

Jesus Walked on Water – George Washington Built on Land*

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He looked forward to the well-founded city,
designed and built by God.
Hebrews 11:9-11

These words, written by Paul about the faith of Abraham, can be aptly applied to George Washington – a founder whose deep religious faith and profound political vision are too little acknowledged today. Indeed, for two centuries, the nation has esteemed Washington largely for his actions, especially on the battlefield, more than for his words and thought. Washington's actions do speak to us and in them we can discern, readily enough, that fine political vision which guided his entire public life. But he also reveals that vision – a complete and lofty design for the just city – in eloquent and powerful words. This essay will use Washington's own words to show how he assayed to carry out the Lord's work in his founding efforts. His unwavering goal in this endeavor was to create a nation dedicated to and capable of sustaining civil *and* religious liberty – the intertwined end of politics as he saw it. Yet, for all the grandeur of his vision, the work itself was relentlessly pragmatic. You see, while Jesus walked on water, George Washington built on land.

Washington makes clear in a letter to Jonathan Trumbull (July 20, 1788) that he saw the hand of God at work in the establishment of the nation, as he instructs Trumbull to
...trace the finger of providence through those dark and mysterious events, which first induced the States to appoint a general Convention and then led them one after another (by such steps as were best calculated to effect the object) into an adoption of the system recommended by that general Convention; thereby, in all human probability, laying a lasting foundation for tranquillity and happiness; when we had but too much reason to fear that confusion and misery were coming rapidly upon us. (*GWC*, pp. 411-12.)ⁱ

Do not think these invocations of Providence and of religious liberty to confirm mere pieties. For Washington was prolix on the subject, in such a manner as to make clear that it was more than a nicety.

Perhaps the best way to assess this dimension of Washington's founding contribution and his basic political thought would be to trace from beginning to end the genetic connection between his political goals and the justifications he typically offered for them. In that manner we would advance from what is perhaps the most important initial observation, namely his interest in developing the navigation of the Potomac River and connecting it with the Ohio River. He addressed that question, after all, in 1770, when he counseled one of the authors of the scheme to embrace "a more extensive Plan." For, "it would meet with a more general approbation... if it was recommended to Public Notice...as a means of becoming the Channel of conveyance of the extensive and valuable trade of a rising Empire..." (*GWC*, p. 28.) This pre-Revolution insight charac-

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terized Washington's continuing advocacy of this project in all the years thereafter, if anything becoming emphatically more political during the era of drafting the Constitution, and eventuating in a complete conflation with ideas of religious liberty and the call for a "national university" by the end of his career.

In 1784 Washington made the connection explicit:

It has been long my decided opinion that the shortest, easiest, and least expensive communication with the invaluable and extensive Country back of us, would be by one, or both of the rivers of this State which have their sources in the Appalachian mountains...

This then when considered in an interested point of view, is alone sufficient to excite our endeavours; but in my opinion, there is a political consideration for so doing, which is of still greater importance.

I need not remark to you Sir, that the flanks and rear of the United States are possessed by other powers, and formidable ones too; nor how necessary it is to apply the cement of interest, to bind all parts of the Union together by indissoluble bonds, especially that part of it, which lies immediately west of, with the Middle States. For what ties, let me ask, should we have upon those people? How entirely unconnected with them shall we be, and what troubles may we not apprehend, if the Spaniards on their right, and Gt. Britain on their left, instead of throwing stumbling blocks in their way as they now do, should hold out lures for their trade and alliance... It needs not, in my opinion, the gift of prophecy to foretell.

The Western settlers...stand as it were upon a pivot; the touch of a feather would turn them any way. (to Governor Benjamin Harrison, October 10, 1784, *GWC*, pp. 287ff.)

He was relentless in pursuing "great political, as well as commercial consequences to these States," (*GWC*, p. 303), namely, to assure the rise of an "Empire" (*GWC*, p. 558) that will assure the political integrity of the United States, and which goal "gave the spur to my exertions." (*GWC*, p. 305.) Washington foresaw, as he wrote to the Marquis de Lafayette in 1785, that without canals to connect the Atlantic States and the Western Territory, there would result "...many, and great mischiefs which would naturally result from a separation, and that a separation would inevitably take place, if the obstructions between the two countries remained, and the navigation of the Mississippi should be made free." The goal for the United States, however, the eventual goal, was "to afford a capacious asylum for the poor and persecuted of the earth." (*GWC*, p. 418.)

When Washington embraced the idea of rescuing the "poor and persecuted" he embraced the twin goals of fostering prosperity and religious liberty. Nor did he ever conceive that they could be separated, as his encouragements to a wide diversity of religious sects revealed. Starting from the simple premise that the Potomac described a geographical and political center around which a constitution could be built, he moved in a straight line toward collecting the talent of the country at the center.

Potomac River then, is the centre of the Union. It is between the extremes of heat and cold. It is not so far to the south as to be unfriendly to grass, nor so far north as to have the produce of the Summer consumed in the length, and severity of the winter. It waters that soil, and runs in that climate, which is most congenial to English grains, and most agreeable to the cultivators of them.

It is the River, more than any other, in my opinion, which must, in the natural progress of things, connect by its inland navigation (now nearly compleated 190 measured miles up to Fort Cumberland, at the expence of £50,000 Sterlg. raised by private subscription) the Atlantic States with the vast region which is populating (beyond all conception) to the Westward of it. It is designed by law for the seat of the Empire; and must from its extensive course through a rich and populous country become, in time, the grand Emporium of North America. (to Arthur Young, December 5, 1791. *GWC*, p. 558)

...by assembling the youth from the different parts of this rising republic, contributing from their intercourse, and interchange of information, to the removal of prejudices which might perhaps, sometimes arise, from local circumstances... The Federal City, from its centrality, and the advantages which, in other respects it must have over any other place in the U. States, ought to be preferred, as a proper site for such a University. And if a plan can be adopted upon a scale as extensive as I have described; and the execution of it shall commence under favorable auspices, in a reasonable time, with a fair prospect of success; I will grant, in perpetuity, fifty shares in the navigation of the Potomac River towards the endowment of it. (to The Commissioners of the District of Columbia, January 28, 1795, *GWC*, p. 603; p. 607.)

It is perhaps easier to observe the connection between Washington's encouragement of entrepreneurial development of riverways and canals with political prosperity than with any notion of the necessity of religious liberty. To observe the latter, however, one need only read through the parallel letters to religious congregations and similar reflections that were being penned simultaneously with these developments. Then it becomes starkly clear that these are all elements of a grand design. This was made retrospectively manifest in the instruction Washington provided Alexander Hamilton regarding the crafting of the "Farewell Address:"

Let me pray you, therefore, to introduce a Section in the Address expressive of these sentiments, and recommendatory of the measure [a national university]; without any mention, however, of my proposed personal contribution to the plan [his shares in the Potomac and James River canal projects]. *Such a Section would come in very properly after the one which relates to our religious obligations*, or in a preceeding part, as one of the recommendatory measures to counteract the evils arising from Geographical discriminations. (*GWC*, p. 650.) (Emphasis added).

It was natural for Washington to connect his ideas with his understanding of religious liberty and religious obligations, for he already aimed to emphasize in the "Farewell" that,

[o]f all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labour to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens... And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle... (*GWC*, p. 521-22.)

Religion, then, constituted a fundamental element and background for "the general diffusion of knowledge," and both were necessary "in proportion" as the government was founded in "public opinion."

In his “Eighth Annual Message” Washington had declared the goal of assimilating “the principles, opinions, and manners, of our countrymen,” and that goal coincided with the assimilative function of the various canal projects. (*GWC*, p. 505.) It coincided no less, however, with the goal declared in the “Circular Address of 1783,” so much at the center of my analysis. There he argued that whatever would “dissolve” the Union or “lessen” the sovereign authority of the United States would in fact be hostile to liberty. (*GWC*, p. 243.) It was no accident, then, that within the same time frame he could write to the Reformed German Congregation, “The establishment of Civil and Religious Liberty was the Motive which induced me to the Field,” adding to that declaration of intent his “...earnest wish and prayer, that the Citizens of the United States would make a wise and virtuous use of the blessings placed before them...” (*GWC*, p. 270.)

In short, Washington conceived of religious liberty not as a side benefit of independence but rather the objective for which independence was sought. He pursued political integrity and the fullness of empire as a means of assuring the attainment of that goal. He discerned the direction of the hand of Providence in the operation because he was witness to the progressive attainment of the goal. “In war he directed the sword and in peace he has ruled in our councils,” he told the Hebrew Congregations in January 1790 (*GWC*, p. 546.)

America, under the smiles of a Divine Providence, the protection of a good government, and the cultivation of manners, morals, and piety, cannot fail of attaining an uncommon degree of eminence in literature, commerce, agriculture, improvements at home and respectability abroad. (*GWC*, p. 546.)

The citizens of the United States have...an enlarged and liberal policy – a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support. (*GWC*, p. 548.)

Washington so far saw these blessings of civil life as interdependent and inseparable, that he even mused on occasion that the people’s good fortune (good crops and ready markets) has put them in such good humor that they sometimes “even impute to the Government what is due only to the goodness of Providence.” (*GWC*, p. 557.) He was, in other words, suitably modest about his own agency in the transformation of the United States into the land of a chosen people. On the other hand, he was far from immodest in consistently asserting his understanding of what was necessary and his determined pursuit of the goal:

...to establish a general system of policy, which if pursued will ensure permanent felicity to the Commonwealth. I think I see a *path*, as clear and as direct as a ray of light, which leads to the attainment of that object. Nothing but harmony, honesty, industry and frugality are necessary to make us a great and happy people. Happily the present posture of affairs and the prevailing disposition of my countrymen promise to co-operate in establishing those four great and essential pillars of public felicity. (*GWC*, p. 428.)

The “four great pillars” that Washington *discerned* in 1789 (letter to Lafayette) just happen to correspond perfectly with the four “pillars” that he *prescribed* in the 1783 “Circular Address:” indissoluble union, justice, “a proper peace establishment,” and that “harmony” among

the people that occasions “prosperity” and sometimes requires “sacrifice of individual advantages” in the interest of the community.

A reflection on Washington’s interest in just one of these four pillars – the American union – illustrates how closely interwoven were all aspects of Washington’s master design in founding the city of justice. In his 1796 Farewell Address, he told his countrymen that “the Unity of Government which constitutes you one people...is a main Pillar in the Edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home; your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very Liberty which you so highly prize.” (GWC, p. 515).

Washington had urged the notion of an American union, in the context of the Revolution, as early as 1775. The progress of the war made his appeals ever more strident and more insistent. In the final two years of the war, despite the enormous labors required to maintain his position in the face of a determined enemy, his appeals attained the status of virtual demands. Even as the Articles of Confederation came finally to be ratified, Washington urged upon legislators and others the necessity for a still stronger national union. He reflected in this the fruit of sad experience: “we must take the passions of men as nature has given them, and those principles as a guide which are generally the rule of action.”

Once the war was won and the enemy had left American soil, and although Washington plunged back into the tasks of managing his estates, public concerns still pressed in on him. He resumed his pre-war efforts to produce a waterway connection between the Transappalachians and the Potomac, as much for reasons of state, “to cement the union,” as for reasons of commerce.

Washington was perfectly esoteric in his conduct regarding the development of an American republic. Nevertheless, he very nearly monopolized the people’s attention insofar as it concerned itself with the future form of the regime. In the “Circular Address” he had made clear that the conditions for achieving the status of “a people” in the United States hinged completely upon the establishment of a rule of justice, not only within the institutions but also within the souls of its people.

Washington’s continuing concern with establishing a rule justice, and the centrality of justice to the American union, is apparent in the fragments that remain of his undelivered “First Inaugural Address.” There he pledged his intention and urged the nation to join him in advancing “...directly forward in the path of our duty,” entering a path that would yet prove “intricate and thorny,” but which would “grow plain and smooth as we go.”ⁱⁱⁱ It would grow so, he held, because of their adhering “[in] public as in private life” to “...the eternal line that separates right from wrong.” (GWC, 458.)

The “First Inaugural Address” that Washington delivered instead was a very simple, humble appeal for virtue in the citizens. Not until the 1796 “Farewell,” the one spurring George III to declare Washington the “greatest character alive,” did Washington take up a copious celebration of his fellow citizens, as though the path had, by then, grown “plain and smooth.” That is at least the powerful implication of the claim in the “Farewell Address,” that “the unity of government which constitutes you one people is now dear to you.”

The Revolution had opened with a recognized love of liberty and a circumscribed patriotism. The true founding transformation consisted of an enlargement of patriotism, informed with a sense, not of consanguinity but, of common participation in the *imitatio dei*. The love of liberty is a powerful inducement toward constructing a free society; only the love of being one people pro-

vides the means of preserving it against foreign and domestic assault. Washington brought to the people his goal of union; he brought them to vaunt their particularism (newly acquired), the love of the American, and thus gave assurance to individual liberty.

The path followed by Washington – encouragement of virtue through intricate and thorny trials – alone suggests the reason for his success. Having determined to work with nature, rather than against her, Washington built up claims of justice sufficient to make lawmaking possible. Although all claims of justice are tied in some fashion to claims of patriotism, the laws of one's fatherland do not necessarily conform to the demands of justice.ⁱⁱⁱ The work of detaching a people from the laws of their fatherland, in order to render possible a greater, virtue-based patriotism, is difficult beyond the limits of ordinary imagination. George Washington apparently saw with clarity of vision that exceeded the ordinary. He succeeded because he cared more for justice than for patriotism. He succeeded, too, because he placed the work of the Almighty above personal ambition and self-interest and urged the nation to do likewise. In phrasing his 1783 prayer for his countrymen from *Micah* 6:8, he amended the sacred text so as to embrace the most extensive human ambition and thus to project the goal he aimed at:

That [God] would graciously be pleased to dispose us all, to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the characteristicks of the Divine author of our blessed Religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy nation. (“Circular Address to the Governors of the Thirteen States,” June 14, 1783, *GWC*, p. 249).

Washington's *imitatio dei* converted Micah's humble prayer (“What does God ask of man, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”) into an ambitious program to build, on this land, the city of justice.

ⁱ This and all subsequent references to Washington's writing are taken from *George Washington: A Collection*, edited by W. B. Allen, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988, and hereinafter cited as *GWC*.

ⁱⁱ That is, consistent with that “path, as clear and direct as a ray of light,” that he had anticipated.

ⁱⁱⁱ I have developed this principle in an essay, “The Truth About Citizenship: An Outline,” in the *Cardozo Journal of International and Comparative Law*, vol. 4, No. 2, Summer, 1996, pp. 355-372.