

STRATEGIC MOURNING: AMERICA'S JOURNEY AFTER
THE DEATH OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

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JENNIFER LOUISE CRANE

B.S., Emporia State University, 1996
M.E.T., MidAmerica Nazarene University, 2004

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JENNIFER LOUISE CRANE

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Jennifer Louise Crane, Candidate for the Master of Arts Degree
University of Missouri—Kansas City, 2020

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the eulogies delivered after the death of George Washington in 1799, identifying themes in the texts and motivations of the authors. The death of the first president occurred during a series of national and international events that challenged the procedures and foundational beliefs of the new American republic. As citizens and leaders faced these challenges, they realized they had differing ideas about the role of a national government and its relationship with the citizenry. Additionally, they disagreed about how to solve problems facing the new country. The first American political parties had formed in response to these differences, with Federalists promoting a strong central government and Democratic Republicans favoring more power for the citizenry, and each party disagreeing about what it meant to be an American.

When Washington died unexpectedly, Americans had to quickly manufacture practices surrounding the mourning of their presidents. Losing the man who had led them for many years—and against a backdrop of numerous national arguments—inspired eulogists to paint a heroic portrait of the popular general and president to promote calm and unity among citizens. I argue that in the process of encouraging unity and formulating Washington's image as a perfect hero, eulogists were manufacturing not only a national identity, but also the motivation for Americans to continue the republic after the death of their first leader.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Strategic Mourning: America’s Journey After the Death of George Washington,” presented by Jennifer L. Crane, candidate for the Master of History degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Supervisory Committee

Matthew Osborn, Ph.D., Committee Chair
Department of History

Diane Mutti-Burke, Ph.D.
Department of History

Brian Frehner, Ph.D.
Department of History

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On Sunday, January 5, 1800, Pastor Timothy Alden of the South Church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, delivered a eulogy for the recently-departed George Washington, and related a story involving his colleague, Reverend Samuel Haven:

When Washington made his last tour, through the Northern States, and had reached the vicinity of Portsmouth, the question was asked *what title shall we give him*. The venerable Doctor Haven replied, *in the true sublime*; Fame spread her wings, and with her trumpet blew;/Great Washington is near! What praise HIS due!/What TITLE shall he have? She paus'd and said,/Not ONE; HIS NAME ALONE STRIKES EVERY TITLE DEAD.¹

In urging his listeners to pay their respects to their late leader, Alden placed Washington on a very high pedestal. He closed with a popular poem of the time that expressed profound reverence for Washington. Like others who gave public remarks after the first president's death, Alden's eulogy sought to shape the collective memory of Washington as the foundation of American national identity and as the immortal figurehead inspiring citizens to carry on as a united republic. The examination of this mourning process in written format is one important way to view the formation of nationalism in the United States.

The presence of George Washington had been reassuring for many, and his death challenged Americans to continue the republican experiment without him. He had been the central figure of the military during the Revolution, the Constitutional Convention, the first national election, and of course, the country's first presidential administration. The fact that Americans had just witnessed the first peaceful transference of power and were still navigating their way through the reality of becoming a nation made this an especially

¹ Timothy Alden, *A Sermon, Delivered at the South Church in Portsmouth, on the V January, M,DCCC: Occasioned by the Sudden and Universally Lamented Death of George Washington Commander of the American Armies, and Late President of the United States* (Portsmouth, NH: Charles Peirce, 1800), 24.

difficult time to lose a key figure of the new republic. Though Washington had not approved of or joined any political party, he was viewed as a Federalist. In particular, the Federalists saw his death as a call to action, as the election of 1800 was less than a year away.

Federalists were backing incumbent John Adams, while Thomas Jefferson was the Democratic Republican candidate. Federalists needed to rally Americans to their cause of unwavering support of a strong national government, and coax them away from the Democratic Republicans, who had been critical of the late president. The upcoming election would hand the national reins to the Democratic Republicans, a major shift in power, but at Washington's death, Federalists still retained the presidency. The fact that their brightest star had just passed away now posed a threat to their cause.

Most of America's forty-five presidents have been eulogized in a well-established, predictable program of rituals put into place over the past two centuries. The first time a president died, however, Americans were caught off guard at the news that the "father" of their country had unexpectedly passed away. They understood the fragility of that moment—now was the time to capture people's attention and direct it in a constructive manner. Local and national leaders across the country joined forces to offer eulogies that imparted the message that the young country would be sustained in this time of loss by remembering the strength of this exceptional man's character. Strategically-written eulogies as mourning rituals promoted a consistent, focused collective memory of Washington, and used that narrative as a political roadmap for the new republic.

Washington's death provided an opportunity for self-examination on the part of mourners, a process that would prepare them for the political future. The eulogies commemorated a man whose most incredible accomplishment was giving up power, and

many of the speakers marveled over this fact. Washington had demonstrated that respect for the procedures of the new Constitution outweighed a need for personal power. America was instructed, through the eulogies, to revere leaders who saw honor in this peaceful transfer of national authority. Little did they know how important this understanding would be when Thomas Jefferson took office a year later. Federalists who had exalted the leader who willingly left the presidency would have to uphold this idea as Democratic Republicans won the presidency in the coming months.

Review of the Literature

Though some historians see the eulogies as simply overwrought, “platitudinous lamentations on [Washington’s] passing,” they are an intriguing portal into the worries of a peculiar moment in the nation’s history.² Those historians and other scholars who have viewed them as valuable sources of information have interpreted their meaning from differing perspectives, including whether the eulogists had motives in mind other than paying their respects to the late leader. As many of the eulogies were written by clergymen, some historians have interpreted the writings from a religious perspective. Others have noted the emergence of Washington’s lasting image as a political leader during a precarious time when the nation needed reassurance.

Historian John Berens sees the eulogies as a primarily religious method of preaching nationalism to the masses after Washington’s death. He argues that since Americans had such a limited national history to look back on, leaders needed to manufacture a sacred backstory to prove that America was chosen by God in order to convince the grieving populace that their new country would survive. Therefore, Washington served as “a substitution for the mythical kings and legendary lawgivers which the United States lacked,” which explains the many references in the eulogies to him as a savior.³

Psychologist Barry Schwartz, too, examines the ways in which the eulogists positioned George Washington as a national hero for their audiences, but from a different angle. He proposes the idea that the Washington of the eulogies is a leader whose image fits that of Whig tradition, a leader who successfully fights off the inevitable need for power.

² Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 270.

³ John F. Berens, “‘Like a Prophetic Spirit’: Samuel Davies, American Eulogists, and the Deification of George Washington,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63, no. 3 (1977): 297.

Schwartz contrasts this image with sociologist Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority. Washington was not charismatic, Schwartz argues, because he was neither an authoritarian nor a radical; he fought for "a conservative uprising which aspired not to the creation of a new order but to the restoration of previously held rights and liberties."⁴ According to Schwartz, this idea was useful for eulogists taking charge in a worrisome time period by preaching calm and unity.

One recent author places the eulogies into categories based on the specific separate agendas of their authors. In 2008's *The Long Farewell: Americans Mourn the Death of George Washington*, Gerald L. Kahler points out that Freemasons, clergymen, members of the Society of the Cincinnati, and members of the military all represented aspects of the first president's life and these individuals "attempted to use the national grief at the time of Washington's death to satisfy their own purposes and goals."⁵ Freemasons wanted to rehabilitate their image as a mysterious, radical group with ties to foreign secret societies targeting the United States government, and used the nationwide memorials to try to dispel those rumors and fears.⁶ Clergymen seized on Washington's comments in the Farewell Address stating that "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."⁷ They strongly urged their listeners to remember God's role in bringing forth the heroic Washington to worldwide greatness, and pushed the narrative of a pious Washington crediting his successes to his belief in God. "Let our great men . . . remember that they cannot resemble WASHINGTON, in one of the most

⁴ Barry Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 1 (1983): 19.

⁵ Gerald E. Kahler, *The Long Farewell: Americans Mourn the Death of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁷ George Washington, "Farewell Address to the People of the United States." September 19, 1796.

beautiful and honorable traits in his character, if they are not the sincere friends of religion.”⁸ The Society of the Cincinnati, an organization of Revolutionary War officers, commemorated their late commander amidst dwindling membership. Veterans were gradually passing away, and the remaining members—like the Freemasons—suffered from an image problem, as some Americans believed the Society was establishing a society based on hereditary entitlement. This did not go over well in a country trying to demonstrate the feasibility of a power structure of prestige rooted in individual merit. Finally, the military processions included in the remembrances for the late president prominently recalled his decades of military service and unlikely victory over His Majesty’s forces after the long War for Independence, and subtly pushed the idea of a national armed force.⁹

All of the aforementioned scholars have made connections between the landscape of the late eighteenth century and rituals related to the president’s death. Examining the eulogies across the various groups, however, reveals common threads and similar motivations. These writings and their performance in front of audiences represent a dramatic moment in early American history when leaders collectively used a shared memory to guide succeeding generations of participants in the new democracy and make grief a part of patriotism. Attendance for these eulogies were occasions in which “ordinary citizens [could] act politically between elections.”¹⁰

By holding public memorials, leaders around the country also actively promoted the idea that a nation had to be manufactured, and that it was a conscious process guided via such

⁸ John Andrews, *An Eulogy on General George Washington: Who Departed This Life December 14th, 1799, in the 68th Year of His Age*, (Newburyport, MA: Angier March, 1800), 11.

⁹ Kahler, *The Long Farewell*, 45.

¹⁰ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1997), 112.

rituals as parades, remembrances, and pageantry. “The contested nature of the early Republic’s political culture often appeared as rising partisanship . . . at events associated with holidays, including Washington’s birthday and in subsequent newspaper reportage.”¹¹ It is these types of everyday celebrations that historian David Waldstreicher interprets in 1997’s *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism 1776-1820*. In his view, early Americans created their country through “the gathering of people at celebratory events, in the toasts and declarations given meaning by assent, in the reproduction of rhetoric and ritual print.”¹² These holidays, remembrances, and other observances empowered people to establish what it meant to be an American. At the end of 1799, then, these commemorations had new significance. Being an American now meant publicly attesting support for their nation and government by grieving the first president’s death.

These activities only possess meaning when they incorporate the memory of participants, both individual and collective. Ultimately, memory is what attaches people to one another, thereby upholding structures of society and enabling nation-building. At the close of the eighteenth century, leaders of the United States wanted to strengthen their country and the power of Federalism. One way to accomplish this was within the framework of memory. The eulogy, an established practice to remember the dead, was one effective memory-making method. Washington could still retain power, in the form of memory, to provide a national identity and the motivation for Americans to carry on the republic.

¹¹ Kathleen Bartoloni-Tuazon, *For Fear of an Elective King: George Washington and the Presidential Title Controversy of 1789* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), 46.

¹² Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 51-2.

CHAPTER 2

A STORMY BEGINNING

The first decade after the nation's founding was a tumultuous time. An understanding of the period in which Washington died animates the content of the ensuing eulogies, as the political contest shaped the reaction to his death. Decisions made and precedents set might forever determine how the U.S. government would operate, how people would behave, and whether the United States would survive. Perhaps these decisions would not matter at all. At this early stage, not all inhabitants of the United States saw themselves as "united", but as citizens of one state or another. Freshly broken away from Great Britain after the war, however, Americans bickered over a variety of issues. Perhaps this disagreement was inevitable after gaining independence, but mostly-unanimous support of now-President Washington soon branched off into political parties with opposing views about how the former colonies should evolve after the long, violent separation from Great Britain. As Joseph Ellis frames the political scene, "On one side stood those who wished America's revolutionary energies to be harnessed to the larger purposes of nation building; on the other side stood those who interpreted that very process as a betrayal of the Revolution itself."¹

As much as the president enjoyed great popularity and rejected the "party spirit" of the times, he could not help but be caught between those two sides. On many occasions, he encouraged unity between the Federalists and Democratic Republicans, but found this increasingly difficult to do in the course of running the new nation. Political divisions appeared in his own cabinet, between Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, an admirer of the egalitarian French Revolution, and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, a

¹ Ellis, *His Excellency*, 230.

Federalist who favored a strong central government reflecting the power of the wealthy elite. “Their single common interest was their country’s ultimate good, yet where one sought strength for the nation, the other only saw the seed of dissolution; the ideal of the one was the abomination of the other.”² As dilemmas naturally arose to test the new government, the Democratic Republicans and Federalists within Washington’s circle of advisors made their affiliations clear as they argued over the best course of action. At times, Washington had to work just as hard to endure the disagreements of the people around him as he did to work through the country’s problems.³

The new political parties sharply divided over how to respond to the events unfolding around the world. Washington and the Federalists feared the potential repercussions of involvement in foreign affairs, including the French Revolution, and the subsequent rise of Napoleon, who unleashed decades of warfare in Europe. Washington steadfastly maintained his stance on neutrality, believing that no good could come from favoring one country over another, but the troubling situation in France tested this resolve.⁴ During the American Revolution, French support had been crucial. Democratic Republicans felt a continued kinship with the French as they saw an oppressed people now exercising their right to eliminate their monarchy to escape its tyranny. The world had just witnessed the American colonies defeat the most powerful military force in existence, unite to establish its own government, and elect a new leader. Perhaps it was only right that other countries should follow suit, establishing governments through the consent of the people, and retaining the right to hold these governments accountable.

² Douglas S. Freeman, *Washington* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 613.

³ *Ibid.*, 598, 591, 610. John H. Rhodehamel, *George Washington: The Wonder of the Age*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 235.

⁴ George Washington, “Proclamation of Neutrality,” April 22, 1793.

Federalists viewed the revolt in France with concern, however. French citizens, frustrated with poor economic and social conditions, had overthrown their government and imprisoned King Louis XVI and his family, eventually executing the monarch and his wife in 1793. More executions, continued uprisings, and counterrevolutions followed. As the fighting spilled over into other countries, France asked for American support (as well as the repayment of a massive debt left over from the American Revolution), forcing the administration to make several difficult decisions.⁵ Federalists disapproved of the instability and destruction in France, and naturally related it to their own situation in the United States, having just survived a revolt of their own. The rebellious sentiment and violence of the French Revolution might infect the American populace, and undo all the work that had been done to establish their new republic.⁶ These same fears resurfaced in the eulogies a few years later, as orators warned against Democratic Republican dissent.

Federalists disliked the defiant tactics and criticism of government that had contributed to the success of the War for Independence when they were now used against the new American government, and believed this opposition was a sign that more upheaval was coming. Shays' Rebellion, the 1786 uprising of western Massachusetts farmers unhappy about state taxation, was one such example. The bewildered Washington "insisted on seeing the crisis as a harbinger of prospective anarchy" and Federalists resolved to strengthen the federal government, dispensing with the Articles of Confederation shortly thereafter.⁷ The new Constitution of the United States laid out the proper framework and procedure for a republic, and that meant that dissent, demonstrations, or a critical press were unnecessary.

⁵ Douglas S. Freeman, *Washington* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 617-622.

⁶ Ellis, *His Excellency*, 223-4, 246-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

Historian Shira Lurie articulates the two sides' thought processes quite plainly when she writes:

From the Republican perspective, the Patriots' victory in the War of Independence promised individual freedom from government power. They believed that citizens in a republic had a right to resist government overreach . . . For Federalists, by contrast, the Revolution secured representative government as the means to protect American liberty. They held that citizens in a republic had a duty to obey legislation passed by their elected representatives.⁸

There was more rebellion to come. In devising ways to pay off the now-consolidated war debts accumulated by the states during the Revolution, Alexander Hamilton pushed a tax on distilled spirits, which passed into law in 1791. Grain farmers of rural western Pennsylvania who made whiskey from their crop depended on the immense value and transportability of their product, and they demanded the repeal of the tax. For years, they protested through a variety of drastic methods, sometimes threatening, kidnapping, or injuring tax collectors. Washington's administration was aware of the ongoing rebellion and responded with a proclamation, while Hamilton and the president disagreed about the next step. Things came to a head in the summer of 1794 when an angry mob destroyed tax collector John Neville's Washington County home. Protestors continued their confrontation, which resulted in more injuries and property damage, but they believed they were exercising their right to protest. Ultimately, the Whiskey Rebellion, as it came to be known, began to subside as protesters heard of Washington's call to the militia of surrounding states, which he personally led months later to western Pennsylvania to enforce the law. This incident was an

⁸ Shira Lurie, "Liberty Poles and the Fight for Popular Politics in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2018), 674.

early test of the federal government's authority, specifically, its authority to collect taxes from constituents.⁹ It was also more of the dissent Federalists feared.

The parties also disagreed about whether America should continue to be a primarily agrarian nation or encourage industry, and fretted about the possibility of the economies of the Northern and Southern colonies developing in such different directions that, as Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson put it, "I can scarcely contemplate a more incalculable evil than the breaking of the union into two or more parts."¹⁰ Democratic Republicans favored the idea of a nation of farmers (including those western Pennsylvania farmers of the Whiskey Rebellion), and a more egalitarian society. Of course, their vision was intended for white inhabitants only; the labor of enslaved people was paramount to the success of an agricultural economy. While Democratic Republicans felt that a strong central government threatened individual freedom, Federalists lobbied for the authority of a federal government that possessed the strength to maintain citizens' freedoms. George Washington, who had survived the hardships of commanding the Continental Army during the Revolution, knew firsthand the complexities of interacting with leadership that lacked cohesive authority.

Even the title of the occupant of the executive office was cause for major argument. In retrospect, compared to the many lingering questions about how that elected official could or should govern, this issue could appear to be insignificant. Nonetheless, when people expressed strong feelings about whether the president should have a more royal-sounding title like "His Majesty" or "His Highness," or the less-ornate "President of the United States"

⁹ Scott A. Cook, and William Earle Klay, "George Washington's Precedents: The Institutional Legacy of the American Republic's Founding Public Administrator," *Administration & Society* 47, no. 1 (January 2015), 82-3. See also Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.)

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, Philadelphia, PA, May 23, 1792.

they revealed what they believed about the bearer of that title, and what they wanted him to signify to the world. “[F]oes of a regal title distrusted a strong, monarchical federal executive, while proponents worried about a weak and easily intimidated one that nonetheless had the sway of a monarch.”¹¹

Americans disagreed about what differentiated the behavior of a president from that of a monarch. Aside from the semantics of his title, some Americans argued that the first president’s performance was not living up to their expectations. Democratic Republicans envisioned the president as a figure who was open to criticism and answered to the public directly. They believed this give and take process was the way a republican government was supposed to operate. The president was beholden to the people, and must not ignore questions, concerns, and complaints. Having rid themselves of one king, they were not open to what they perceived as the machinations of another self-serving monarch. The president possessed what some called “a disturbingly regal aloofness that they argued had come to characterize Washington’s presidential conduct,” like that of an aristocrat.¹² In the eyes of those who interpreted his reserved nature as an uncaring or arrogant attitude, this was unacceptable.

Adding to this air of detachment, Washington implemented customs of the new office. He travelled in an elaborate presidential carriage pulled by six horses, held weekly levees in which men were formally received by the president on Tuesday afternoons, and he and Martha Washington held weekly dinners for government officials and their wives.¹³

Critics compared these new customs to those of a monarchy, and argued that Washington

¹¹ Bartoloni-Tuazon, *For Fear of an Elective King*, 3.

¹² Nathaniel C. Green, “‘The Focus of the Wills of Converging Millions’: Public Opposition to the Jay Treaty and the Origins of the People’s Presidency,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2017), 450.

¹³ Freeman, *Washington*, 574.

was establishing a royal court rather than a presidential administration.¹⁴ Some also found it problematic that Washington did not favor political parties, interpreting this stance as Washington once again placing himself above all others. Federalists were appalled by all this criticism, which they viewed as disorder, impertinence, and symptomatic of factionalism. People had fought and died for the right to elect this leader, and citizens had a duty to support him, not fight him. As he had no precedent to use as a model, it was appropriate for Washington to make the office of the president respectable and dignified based on his own judgment. From this vantage point, President Washington was not aloof, but authoritative and trustworthy, and he commanded and deserved respect. This sentiment was echoed in the eulogies a few years later, which frowned upon dissent. As historian Nathaniel Green notes, “supporters of Washington’s administration sought to use Washington’s presidency to make unreserved public assent to the government the crucial foundation of republican union.”¹⁵ The man central to this “crucial foundation,” however, was about to make a momentous decision.

¹⁴ Edgar S. Maclay, ed., *Journal of William Maclay, United States Senator from Pennsylvania, 1789-1791* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1890), 351.

¹⁵ Green, “‘The Focus of the Wills of Converging Millions,’” 441.

CHAPTER 3

THE FIRST EX-PRESIDENT

Facing a multitude of critics, problems, and no easy answers, it was no wonder that Washington felt “a deepening weariness with public service” and longed for retirement rather than a third term.¹ As one historian framed the president’s quandry, “He had committed himself so closely to the nation and its government that every attack on government policies seemed to be an attack on *him*.”² It is impossible to overstate the significance of the fact that the first president of the United States (or any head of state) voluntarily walked away from his office, watched another man fill this office, and returned to being a private citizen. As historian Gordon Wood wrote, “Most people assumed that Washington might be president as long as he lived, that he would be a kind of elective monarch—something not out of the question in the 18th century.”³

Nevertheless, after two terms in office, Washington did step down, but not without offering the advice of a man who was now sixty-four years old, with decades of leadership positions behind him, and who sensed that the “increasing weight of years admonishes me more and more that the shade of retirement is as necessary to me as it will be welcome.”⁴ William Jackson, Washington’s personal secretary during the Revolution later described the compilation of these sentiments, the Farewell Address, as “containing the most instructive,

¹ Bruce G. Peabody, “George Washington, Presidential Term Limits, and the Problems of Reluctant Political Leadership,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2001), 443.

² Edmund S. Morgan, “George Washington: The Aloof American,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 52, no. 3 (Summer 1976), 410-36.

³ Gordon S. Wood, “The Greatness of George Washington,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 68, no. 2 (Spring 1992), 189–207.

⁴ Washington, “Farewell Address.”

interesting, and important advice that has ever been submitted to any nation.”⁵ Washington would not seek a third term, Americans learned as they read the Farewell Address in newspapers around the country in September of 1796. Not only that, Washington took this opportunity to caution citizens about foreign policy decisions, offered his thoughts on what it meant to be an American, and preached unity in the face of inevitable adversity. A little over three years later, the men offering eulogies in memory of Washington would reiterate these same themes.

Though at sixty-seven Washington had reached an advanced age for a man of the eighteenth century, his death was surprising in that he unexpectedly passed away after a very brief illness. An examination of the details of Washington’s final days in late 1799 is important because of the fact that he died in private at home after leaving public office, and because of the suddenness of the event, which affected the reaction to his death. A lot of what is known has been gleaned from the firsthand accounts of the doctors on the scene, and the writings of his private secretary, thirty-seven year old Tobias Lear, who was present at Mount Vernon for the unexpected death of his employer. By virtue of his position and proximity, Lear was a witness to the notable happenings of those days in mid-December and was called upon to make several vital decisions. The night of Washington’s death, Lear sat down and wrote about the troubling events of the previous few days. When it came time to take Washington’s measurements for his coffin, Lear performed this task as well. Some seventy-two hours before, he had been a visitor at the estate, informally passing the time with George and Martha Washington.

⁵ George Washington, *Washington's Monuments of Patriotism. Being a Collection of the Most Interesting Documents, Connected with the Military Command and Civil Administration of the American Hero and Patriot. To Which is Annexed, an Eulogium on the Character of General Washington, by Major William Jackson* (Philadelphia: J. Ormrod, 1800), 257.

After spending a couple of days overseeing work on his land, Washington had begun to feel unwell on Friday, but initially refused medical attention, replying to a concerned Lear, “No, you know I never take anything for a cold. Let it go as it came.”⁶ Throughout the ensuing centuries, most if not all authors who recount this story connect his ensuing death with the fact that he was out in wintry weather during those two days, and returned home wet and cold, but Washington’s death is thought by many modern sources to have been brought about by a bacterial infection.⁷ Epiglottitis enlarges the epiglottis in the back of the throat, which gradually “closes off the windpipe, making breathing and swallowing extremely difficult, eventually impossible.”⁸ In an era before antibiotics, medical help for his condition was limited, and what had originally appeared to be the common cold advanced to the serious illness that confined the former president to bed and caused him great difficulty communicating with the concerned people steadily gathering around him.

Upon rising early on the morning of Saturday, December 14th, the Washingtons summoned Lear, who had stayed the night, and it was Lear who sent for trusted overseer George Rawlins and medical help. Doctors James Craik and Gustavus Richard Brown, both personal friends of the general, arrived that morning and put the sixty-seven year old through established medical procedures of the time, including a few sessions of blood-letting, and administering mixtures to gargle, drink or inhale. Dr. Elisha C. Dick arrived in the afternoon, and as the day wore on, the patient indicated that he wished no further treatment and knew his time on Earth was coming to a close. He directed his wife to locate his will, which she

⁶Tobias Lear, “II, 14 December 1799,” *Founders Online*, National Archives.

⁷ Cameron Boutin, “Adversary and Ally: The Role of Weather in the Life and Career of George Washington,” *The Journal of Military History* 81 (July 2017), 718. Boutin outright claims that, “In his extraordinary and lengthy career in politics and the military, Washington had acquired many enemies, but the one that finally ended his life was hostile weather.”

⁸ Ellis, *His Excellency*, 269.

did, and he told Lear, “I find that I am going,” and requested that his secretary ““arrange and record my military letters and papers . . . arrange my accounts and settle my books.””⁹ In response to a comment from Lear at the end, Washington replied, “‘Tis well,” his final words before he died late in the night, in the presence of Lear, Martha Washington, the assembled doctors, and several enslaved household staff.¹⁰

The man who had repeatedly escaped death and serious injury during his decades-long military career and was renowned for his strength and imposing physical presence had died at home from a microbial infection. Perhaps more significantly, the man who had passed up numerous opportunities to keep power indefinitely had died in his own bed after a few years’ voluntary retirement—not in battle, not in a coup, and not at the hands of the man who was currently president. True, Washington had not died a “hero’s death” in battle, but he had done something just as extraordinary: he had died as a former leader. As Barry Schwartz writes:

[T]he initial praise for Washington took place in the context of great political resentment and military fervor . . . By the end of the war, however, the public’s attention shifted from military to political concerns, and it was against this new background that Washington was transformed from a military hero into the nation’s great moral symbol.¹¹

Washington’s purposeful exit from the political stage had made him a new type of hero, a leader turned private citizen, and therefore his death at home was heroic because it was ordinary.

Washington’s straightforward instructions expressing his wishes regarding his burial were also ordinary: “And it is my express desire, that my corps (sic) may be interred in a

⁹ Tobias Lear, “II, 14 December 1799.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Schwartz, “George Washington,” 18-19.

private manner, without parade or funeral oration.”¹² Nonetheless, his funeral was held at Mount Vernon on Wednesday, December 18, 1799. Four ministers, all with personal connections to the late general and president, addressed the attendees at Washington’s funeral. The Reverend Thomas Davis, rector of Christ Church in Alexandria, Virginia, had served as chaplain during the American Revolution and had once been a guest at Mount Vernon. The Reverend Dr. James Muir, originally from Scotland, was pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, and served as trustee of Alexandria Academy, a cause Washington had supported financially. The Reverend William Moffatt taught at the aforementioned Alexandria Academy, while the Reverend Walter Dulany Addison was rector of the Episcopal Church in Oxon Hill, Maryland, and had also been a guest at Mount Vernon in years past.¹³

¹² George Washington, Francis Johnston, and William Hamilton, *The Washingtoniana: Containing a Sketch of the Life and Death of the Late Gen. George Washington, with a Collection of Elegant Eulogies, Orations, Poems, &c., Sacred to His Memory: Also, an Appendix Comprising all His Most Valuable Public Papers, and His Last Will and Testament* (Petersburgh, VA: Blandford Press, 1802), 50 (Appendix).

¹³ Mary V. Thompson, “Funeral Ministers,” Washington Library.

CHAPTER 4

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE PATH FORWARD

Grief prompts varied reactions from those left behind. Perhaps Americans hoped a man who had survived so many battles and other hardships would live on and on, or that he might return for more leadership opportunities in the nineteenth century. Even with another president in office in 1797, at least Washington had been watching from afar. As one British publication looking back on that time noted, “It was fitting that the Americans should have an example of a quiet election and a prosperous administration, apparently independent of the personal influence of the great founder of their liberty, though, in reality, supported by the whole strength of his character.”¹ In other words, Americans might now be lost without their beloved leader, as his influence had carried them even after he left the presidency.

Federalists were in a tenuous position at the end of 1799. True, the election of John Adams had been the first peaceful transfer of presidential power just a few years prior, but the way forward would not be smooth. “Hope as the Founders might have for political peace and harmony, the 1797 inauguration was just a temporary breather for the American party conflict, not the end.”² Washington’s second term had invited a lot of criticism, and Adams never enjoyed a level of popularity even close to that of his predecessor. Adams “went into his administration watching for a disturbingly long and flexible list of potentially treasonous actions, many of which he felt had already occurred and which were not at all limited to attempted overthrow of the government.”³ In response, the controversial Alien and Sedition

¹ “Biographical Sketch of George Washington, Late President of the United States of America,” *Monthly Magazine, Or, British Register* 9, no. 58 (1800), 357.

² Jeffrey L. Pasley, *The First Presidential Contest: 1796 and the Founding of American Democracy*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 414.

³ *Ibid.*, 413.

Acts passed in 1798 were meant to quash criticism of the Adams administration, a direct contradiction of the First Amendment. Political suppression would not work. Federalists were on their way out.

Washington's death was the next major step on the path to more change for the United States. Young Americans had known no other leader of that magnitude or who had served such a length of time in the public eye, with Washington having taken command of the Continental Army nearly a quarter of a century before, never quite achieving the full, uninterrupted retirement to Mount Vernon "for which [he had] never ceased to sigh . . . and which (remote from the noise and trouble of the World)" where he could live "in a state of undisturbed repose," as the eulogists noted.⁴ Washington's death meant the Revolutionary generation would have to cross over to the nineteenth century without him. Some saw it as an ill omen. The hundreds of men writing eulogies across the United States in this moment wondered why it had pleased God to remove George Washington at such an inopportune time, reasoning that if God had sent Washington as an "instrument" and "savior" to liberate the colonies from the tyranny of British rule and then establish a virtuous republican government, perhaps God was angry at the brewing party spirit dividing citizens.⁵

This party spirit was of real concern to Federalists, who feared that the death of the first president might invite calamity. Without his unifying presence, who was left to promote and guide America as only he could? Washington had used his every public move to carefully demonstrate to others how he believed American leaders must behave, so that his

⁴ George Washington, "Circular to the States," June 14, 1783.

⁵ John Andrews, *An Eulogy on General George Washington: Who Departed This Life December 14th, 1799, in the 68th Year of His Age* (Newburyport, MA: Angier March, 1800), 15; Oliver Everett, *An Eulogy, on General George Washington, Who Died on the 14th Od Dec. 1799: Pronounced at Dorchester, Feb. 22, 1800. It Being the Day Recommended by Congress, for the National Lamentation on His Death* (Charlestown, MA: Printed by Samuel Etheridge, 1800), 6.

successors would carry on the republic in like fashion without him. Yet now that they were without him, amidst the division of faction, Federalist leaders across the country knew that not everyone was on the same page. Future leaders might not be able to fight the need for power as Washington had.

“Two hundred years after his death, George Washington continues to hold a privileged place in the crowded iconography of American politics” and this is in part because of the collective memory formulated at his death to quell the unrest at that moment.⁶ “Collective memory” is a term coined by French sociologist and philosopher Maurice Halbwachs in the early twentieth century.⁷ Since then, scholars have applied it to a variety of situations in which a group of people retain a version of an event in their communal memory.⁸ Communities place significance upon specific memories, and this mutually agreed-upon significance assigns responsibility to community members, guiding their actions and obligating them to pass the “memory” (and therefore responsibility) on to future generations. It is not uncommon for collective memories to form around the death of a notable individual, and in the case of George Washington, he was notable and his death was unexpected. Perhaps most importantly, he represented American identity.

The “Orphan Republic” Pays Its Respects

As the eulogists warned, the sun was setting on the eighteenth century, and the “orphan republic” knows “[t]he eyes of the world are fixed upon us.”⁹ It was a prime

⁶ Bruce G. Peabody, “George Washington, Presidential Term Limits, and the Problems of Reluctant Political Leadership,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2001), 439.

⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter. (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

⁸ Michael Meng, *Shattered Spaces*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Ross Poole, "Memory, History and the Claims of the Past," *Memory Studies* 1, no. 2 (2008): 149-166.

Jay M. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

⁹ Washington, Johnston, and Hamilton, *The Washingtoniana*, 261; *Ibid.*, 278.

opportunity to promote Washington's vision of American identity and convey the responsibility of continuing the republic, based upon a grandiose legend of its first president to be passed down to future generations in the form of collective memory. As Kahler rightly describes it, "[i]t is the contemporary perspective of the eulogies and orations that makes them a unique and valuable source of information about how citizens of the early republic viewed George Washington."¹⁰ Prominent citizens used people's feelings towards Washington to achieve a task throughout the country, advancing the idea that the continuation of the United States was a way citizens could pay their respects to him. Washington had worked and sacrificed most of his life in service to his country, and the way for people to repay that debt was to unify under the banner of his beliefs. Leaders initiated the broadcast of this message of unity less than two weeks after his death.

On Thursday, December 26, 1799, General Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee gave the first public eulogy in memory of George Washington. He delivered it at the German Lutheran Church in Philadelphia, after a funeral procession through the streets of the city from Congress Hall. President John Adams and his wife, Abigail, attended the service. No doubt many Americans today can quote at least one phrase from this oration, which caught on as a catchy tagline to sum up the way in which their first president would be remembered: "First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen."¹¹ Lee's thoughts on this somber occasion served as a template for the hundreds of eulogies subsequently given throughout the United States in the months to come: commentary on common grief and

¹⁰ Kahler, *The Long Farewell*, 120.

¹¹ Henry Lee, *A Funeral Oration on the Death of George Washington Late President & Commander in Chief of the Armies of the United States of America, Who Departed This Life at Mount Vernon in Virginia, on the 14th of Dec. 1799, in the 68th Year of his Age. Delivered at the Request of Congress, by Major-General Henry Lee, Member of Congress from Virginia to Which is Subjoined, An Eulogy: by Judge Minot* (London: Printed by J. Bateson, 1800), 10.

shock, Washington as God's chosen one, a comparison of Washington to other leaders, and an image of the departed leader as a superhuman "[m]oving in his own orbit."¹²

In his eulogy, Lee also reminisces about the election of George Washington as president. This passage reveals the undercurrent of collective memory, in the form of a narrative of Washington as a heroic leader who had the power to unify Americans without requiring their overwhelming plaudits:

What was the burst of joy through our anxious land on this exhilarating event is known to us all. The aged, the young, the brave, the fair, rivalled each other in demonstrations of their gratitude; and this high-wrought delightful scene was heightened in its effect, by the singular contest between the zeal of the bestowers and the avoidance of the receiver of the honours bestowed.¹³

Though a few memorials were held in the weeks after, many people around the country paid their respects at local ceremonies held on what would have been the late president's sixty-eighth birthday on Saturday, February 22, 1800. In President Adams' January 6th proclamation for the National Day of Mourning, he called for citizens to "assemble on the 22nd day of February next, in such numbers and manners as may be convenient, publicly to testify their grief for the death of General George Washington, by suitable eulogies, orations and discourses, or by public prayers."¹⁴ There was a two and a half month period of time between Washington's death on Saturday, December 14, 1799, and his birthday on this National Day of Mourning. Depending upon when an American heard news of his death, this provided approximately ten weeks to process the momentous information, understand that a funeral and burial had already taken place, and finally, gather at a church,

¹² Ibid., 4.

¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴ "Testimonials of National Sorrow!" *Massachusetts Spy*, January 8, 1800, 2.

meetinghouse, or Masonic Lodge to observe this designated day.¹⁵ Washington's birthday had been publicly celebrated in the years before (much to the chagrin of those who felt it too closely resembled celebrations of a monarch's birthday), but this was the first time it was not a festive occasion. What had once been called "[t]he birth day (sic) of virtue, valor, and patriotism" was now a day of remembrance for a man who would celebrate no more birthdays.¹⁶ Aside from these past observances of Washington's birthday, this National Day of Mourning was one of the first attempts by the American government to promote and regulate unity and patriotism.

The Eulogists

It is evident from the identities of the eulogists that the people entrusted with the responsibility of publicly aligning these ideas with the memory of George Washington in early 1800 were leaders who had to fit certain parameters of respectability. In this time period, a leader was understood to be a white man with the virtues of the correct education, reputation, and race. Not surprisingly, many of the eulogists leading this somber day of remembrance were clergymen. Several eulogists were well-educated men (including several Harvard graduates) heaping tributes upon a man who notably did not receive a lengthy education but had still managed to make a mark in the world. There were lawyers, doctors, Revolutionary War veterans, writers, bankers, senators, and judges. Some were immigrants from England, Ireland, Scotland, and France.

One eulogist stands out from the rest, however. A former slave, Richard Allen was the forty year old founder and minister of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in

¹⁵ The first newspaper report appeared the following Monday, December 16th in Alexandria. See *Times and District of Columbia Daily Advertiser*, "Alexandria, Dec. 16," December 16, 1799.

¹⁶ "Boston, Friday, February 26, 1796. President's Birthday," *Massachusetts Mercury*, February 26, 1796, 2.

Philadelphia. Amidst a sea of eulogies praising Washington for fighting for colonists' freedom (some eulogists even alluding to the condition of white Americans railing against England's King George III as "slavery"), the juxtaposition of an African American born into slavery eulogizing a man who had owned hundreds of slaves is unexpected and fascinating.¹⁷ Yet Allen was a leader in his own right, who had repeatedly voiced his opinion that African Americans had a part to play in the new republic.¹⁸ Therefore, on December 29th, 1799, Allen closed his Sunday sermon on a hopeful note by sharing his thoughts on the recent death of the president.

While the enslavement of African Americans rarely surfaces in the other eulogies, Allen primarily speaks about the significance of a lengthy passage in the will of George Washington in which he outlines the freeing of his slaves. As Allen states, Washington "dared to do his duty, and wipe off the only stain with which man could ever reproach him."¹⁹ He aims to convince his audience that this amazing act proves that the late president was a "sympathising friend and tender father" who evidently believed African Americans should share in the freedoms for which Washington had fought during the Revolution.²⁰ One of the criticisms of the war's outcome is that although participants purportedly fought for freedom, their vision of liberty was for white men, not women, not Native Americans, and certainly not for African Americans. "Ever the realist, Washington was fully aware of

¹⁷ Andrews, *An Eulogy on General George Washington*, 11; Isaac Braman, *An Eulogy on the Late General George Washington: Who Died, Saturday, 14th December, 1799. Delivered at Rowley, Second Parish, February 22, 1800. By Isaac Braman, A.M. Minister of the Gospel in That Place. Published by Desire of the Hearers* (Haverhill: Press of Seth H. Moore, 1800), 9.

¹⁸ Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AMR Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2008.) He perhaps also drew strength from the fact that the late president himself had once donated funds for the building of an African church in Philadelphia. See Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 117.

¹⁹ Richard Allen, "Eulogy for Washington," *Philadelphia Gazette*, December 31, 1799.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

slavery's potential to divide," and at least in part because he wanted the newly-united states to gain their footing as a nation, he never made a public issue of the matter.²¹

Washington's instructions in his will regarding slavery are often misunderstood. At his death, enslaved workers who legally belonged to Washington were to be freed upon the death of his wife. Martha Custis Washington was a fellow slaveholder whose ownership of other enslaved workers at Mount Vernon was connected to her first husband's estate, and they could not be freed by her second husband. He was able to free some slaves, but the complexities of the law did not allow him to free hers.

His final statement on the subject of slavery, therefore, was his will, and in that, the Reverend Allen found not only the perfect theme for his sermon on the late president, but also the reasoning for his underlying message to his audience. Like the other eulogists, Allen preached unity, but for different reasons. "Allen . . . hoped to define abolitionism as a key legacy of the American Revolution: a founding act."²² If the leading figure of the Revolution had made arrangements to free enslaved people, then he was signaling the way for the rest of the United States. It was appropriate, then, for African Americans to see themselves as equal, and unite with others to participate not only in mourning the death of this great man who had proved to be their benefactor, but also as full citizens of the United States. The reverend took a moment near the end to encourage listeners to be law-abiding citizens, further encouraging the idea that they had a place in the republic as equals of white Americans. "Allen's eulogy

²¹ Morgan, "The Aloof American," 422.

²² Richard S. Newman, "'We Participate in Common': Richard Allen's Eulogy of Washington and the Challenge of Interracial Appeals," *William and Mary Quarterly: A Magazine of Early American History and Culture* 64, no. 1 (2007), 118.

illustrated his own optimism about a black person's ability to foster national dialogue about slavery and racial equality.”²³

Moreover, the act of Allen giving a eulogy (and later publishing it) positioned him with other leaders who were doing the same, even as he and his audience knew they were being left out of the national conversation of mourning the president. Allen encouraged his listeners to act as virtuous citizens in response to Washington’s death (as did white speakers), but in the end, white men controlled the narrative of how the president’s death would be memorialized. This meant they also controlled Washington’s image, and directed the appropriate actions for mourners, who were to follow the late president’s example and carry on the republic per his beliefs.

The Messages of the Eulogies

Apart from the outlier at the AME Church, many of the remaining eulogies follow a pattern. It is important to examine this pattern, because it lays out the true aims of the eulogists, and demonstrates that they were very similar. The speaker opens with a description of the grief and shock at the news of Washington’s death, followed by a narrative of his life with an emphasis on his lengthy military career and the accomplishments of his presidency. The orator comments on the late president’s various virtues, his interest in agriculture, and emphasizes Washington’s willingness to step up and offer his services to the public but then step down and retire to the “shades” of Mount Vernon when the job was complete. Many eulogies position the understanding of and gratitude for Washington’s life within a religious context, and do this in a variety of ways. As they see it, Washington depended upon his belief in God to guide him, and America was blessed with a “savior” to deliver them in their time

²³ Ibid., 118.

of need. The speech concludes by encouraging the listeners to unite in Washington's memory and carry on his work.

The eulogies are obviously directed at a white, male audience; impressionable young men seeking their way in the world who were perhaps open to taking a page from Washington's book, fathers who could pass on stories of Washington's heroics to their sons, and men of any age who could benefit from hearing about how selflessness, virtue, hard work, and a belief in God would keep the young republic alive. As one speaker challenged his male listeners, "Are ye eager then, fellow-soldiers to live in the voice and memory of men? Be patriots ..."²⁴ It is understood that male audience members needed to take action based on what they heard. "Sons of Freedom! As you regard the memory of your ascended Chief, attend to the injunctions of his will. Remember that it was not for you alone he labored."²⁵

In sharp contrast to eulogies for later presidents, the most important people in Washington's personal life are largely absent. His family members are not often mentioned by the eulogists, or their presence is alluded to, but not by name. When a eulogist does bring up a relative, he emphasizes that Washington "was born of respectable parents," that his father died when George Washington was a child, and that his mother prevented a teenaged Washington from joining the Royal Navy and did so because she was looking out for his best interests.²⁶ Rarely does a eulogist point out the two women who played significant longtime

²⁴ Washington, Johnston, and Hamilton, *The Washingtoniana*, 265.

²⁵ George R. Minot, *An Eulogy on the Late Gen. Washington, Pronounced before the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston, at the Request of Their Committee*, (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1800), 26.

²⁶ Enos Hitchcock, *A Discourse, On the Dignity and Excellence of the Human Character; Illustrated in the Life Of General George Washington, Late Commander of the Armies, and President of the United States. In Commemoration of the Afflictive Event of His Death. Delivered February 22, 1800, in the Benevolent Congregational Church in Providence; and Published by Request of That Society*, (Providence: Printed by John Carter, 1800), 14.

roles in the late president's life, his mother and his wife. As important as they were, however, the names of Mary Ball Washington and Martha Washington are rarely mentioned. The latter is simply part of the landscape of his repeated retirements, his "highly honored, widowed partner" who is now "afflicted."²⁷ Some writers mention the fact that Washington was a husband, but never specifically mention to whom he was married.

When the authors of the eulogies refer to women, "daughters of Columbia," it is to offer comfort to female mourners and encourage them to bring up their sons to emulate the late president. Women were to grieve alongside their husbands, fathers, and sons. New York Pastor John Mason addressed female attendees near the end of his eulogy, saying, "Daughters of America, who erst prepared the festal bower and the laurel wreath, plant now the cypress grove, and water it with tears."²⁸ In Pennsylvania, Greensburg Postmaster David McKeehan urged female listeners to grieve with Martha Washington and "mingle your tears and speak consolation to her woes," and further instructed them to "learn from the example of her, who parted from him in life that he might serve his country."²⁹ Additionally, women were tasked with raising children who would remember Washington and imitate his example. The notion of Republican motherhood is reflected in poet Jean-Simon Chaudron's eulogy, in which he encourages women to "[i]mplant in our children those sentiments with which your own spotless bosoms are inspired. Render them worthy of being one day consecrated on the

²⁷ Josiah Bartlett, *An Oration, On the Death of General George Washington, Delivered at the Request of the Selectmen and Parish Committee Before the Inhabitants of Charlestown, in the County of Middlesex, and Commonwealth of Massachusetts, on Saturday, Feb. 22, 1800* (Charlestown: Samuel Etheridge: 1800), 12.

²⁸ Washington, Johnston, and Hamilton, *The Washingtoniana*, 240.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 279.

altar which we have here erected to wisdom.”³⁰ Women were being charged with bringing forth the next generation of virtuous Americans.

Though this was an important responsibility, women’s subordinate role in the eulogies mirrored their mostly subordinate role in the eighteenth century, though they did participate in public mourning events for Washington. Some mourned his death by wearing black crepe badges or ribbons on their clothing, walking in funeral processions, and attending memorials. First Lady Abigail Adams received female attendees at a special reception in Philadelphia on Friday, December 27th.³¹ Interestingly, Mrs. Adams was not the only woman who played a notable part in the period of national mourning. In January, one unidentified woman, referred to by sources of the time as “a Lady,” delivered a eulogy to an overflow crowd hoping to enter New York’s Old Presbyterian Church for the eulogy being delivered by Gouverneur Morris.³² Certainly many women sat in the audiences of the eulogies given across the country that winter. One such woman was Augusta midwife Martha Ballard, who recorded in her extensive daily diary her attendance at a remembrance for Washington at the local meetinghouse, as well as a commemorative parade featuring women as participants.³³

Women could reimagine their lives as they took part in this most important of national commemorations. “[T]he Revolution forced conservatives, moderates, radicals, and the indifferent to reevaluate or, at the least, defend their assumptions on rights and the individual.”³⁴ During the war, women had been inspired to take on new responsibilities, and

³⁰ Jean-Simon Chaudron, *Funeral Oration on Brother George Washington: Delivered January 1st, 1800, Before the French Lodge l’Aménité. By Brother Simon Chaudron*. Translated by Samuel F. Bradford. (Philadelphia: John Ormrod), 1800, 25.

³¹ Kahler, *The Long Farewell*, 73-85.

³² *Columbian Centinel*, “Humiliation; National; Calamity; New York; Lady,” January 8, 1800.

³³ Laurel T. Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, (New York: Knopf, 1990), 32.

³⁴ Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820*, (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute and University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 13.

now, by participating in this period of national mourning, they could participate alongside men. Years before, during the Revolution, people had been “taken aback by the extent to which subordinates, including women, adopted the language of liberty. Some women sagely considered their political stance.”³⁵ While the populace was being reminded of the founding ideals of the new republic, women also heard these messages about the importance of leadership and personal responsibility.

Another reconsideration was occurring as the eulogies were spoken in weeks after Washington’s death. During his lifetime, he had been repeatedly criticized for being distant in his manner, but shortly after his death, eulogists purposely set him apart from and above other people. Even those eulogists who knew him (including General Henry Lee, John Brooks, John Davis, Frederick Frelinghuysen, William Jackson, Gouverneur Morris, and Thomas Paine) generally avoid noting a personal friendship or collegial relationship in their tributes to the man with whom they were personally acquainted. Washington is commonly portrayed as a lone figure, acting with little to no advice or input on the battlefield and in the office of president. Washington was a great man above all others, and nothing could stand in his way, as he alone “resuscitated the hopes of a desponding people.”³⁶ He was figuratively removed from the people in his life, because a mortal could surely not have accomplished what he did; a mere human being who had made mistakes could not act as the perfect role model for future generations of Americans. One speaker connected the epoch of Washington’s life with that of the nation by saying, “My friends, the object and design of our meeting on this day is noble, patriotic, respectful and worthy of the conduct of Americans. ‘Tis to perpetuate in our minds that ever memorable and joyful era the twenty second of

³⁵ Ibid., 90.

³⁶ Washington, *Washington's Monuments of Patriotism*, 71.

February, 1732.”³⁷ In the images painted by numerous eulogists, the person born this day sixty-eight years before is a fully-formed “saviour” whose life has been specially charted by God and Heaven to follow a preplanned path to greatness. “He appeared, in the various scenes of his life, to be under the commanding influence of a principle superior to every other, in forming a consistent, useful, and truly great character; a principle of moral rectitude, or duty.”³⁸

The writers of the eulogies led the way in reshaping the collective memory that had originated during Washington’s lifetime. Now that he had no further control of his image nor any more opportunities to edit or manage his writings, the people left behind had a golden opportunity to promote a grandiose, superhuman narrative of the first president without any protest or affirmation from the man himself. Once he existed only as a memory in other people’s minds, he was theirs to shape as they wished, and any mistakes, human failings, or personality quirks were ignored or transformed into advantages. At a time when the country was young, and vulnerable to disorder that could tear it apart, leaders used the opportunity to make an impression on a grieving people. Now that Washington was gone, perhaps their grief and surprise at his death could be channeled into keeping not only his memory alive, but also his political beliefs and wishes. As historian Caroline Cox notes in *Remembering the Revolution*, “experiencing an intense emotion around an occasion makes the subsequent memory of it more vivid.”³⁹ The repetition of the eulogists’ version of Washington’s life

³⁷ Proctor Peirce and Thomas Dickman, *An Eulogy, Pronounced on the 22d of February, 1800: Before the Inhabitants of Greenfield, Massachusetts. Assembled to Commemorate the Death of Gen. George Washington, Late Commander in Chief of the American Armies* (Greenfield: Thomas Dickman, 1800), 6.

³⁸ Eliphalet Porter and George Washington, *An Eulogy on George Washington, Late Commander of the Armies, and the First President of the United States of America* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1800), 6.

³⁹ Michael A. McDonnell, Clare Corbould, Frances M. Clarke, and Fitzhugh W. Brundage, eds., *Remembering the Revolution: Memory, History, and Nation Making from Independence to the Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 6.

validated the feelings of the people alive to remember the events and emotion of the Revolutionary era, and the power of this collective memory could be passed down to convince others. For the Federalists, the eulogies also presented a political rebuttal to the Democratic Republicans.

The people of the new republic needed Washington to be more than a person, and be responsible for more than he could have humanly accomplished. Perhaps it is Thomas Jefferson who put it best, when in 1792, he wrote to Washington himself that:

[T]here is sometimes an eminence of character on which society have such peculiar claims as to controul (sic) the predilection of the individual for a particular walk of happiness, & restrain him to that alone arising from the present & future benedictions of mankind. this (sic) seems to be your condition, & the law imposed on you by providence in forming your character, & fashioning the events on which it was to operate.⁴⁰

At that time, Jefferson was writing to convince the reluctant president to serve another term, and remind him that Washington's behavior held such meaning for so many people that his life served a greater purpose. This meant that he needed to continually put his own wants and needs aside for the greater good, if he wanted the American experiment to succeed. Now that he was gone, however, his memory had to remain in place, as a man with no faults who had lived a life of virtue. As a result, there is no American more legendary than George Washington, a man who is hardly remembered as a human being but instead as a monument. In the words of the eulogists, he is an otherworldly, "divinely qualified" "Hero and Saviour of America" who possessed a "decided superiority."⁴¹ The eulogists painted an impersonal

⁴⁰ Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, Philadelphia, PA, May 23, 1792.

⁴¹ George Richards, *The Accepted of the Multitude of his Brethren: An Historical Discourse, in Two Parts; Gratefully Commemorating, the Unparalleled Services, and Pre-Eminent Virtues of General George Washington*. (Portsmouth: Charles Peirce, 1800), 9; Peirce and Dickman, *An Eulogy*, 10; Charles H. Atherton, *Eulogy on Gen. George Washington, Late President of the United States: Who Died December 14, 1799; Delivered at Amherst, N.H.* (Amherst: Samuel Preston, 1800), 7.

picture of Washington, wiping away imperfections and glossing over or ignoring any details of his life that would portray him as an average person. It is telling that a reader gains more of a sense of who Washington was from Tobias Lear's heartfelt remembrances of those final days in mid-December than in the hundreds of eulogies and orations proclaiming lamentation and tears after the man had died.

To comprehend the significance of the eulogies, one must dwell on the phenomenon of memory and what these Revolutionary-era Americans made of the difficulties they had survived. This was the generation that grieved Washington's death firsthand, the people in the pews listening to the eulogies. Having lived through the Revolution and possessing personal memories of Washington as a leader gave this group of Americans ownership of the era and of this moment. An anguished people needed something to cling to, and most of them could approve of a man like Washington. Now that he could no longer reside at Mount Vernon and try to maintain a private life, he belonged to everyone, as his story became molded to fit what a young nation needed.

It is only by sharing memories and a sense of history that individuals create a common narrative that builds community and enables a collective vision of the future. For many of the Revolutionary generation, the War for Independence seemed to create this common ground, as stock of memorable stories, images, and later, commemorative sites and statues. But as scholars have shown in other contexts, the creation of communal memory is a highly contested, conflicted, and politicized process, in which nonelites play an important role and forgetting becomes as essential as remembering.⁴²

Forgetting was just as important as remembering in the collective memory process after Washington's death. Eulogists did their best to enable those non-elites in the pews to forget certain things at this tenuous time, and promote calm during this "politicized process." Alfred E. Young terms it "willful forgetting"—the ways in which events of the Revolution

⁴² McDonnell, Corbould, Clarke, and Brundage, eds., *Remembering the Revolution*, 15.

were overlooked or downplayed as it suited the opinions of the time, or certain political parties.⁴³ This certainly applies to Washington, about whom several notable personal characteristics and life experiences were “willfully forgotten” by many eulogists after his death, as those narratives were negative (and human), and were not virtuous examples to bring forth at a time when Federalists were anxious to maintain power. They did not fit the image of the military “genius” who had commanded the Continental Army to defeat the British Empire, and had unanimously been twice elected as the first president of the United States.⁴⁴ *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America* concurs with, “Nostalgia had greater value to the Revolutionaries’ successors than historical accuracy.”⁴⁵

Speakers ignored, reinterpreted, or brought up but quickly explained away certain well-known facts about the departed president in their orations. His lack of a lengthy education, his famous temper, his reserved nature, and his many military failures were all dealt with in a variety of sometimes creative ways. One way or another, these problems either had to be banished from people’s memories (both personal and collective), or they had to be rationalized as experiences that he used to his advantage—learning opportunities on his way to becoming America’s most beloved hero.

Eulogists described Washington’s schooling as a “private education” for a person who did not need “that tedious drudgery necessary for less active genius” and whose real education turned out to be the “school of adversity.”⁴⁶ It is true that the young Washington

⁴³ Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), Introduction, xvii.

⁴⁴ Washington, Johnston, and Hamilton, *The Washingtoniana*, 281.

⁴⁵ Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, eds., *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 106.

⁴⁶ Joseph Blyth and John Burd, *An Oration, on the Death of General George Washington: Delivered at the Chapel in All Saint’s Parish, on the 22d of February, 1800, at the Desire of the Officers and Privates of Capt. Ward’s Company* (Georgetown: John Burd: 1800), 106; Washington, *Washington’s Monuments of Patriotism*, 220.

had had a private tutor; his father Augustine Washington had died before he was able to provide a more extensive and worldly educational experience for his son (as he had for his older children). In the eyes of the eulogists, the young Washington received the schooling he needed, was already wise beyond his years and, being destined for greatness as “elevated above the common imperfections and weakness of humanity,” did not require the same education others needed.⁴⁷ They repeatedly applied the words “genius” and “sage” to Washington in terms of his military and agricultural skills, and his overall intelligence.⁴⁸ Orator Dr. David Ramsay said, “He was a great practical self-taught genius, with a head to devise, and a hand to execute projects of the first magnitude and greatest utility.”⁴⁹

As for his temper, incidents of the famed general and first president dramatically expressing his rage are well-documented, from the battlefield to the presidency. In late summer of 1776, during a particularly violent attack by General William Howe’s forces near Kip’s Bay, New York, General Washington raced to the scene to see his troops scattering in every direction. According to one eyewitness, he “threw his hat on the ground, and exclaimed, ‘Are these the men with which I am to defend America?’”⁵⁰ During his first visit to the Senate in the summer of 1789, President Washington became exasperated and left after senators could not or would not immediately come up with answers to his prepared questions

⁴⁷ Washington, Johnston, and Hamilton, *The Washingtoniana*, 267.

⁴⁸ Chaudron, *Funeral Oration on Brother George Washington*, 11; Everett, *An Eulogy, on General George Washington*, 14.

⁴⁹ David Ramsay, *An Oration on the Death of Lieutenant General George Washington: Late President of the United States, Who Died Dec. 14, 1799. Delivered in St. Michael’s Church, January 15, 1800, at the Request of the Inhabitants of Charleston, South Carolina; and Published by Their Desire. By David Ramsay, M.D.*, (Charleston: W.P. Young, 1800), 90.

⁵⁰ William Heath, *Memoirs of Major-General Heath. Containing Anecdotes, Details of Skirmishes, Battles, and Other Military Events, During the American War. Published According to Act of Congress* (Boston: I. Thomas and E.T. Andrews, 1798), 60.

for them, and was reportedly so furious that he vowed never to return.⁵¹ On another occasion, he displayed “towering anger” during a Cabinet meeting, during which he exclaimed in his frustration that he would “rather be a farmer than emperor of the world.”⁵²

Recollections of this sort of behavior would not do for Federalists trying to illuminate their brightest star to dazzle their listeners and potential voters. The eulogists who did mention his short temper decided to portray it as an early test for Washington. John Romeyn of New York explained:

By nature fierce, and violent in his disposition, his first contest was with himself. Fortunately for his country, his judgment gained the victory over his passions. This paved the way for his future greatness—for who so fit to command others, as HE who can command himself. Thus calm and self collected (sic), prudence, firmness and moderation characterized every action.⁵³

Gouverneur Morris addressed the issue head on by stating that “his wrath was terrible” but explains that “that strong passion was controlled by his stronger mind.”⁵⁴ Washington was therefore commended for facing down a shortcoming, and not going on to be a tyrant.

Following procedure by using the chain of command and relying on the input and judgment of many people rather than the absolute supremacy of one, is central to what would become American democracy. Eulogists made the point that Washington’s power over the American imagination ironically was his notable refusal to retain power over the citizenry.

The counterbalance to Washington’s more heated moments, his remote nature, had also worked against him at times. During his lifetime, many had commented on it. He “certainly struck some contemporaries as distant,” and “those who knew him well and talked

⁵¹ Lindsay M. Chervinsky, “The Historical Presidency: George Washington and the First Presidential Cabinet,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2018), 142.

⁵² Douglas S. Freeman, *Washington* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 636.

⁵³ John B. Romeyn, *A Funeral Oration, in Remembrance of George Washington: Delivered at Rhinebeck Flats, February 22* (Poughkeepsie: John Woods, 1800), 3.

⁵⁴ Washington, *Washington's Monuments of Patriotism*, 45.

with him were often disappointed. He never seemed to have very much to say.”⁵⁵ One unimpressed correspondent noted in a letter that: ““Today I dined with the President and as usual the company was as grave as at a funeral. All the time at table the silence more nearly resembled the gravity of [illegible] worship than the cheerfulness of convivial meeting.”⁵⁶ After his death, orators who mention his tendency to be detached characterize it as an advantage, that Washington’s “dignity never wore the garb of haughtiness”, that he was rightfully “high and exalted in character and rank.”⁵⁷ Therefore, Washington had a right to be distant. He had earned an elevated status, and his behavior simply reflected this.

Perhaps the eulogists’ approach was correct. In the many years since Washington’s death, some historians have argued that what had been perceived as coldness might actually have been a saving grace. Washington “earned the honor, and his dignity and reserve, the aloofness that still separates him from us, helped him to earn it.”⁵⁸ A man who tended to share too much of himself with others, behave more informally, or spoke more than he listened might have been unable to summon up enough dignity and detachment from others to foster reverence for the office of the presidency. What may have appeared to be a disturbing lack of transparency by a man who at the time had yet to give up his position might simply have been calculated restraint on his part. President Washington perhaps was actively trying to create an aura of respectability for the office of a leader whose behavior

⁵⁵ Don Higginbotham, ed., *George Washington Reconsidered* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 2001), 151; Wood, “The Greatness of George Washington,” 312.

⁵⁶ Joseph Charles, “Hamilton and Washington: The Origins of the American Party System,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1955): 253.

⁵⁷ Samuel Bayard, *A Funeral Oration, Occasioned by the Death of Gen. George Washington; and Delivered on the First of January, 1800* (New Brunswick: Abraham Blauvelt, 1800), 213; Gunning Bedford, *A Funeral Oration Upon the Death of General George Washington: Prepared at the Request of the Masonic Lodge, No. 14, of Wilmington, State of Delaware, and Delivered on St. John the Evangelist’s Day* (Wilmington: Franklin Press, 1800), 152.

⁵⁸ Morgan, “George Washington: The Aloof American,” 410.

would understandably be a source of examination and interpretation around the world. By behaving in a dignified manner, he was trying to keep the republic alive.

Finally, as Washington had successfully led the Continental Army to an astonishingly successful end, the military failures were likely the easiest for writers to maneuver around—they either ignored his negative experiences, or chalked up his early military career lows to youth and inexperience. Many eulogists expressed their belief that young Washington was held back by the “haughty,” “unfortunate” General Edward Braddock whose death during the Battle of the Monongahela in 1755 provided the opportunity for his twenty-three year old aid-de-camp to take initiative.⁵⁹ Many eulogists blamed his early British commanders for failing to recognize the awe-inspiring military greatness in their presence. Even from an early age, speakers asserted, Washington knew best and simply needed the right time and place to prove his worth. In one creative passage, the speaker decided to credit Washington for handling loss gracefully, writing off one Revolutionary War battle’s undesirable end with, “The glory of the day was lost to the army, but not to the general. The greatness of his conduct in defeats still added to his laurels.”⁶⁰ No matter what, Washington could not lose.

By not mentioning potential faults, or repackaging them as strengths, eulogists were free to move on to his more obvious positive characteristics and accomplishments, and encourage listeners to learn by example. Though the eulogies make it clear that America and Washington were chosen by God, earning the title of “American” did involve work, so it was important for people to imitate Washington’s actions. According to the orations, one had to

⁵⁹ Andrews, *An Eulogy on General George Washington*, 12; Washington, Johnston, and Hamilton, *The Washingtoniana*, 121; *Eulogies and Orations on the Life and Death of General George Washington: First President of the United States of America* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1800), 69.

⁶⁰ Adam Boyd, *A Discourse, Sacred to the Memory of George Washington, the Father of His Country*, (Nashville: John M’Laughlin, 1800), 13.

cultivate a virtuous character, and this meant demonstrating disinterestedness by never forgetting one's place as a citizen of a republic, and by identifying as a Christian. Virtue is mentioned repeatedly in the orations, sometimes as often as twenty times in one eulogy. The speakers explained specific ways in which the late president had exhibited the noble characteristics of a virtuous man, and strongly recommended their audiences take note and do the same. As David McKeehan urged, "Will America's sons want virtue? . . . Let us be united and imitate the example of him whose loss we this day deplore, and our liberty will be secure."⁶¹

An American Identity

Eulogists expressed their conviction that virtue was needed now more than ever. In 1800, America was easily within living memory's distance from the Revolution, and inhabitants were still deciding who or what America was. It was vital to have the right people to form and uphold the structure of the new federal government; it had to be nothing less than a strong foundation of men who adhered to what sociologist Barry Schwartz terms "the cult of virtue."⁶² Intriguingly, virtue often referred to what people would not do—virtue meant having power without wanting power, and leading without needing to lead. Since Americans of the time believed that humans had an innate, almost insatiable need for power, a leader had to be a man who demonstrated that he could overcome this to govern in a disinterested manner.⁶³ Washington had not only submitted to the authority of Congress during the Revolution, he had also resigned his military commission after the conclusion of the war, and then resigned the presidency after two terms.

⁶¹ Washington, Johnston, and Hamilton, *The Washingtoniana*, 278-9.

⁶² Schwartz, "George Washington," 26.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 25-6.

Washington's ability to give up power emerges as a common theme of the eulogies, demonstrating citizens' high level of concern about leaders' need for power. New Hampshire lawyer and politician Charles Humphrey Atherton encouraged his audience to view Washington's final address to his troops in 1783 as more extraordinary than his winning the war. "He placed you on the base of freedom and independence, and then upheld you in their enjoyment."⁶⁴ In other words, Washington led so that others might partake in the outcome, not simply to add to his own status. Similarly, Orator Daniel Adams asked his audience, "Was it a thirst for fame and military glory which led him to accept the high appointment of his country?"⁶⁵

Disinterestedness, a vital characteristic of an eighteenth-century gentleman in the public eye, and certainly any leader, was one key to Washington's virtue. According to the eulogists, this meant that he acted selflessly by not actively seeking rewards or power, and by repeatedly giving them up. The word "disinterestedness" surfaces many times, and for good reason. Washington asked for no compensation for his services as commander of the Continental Army.⁶⁶ He remained in contact with Congress during the war and yielded to their wishes, even when he felt they were not supporting him and his men, when he felt the cause might be lost, or when he vehemently disagreed with their decisions. He gave up his command after the Revolution when he might have retained it and made himself the nation's leader with the force of his men behind him. Finally, he stepped down from the presidency

⁶⁴ Charles H. Atherton and Samuel Preston, *Eulogy on Gen. George Washington, Late President of the United States: Who Died December 14, 1799; Delivered at Amherst, N.H.*, (Amherst: Samuel Preston, 1800), 11.

⁶⁵ Daniel Adams, *An Oration, Sacred to the Memory of Gen. George Washington. Delivered at Leominster, Feb. 22, 1800. By Daniel Adams, M.B.*, (Leominster: Printed by Adams & Wilder, 1800), 17.

⁶⁶ Though many eulogies point out his unpaid military service, some even find ways to excuse the fact that he was wealthy. General Jedediah Huntington urges his New London listeners to consider whether rich men often "labour for nothing because they are affluent?" *Eulogies and Orations on the Life and Death of General George Washington*, 94.

when he could have occupied it for the rest of his life. The speakers asserted that these actions proved that Washington had virtue because he was a servant of the people who had stepped forward in times of need, but was careful to always step back after the job was done. As America's most famous farmer, speaker Josiah Bartlett asked, how many times had he yearned to "relinquish the sword for the pruning hook"?⁶⁷ Never tempted to seize power when he could have, he consistently returned to being a citizen, and according to the eulogists, had no other view in mind but to fight for the happiness of others. "General Washington, although highly exalted in the scale of honour, viewed himself as the companion of Men, and not of Angels . . ." ⁶⁸ As contributor Andrew Burstein notes of Washington in *Mortal Remains*, "Having performed selfless public services made him, somehow, the recipient of a pure light of inspiration. This was the kind of glorification that would attach to Washington in death."⁶⁹ As Washington had evidently placed a high premium on the virtuousness of being an ordinary citizen, this meant that other citizens who exhibited virtue were now bestowed with the responsibility for continuing America's success. Only virtuous men must govern, elected only by other virtuous men.

To learn more about virtue, one only needed to read Washington's Farewell Address. A number of the eulogies that were printed as pamphlets were accompanied by a reprinted copy of this recent document, a signal that each of these written materials were important enough to be considered keepsakes. Some eulogists even suggested audience members store these copies of the Farewell Address next to their Bibles, subtly aligning George Washington

⁶⁷ Bartlett, *An Oration, On the Death of General George Washington*, 9.

⁶⁸ Ariel Kendrick, *An Eulogy on General George Washington: Delivered at the West Meeting-House in the Town of Boscawen, on the 22d of February, 1800, at a Meeting of the Inhabitants, Agreeably to the Recommendation of Congress* (Concord: George Hough, 1800), 9.

⁶⁹ Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, eds. *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 105.

with forces greater than politics. “Americans, bind it in your Bibles next to the Sermon on the Mount that the lessons of your two Saviors may be read together,” Massachusetts orator William Cunningham suggested.⁷⁰ Referred to in the eulogies after his death as though it is Scripture, Washington’s parting thoughts to the people of the nation he helped found were his instructions for how to carry on as citizens of the United States. This document could be passed down to one’s children and grandchildren as a souvenir of this momentous occasion. The recipients would know their parents or grandparents had walked the Earth at the same time as the celebrated George Washington, and it was up to this younger generation to follow his instructions. Many eulogists used the Farewell Address as an opportunity to repeat themes from or quote this message from the late president, and some outright told their audiences that they (the speakers) could hear him further directing Americans from the grave.

Hark! – A message from the tomb! – ‘Citizens of America . . . Let the love you bore me, the confidence you were pleased always to repose in me, and the regard you now profess for my memory, be shown in following those admonitions which I have given you . . . Give support and stability to your government . . . Pay the strictest attention to the injunctions of religion and morality.’⁷¹

“The injunctions of religion and morality” were another prominent theme of the eulogies, and the second major dimension of his virtue. Many speakers reiterated their belief that Washington was a Christian, had regularly attended church services, and had attributed his lifelong successes to God. Being an American, therefore, was defined by one’s faith, as Washington had “laid the foundations of our national policies in the unerring immutable

⁷⁰ William Cunningham, *An Eulogy Delivered at Lunenburg, on Saturday the 22d of February 1800. The Day Recommended by Congress to Commemorate the Unequalled Virtues and Preeminent Services of Gen. George Washington: First President of the United States of America, and Commander in Chief of the Revolutionary War.* By William Cunningham, (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas, 1800), 15.

⁷¹ William Linn, *A Funeral Eulogy, Occasioned by the Death of General Washington: Delivered February 22d, 1800, Before the New-York State Society of the Cincinnati* (New York: Isaac Collins, 1800), 172.

principles of morality based on religion . . .”⁷² Some orators begged God to send another “instrument” to Earth for great deeds, perhaps signaling to some unknown person in the audience that he, too, could break forth as a virtuous, God-fearing, selfless leader just like the much-celebrated general and president.⁷³ Washington had died a Christian with a clear conscience, as the New South Church’s Minister John Thornton Kirkland pointed out to his listeners in Boston: “His sword was not stained with the blood of innocence . . . His trophies are the trophies of wisdom and humanity, the peace, prosperity, and order of his country.”⁷⁴ These were the only “trophies” an American should desire.

⁷² Lee, *A Funeral Oration on the Death of George Washington*, 7.

⁷³John Boddily, *A Sermon, Delivered at Newburyport, on the 22d February, 1800* (Newburyport: Edmund M. Blunt, 1800), 9, 10; Bedford, *A Funeral Oration Upon the Death of General George Washington*, 154.

⁷⁴ *Eulogies and Orations on the Life and Death of General George Washington*, 295.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

With the collective memory of the first president laid out for them by the eulogists, Americans had to unite in this glorification of their departed leader, who had encouraged unity over and over through the years in his writings to the public. The Farewell Address was no exception, and eulogists cited it in their fight against faction. In the *Federalist Papers*, James Madison defines faction as “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.”¹ Many eulogies warned against just this sort of dissent: “Let us support our constitution, our laws, and the administration of our amiable and enlightened chief magistrate.”² Speakers warned opposing factions, in flowery terms, to proceed with caution and remember George Washington as an example for any man who wished to be a dutiful, patriotic American. Pastor Benjamin Wadsworth told his listeners in Salem:

United America is the land of peace and enjoyment . . . No country ever presented prospects more favourable to posterity. But reflect and consider how much you are indebted to WASHINGTON for your distinguished privileges . . . let his name serve as a talisman, and prove an indissoluble bond of union to all.³

Washington’s death marked an unprecedented moment in time, one that had to be recognized with new rituals. “[T]he relationship of nationalist ideology to political practice in the United States” is reflected in the eulogies, and the very act of a citizen eulogizing the first president in front of a group of the first generations of Americans certainly demonstrated the

¹ James Madison, *Federalist No. 10*, November 22, 1787.

² *Eulogies and Orations on the Life and Death of General George Washington*, 260.

³ Benjamin Wadsworth, *An Eulogy on the Excellent Character of George Washington, Late Commander in Chief of the American Armies, and the First President Under the Federal Constitution: Who Departed This Life December the 14th, 1799, in the 68th Year of His Age*, (Salem: Joshua Cushing, 1800), 30.

“interplay of rhetoric, ritual, and political action” in the midst of creating a new national ritual.⁴ Unlike a monarch’s death, a president’s death usually does not signal a transference of power, so the focus of attention is only on the passing of a citizen, making rituals surrounding Washington’s death unique. Rituals bring the past into the present and future, and the act of preserving Washington in some form helped establish the values and beliefs of this new national family.

The deaths and mourning of the Founding Fathers initiated a process of creating monuments of once-living men. Washington’s death meant there could be no more consultation from Mount Vernon, no more words of wisdom from the man who had set the precedent, and no possibility of further intervention or help. “Heavenly virtues and the prudent management of terrestrial affairs united in the first president’s bequest.”⁵ It was up to the people left behind, citizens of a new nation, to carry on the work he had led up to this point. This is where the pointed messages of the hundreds of eulogies stepped in to lead the way and promote unity, calm, and order in an emotional time. “There is something inherently untruthful about most forms of patriotic devotion, and yet the comfort supplied by nostalgia is made to seem an acceptable excuse for it.”⁶

The decision to carry out rituals to observe the passing of the man who had led the colonies through the upheaval of the American Revolution and then taken on the new office of president was critical in establishing not only how this new democracy would mourn its leaders, but how that process was intertwined with what it meant to be an American. Electing a president was the virtuous way to run a government, and the fact that citizens had

⁴ Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 3.

⁵ Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, eds., *Mortal Remains*, 111.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

witnessed the orderly transference of power meant the American experiment might work. The eulogies for George Washington demonstrate and reinforce the unique perspective of Americans who were just beginning to understand that marking the death of a president did not mean the death of their country. But this meant it had to be held together by a collective agreement about national identity and a sense of responsibility, each based upon the carefully orchestrated collective memory of its first leader.

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VITA

Jennifer Louise Crane was born on April 23, 1974 in Emporia, Kansas. She graduated from Emporia High School in 1992. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Education degree with a concentration in Special Education from Emporia State University in 1996, graduating Magna Cum Laude.

She worked as a special education teacher for three years in the Alief Independent School District in Houston, Texas, and for ten years in the Shawnee Mission Unified School District in Johnson County, Kansas. Additionally, she worked as a math tutor for eight years in the Kansas City metro.

In 2004, Ms. Crane earned a Master of Educational Technology degree from MidAmerica Nazarene University in Olathe, Kansas. She worked for four years as the Curator of Education at the Johnson County Museum in Shawnee, Kansas, where she directed public and school programming, and the volunteer program.

Ms. Crane is currently a Patient Access Educator at Children's Mercy in Kansas City, Missouri. Her work emphasizes cultural diversity efforts and accessibility for visitors with disabilities.