land of their own in Guiana itself was immolated in the emerging revolution of France and La Fayette’s own eventual exile. But the idea of it prefigures well the kind of forethought that Washington believed must accompany any emancipation; emancipation meant for him provision to live well.

Washington did not succeed in planting the seeds of abolition in the public mind through his administration of the government. But he did not cease to try, providing further exemplary leadership even in his last will and testament. Washington meant his will as a public example; it is as much one of our founding state papers as his 1796 “Farewell Address.” It conveys not just his wishes but the principles he wished to guide the nation he founded. Among the founders, Washington was unique in providing specific moral guidance throughout his career. Just as he committed the new nation to lift up “the poor and oppressed of all nations and religions,” he showed it how to realize that commitment through public and private acts. His ultimate private act became, in that sense, his consummate public act.

He completed the will July 9, 1799 and in it, subject only to the opening bequest of “the use, profit [an]d benefit of my whole Estate, real and p[e]rsonal, for the term of her natural life” to his “dearly [be]loved wife Martha,” he declared,

th[at] all of the Slaves which I hold in [my] own right, shall receive their free[dom.] To emancipate them during [her] life, would, tho’ earnestly to be wish[ed by] me, be attended with such insu[pera]ble difficulties on account of thei[r interm]ixture by Marriages with the [Dow]er Negroes, as to excite the most pa[In]ful sensations, if not disagreeabl[e c]onsequences from the latter, while [both] descriptions are in the occupancy [of] the same Proprietor; it not being [in] my power, under the tenure by which[h t]he Dower Negroes are held, to man[umi]t them. And whereas among [thos]e who will receive freedom ac[cor]ding to this devise, there may b[e so]me, who from old age or bodily infi[rm]ities, and others who on account of [their] infancy, that will be unable to [su]pport themselves; it is [my] Will a[nd de]sire that all who [come under the first] and second descrip[tion shall be comfor]tably cloathed and [fed by my heirs while] they live; and that such of the latter description as have no parents living, or if living are unable, or unwilling to provide for them, shall be bound by the Court until they shall arrive at the age of twenty five years; and in cases where no

record can be produced, whereby their ages can be ascertained, the judgment of the Court upon its own view of the subject shall be adequate and final. The Negroes thus bound, are (by their Masters or Mistresses) to be taught to read and write; and to be brought up to some useful occupation, agreeably to the Laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia, providing for the support of Orphan and other Poor Children. And I do hereby expressly forbid the Sale, or transportation out of said Commonwealth, of any Slave I May die possessed of, under any pretence whatsoever. And I do moreover most pointedly, and most solemnly enjoin it upon my Executors hereafter named, or the Survivors of them, to see that *this* [cl]ause respecting Slaves, and every part thereof be religiously fulfilled at the Epoch at which it is directed to take place; without evasion, neglect or delay, after the Crops which may then be on the ground are harvested, particularly as it respects the aged and infirm; Seeing that a regular and permanent fund be established for their Support so long as there are subjects requiring it; not trusting to the uncertain provision to be made by individuals. And to my Mulatto man William (calling himself William Lee) I give immediate freedom; if he should prefer it (on account of the accidents which have befallen him, and which have rendered him incapable of walking or of any active employment, to remain in the situation he now is, it shall be optional in him to do so: In either case however, I allow him an annuity of thirty dollars during his natural life, which shall be independent of the victuals and cloaths he has been accustomed to receive, if he chuses The last alternative; but in full, with his freedom if he prefers the first; and this I give him as a testimony of my sense of his attachment to me, and for his faithful services during the Revolutionary War.

It is interesting, is it not, how studiously Washington avoided the term “slave,” except in the single passage in which he “expressly forbid the Sale, or transportation out of” Virginia of “any Slave I may die possessed of, under any pretence whatsoever. He did not leave to interpretation his “religious” injunction regarding the treatment of the slaves. Under no subterfuge of necessity or the need to satisfy claims on the estate were any of his people to be sold or given. Precisely because Washington had always participated in the ordinary transactions affecting slavery in the social state, he was keenly aware of the provisions that required to be made in order that freedom for his slaves would be a blessing and not a curse. As he had said to La Fayette, merely to “set them afloat” would be a curse. Now, in his will, he demonstrates just how greatly provision must be made to ensure that the slaves are not worse off in freedom than they had been in slavery.

Moreover, Washington was not content only to influence the fate of the slaves for whom he was directly or indirectly (through marriage) responsible. In a further provision of his will he addressed the status of slaves held by a sister-in-law but ultimately entailed to him. These were slaves Washington had not known nor ever owned save by legal prescriptions eventually to be realized. There were some thirty-three such persons, who in settling the estate of Bartholomew Dandridge had been “taken in execution, sold, and purchased in on my account.” This illustrates how one comes to be a major slave-owner without so much as lifting a finger; it had happened to Washington before. Of these

slaves, Washington provided that they would continue to attend the widow while she lived, but thereafter, without regard to any other heirs or relations, they “shall receive their freedom” if “forty years old and upwards.” For those under forty but above sixteen, they shall serve seven years and then be free; while those sixteen and under “shall serve until twenty-five years of age and then be free.”

The common principle for Washington was freedom. It was subject to such conditions as the social state made prudent or necessary, but it was clearly enunciated and consistently provided. It was important that Washington first be able to show himself a responsible steward before the example of his statesmanship could compel the stewardship of others. Washington provided for his own estate in a manner that revealed excellence in judgment and in manner. His relationships with his slaves were correct, by all accounts, and abusive by no accounts. Moreover, his affairs were in such a state at the end of his life that he could actually afford not merely to free his slaves but also to provide for them. That element of his stewardship was doubtless the most important, if one cedes him the claim that it would be a curse, merely to set them afloat.

There is no fair reading of George Washington’s life, circumstances, and actions that will not concede in him an exemplary defender of what I have called the soundest multiculturalism. Washington more meaningfully enacted the principles of human rights than any similarly situated republican. He made certain that the people of the United States benefited at least from the example of rising above cultural origins in the pursuit of something far better. It will remain forever unanswered, whether his example and instruction would have been sufficient eventually to bring about the peaceful abolition that Washington aimed at. Whatever one thinks of that question, however, no one can fail to see in Abraham Lincoln’s 1838 Lyceum Address acknowledgement that, without Washington, the principles of freedom could never have been vindicated even in war. What makes Washington the truest multiculturalist is precisely the fact that he was the truest defender of liberty.