

Book Review

An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America. By Henry Wiencek. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. Pp. 404. Illustrations, map. Cloth, \$26)

Reviewed by William B. Allen*

Henry Wiencek reclaims Washington from debunkers who consider Washington's moral contributions unforgivably overshadowed by the moral failure of holding slaves. The reader, however, should beware of the conceit by means of which the narrative accomplishes its purpose. Wiencek's "an imperfect god," begins with the concession that Washington had clay feet.

This conceit commits an author to a detailed examination of the subject. Where detail is required, however, great is the potential for error. Wiencek commits numerous errors: insignificant (Washington stopped at Mt. Vernon for a brief visit in September, 1781 and never "saw it again" until after the peace (Wiencek, 251); actually, in September he held a war council there with his French allies, during his progress toward Yorktown, stopped there again in November, after the October victory, and, of course, pausing for the funeral of his Custis step-son) and dramatically significant (Washington's letter to Robert Morris in 1786 concerning the Dalby case, combined with his answer to the Quaker petitioners of 1790 defines the central question concerning his attitude toward slavery). (Allen, 318)

At the founding Crevecoeur visited America and penned the model of "the melting pot:" an ideal of peoples from diverse societies uniting their energies in political and moral creativity and bringing forth a "new man." George Washington voiced this idealism in his "General Orders" of April 18, 1783:

"for, happy, thrice happy shall they be pronounced here after, who have... assisted in protecting the rights of humane nature and establishing an Asylum for the poor and oppressed of all nations and religions." (Allen, 237)

Nor can we mistake the meaning: "the rights of humane nature" bore a *necessary* relation to the needs of "the poor and oppressed of all nations and religions."

Equality as an intellectual concept has no special relationship to ideas of oppression and want, but American equality includes the disposition to lift up 'the poor and oppressed of *all* nations and religions.'" How could someone who held this view participate in and even help to perpetuate the institution of slavery? It is necessary to see Washington's dealings with slavery in the context of a constrained social and political environment.

He principally inherited slaves, but he also purchased slaves (including efforts to unite families). We concede Wiencek's argument that Washington, first, routinely carried out the transactions entailed by a system of social relations dependent on slavery and, second, believed slavery a wrong. What, then, obstructed Washington's acting prior to his death?

On June 10, 1774, Washington informed George William Fairfax in England how, as agent, he had handled Fairfax's lands and property. But Washington did not account for the slaves Fairfax wished to sell with the same detail he provided for the remaining property. He acted under the impulse of necessity but could barely utter the words that described the necessity.

Two months later Washington commented upon the impending crisis with Britain. He invoked principles of natural justice, observing that "the crisis is arrived when we must assert our rights, or submit

* A modified version of this review was presented at the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies, Grand Valley State University, on April 15, 2004, under the title "George Washington: On the Wrong Side of the Slavery Issue?"

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.” (Allen, 39) Washington likened British oppression to the oppression of the slaves. He saw in the cases only the difference between acquiescence and resistance.

In proportion as slavery became embedded in society with legal protections and social expectations it became difficult to uproot. Where slaves rival the numbers of free men and women, there also grow laws and social arrangements reinforcing slavery. Among other things, obstacles obstructed manumissions, and even willing emancipators had to think twice about the legal and financial implications. Moreover, what would such unwanted residents do in the midst of a society that spurned them?

On April 5, 1783 Washington supported LaFayette’s emancipation “scheme... 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...” (Allen, 235) The LaFayette correspondence continues conversations held during the war. Washington’s reluctance to enter into particulars, however, suggests wariness on his part about the public atmosphere that prevailed. About his correspondence we know two things: first, he did not hesitate to write long, detailed letters when that was appropriate; and, second, his letters frequently appeared in newspapers. In fact Washington became adept at writing “private” correspondence with a discernible “public” purpose. He conveyed approval of emancipating all slaves by lauding LaFayette’s “benevolence” but avoided inciting opposition by concealing details. It may further be true that Washington withheld from LaFayette his opinion, that to remove the slaves from among their “masters” could well be unjust.

Further, in spring, 1786 Washington defended a Virginia slave-owner traveling in Philadelphia against a Quaker lawsuit. One Mr. Dalby had exposed himself to activists striking a blow for freedom. Washington’s embarrassed defense of the slaveholder had a no less evidently keen awareness of the importance of the rule of law as the only basis on which the problem of slavery could be solved. He argued, in effect, that the use of law as an expression of popular will is a far cry from the “rule of law,” and that such tyranny at length rather entrenches than dismantles slavery. Observe Washington’s balancing act on the way to a public declaration of political – and not merely individual – emancipation:

I hope it will not be conceived ... that it is my wish to hold the unhappy people ... in slavery. I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I ... 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. [April 12, 1786, to Robert Morris.] (Allen, 318ff)

George Washington maintained, then, that slavery needed to be abolished by act of general legislation, not individual or even group interventions. Only the rule of law itself could permanently remove the stain of slavery. The fact that, in this particular case, he forcefully and publicly reiterated his opposition to slavery goes a long way to indicate Washington’s approach.

He hoped to lead his countrymen to embrace a national constitution; he hoped also to lead them to eliminate slavery. He did so, however, only by giving generous, Lincolnian 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 very much leadership or hope for the future, it is important to recall, first, that in 1786 the nation itself remained to be constructed.¹ Where Lincoln had to save the Union, Washington had to build a union in order to eliminate slavery!

¹ 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; today we speak of a “Stockholm syndrome.”), Washington’s point is clearly the larger one: only a stable social order, with predictable legal assurances, can lay a foundation for emancipation.

Finally, Washington did not take Dalby's representations at face value. He intervened in order to provide instruction on the question of slavery. Moreover, his effort sought 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.

This reading gains support from the 1790 exchange between Washington and Quaker petitioners. His diary records a visit from Quaker representative, Warner Mifflin, who pressed for support of a petition pending in Congress "for emancipating the Slaves." Washington noted a vigorous discussion of the "immorality, injustice, and impolicy" of maintaining slavery and an appeal for "gradual abolition." Washington recorded his response: *I replied, that as it was a matter which might come before me for official decision I was not inclined to express any sentiments. (sic) on the merits of the question before this should happen.* (Emphasis added.)²

Washington believed public opinion would ultimately determine the course to be followed. With regard to slavery, however, he finally hovered near despair. The letter to Morris represented his most optimistic intervention. The reality he more typically observed was later conveyed, when he took up LaFayette's maturing plan of emancipating the slaves to Guiana:

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 [Virginia] Assembly, at its last session, for the abolition of slavery, but they could scarcely obtain a reading. To set [slaves] 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. [May 10, 1786.] (Allen, 322)

The fact that the General Assembly in Virginia barely noticed petitions for emancipation, of which Washington was informed and in which he doubtless had a hand, is the immediate cause of his despair. The greater cause, however, is the country's failure to realize the urgent necessity.³

President Washington planted but did not germinate seeds of abolition in the public mind. Still, he did not cease to try, providing exemplary leadership in his last will and testament, as much one of our founding state papers as his 1796 "Farewell Address." It conveys the principles by which he guided the nation. Among the founders, Washington uniquely provided specific moral guidance. Just as he committed the nation to lift up "the poor and oppressed of all nations and religions," he showed how to realize that commitment. His ultimate private act became his consummate public act.

Washington did not leave to interpretation his "religious" injunction regarding the slaves. Under no subterfuge of necessity or claims on his estate were any of his people to be sold or given.⁴ 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. In his will, he demonstrated how provision must be made to ensure that the slaves are not worse off in freedom than they had been in slavery.

Not content to influence only the fate of the slaves for whom he was directly or indirectly (through marriage) responsible, Washington also addressed the status of slaves held by a sister-in-law but

² March 1790, Item 20 of 28, *The George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799* taken from *The Diaries of George Washington. Vol. 6.* Donald Jackson, and Dorothy Twohig, ed., *The Papers of George Washington.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979.

³ Needless to insist, LaFayette's plan to plant the slaves of the United States on land of their own in Guiana was immolated in the emerging revolution of France and LaFayette's own eventual exile. Emancipation meant for Washington provision to live well and to avoid as far as possible the mischances of politics.

⁴ By providing for his wife during her natural life, he dealt with the problem of the "widow's third," meaning that his slaves could not effectively become hers, to be disposed of by her or her successors. (Allen, 667ff)

ultimately entailed to him.⁵ The common principle for Washington was freedom, subject to such conditions as the social state made prudent or necessary. It was important that he show himself a responsible steward before the example of his statesmanship could compel the stewardship of others. 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. It will remain forever unanswered, whether his example and instruction would have been sufficient eventually to bring about peaceful abolition. 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.

W. B. Allen is a professor of political philosophy at Michigan State University. He is the editor of *George Washington: A Collection* (1988) and co-author of *Habits of Mind: Fostering Access and Excellence in Higher Education* (2003).

⁵ This suffices to show that Washington's prudence was not based on intimate relationship with the slaves whom he had personally owned, and for whom one might reasonably surmise some degree of affection. These thirty-three slaves he never knew at all!